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*Response to the Productivity Commissions Draft Report*

*By Jacqui Ward- Early Childhood Teacher and Advocate for children*

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I would like submit a response to the Commission's draft report highlighting a few significant points for consideration prior to the final report. Firstly I would like to commend the Commission on the diligence and dedication in their conduct of the inquiry and representing the voices of all parties interested in early learning and child care. I would like to raise some issues for further consideration;

- In order for Australia to be competitive on a global level we as a nation need to have a vision for the future. This vision should align with the UN conventions of the rights of the child that focus on building communities that focus on positive outcomes for children and families and that these are the center of government policy. The Commission's draft report doesn't go far enough to push Government to think of a better solution with a broader focus that meets the needs of families for the care of their children and has the needs and interests of children at the center of policy decisions. The recommendations about reducing qualifications and ratios (for 'temporarily operating with staffing levels below required ratios') show a strong bias towards quantity of care (available hours and services) versus quality of education and care for children across all service types.
- Workforce planning strategies should be looking at a longer range view based on sound research such as Heckman 2006 that points to investment in the early years returns the greatest yields. That education and care policy should be more than workforce participation to achieve "a slight increase in GDP".
- The changes introduced through the NQF in 2012 to bring all education and care services under the one system have been of huge benefit to the sector and to children and families in being better informed about quality. The recommendation to bring out of scope services into the NQF support this outcome. However the recommendation to remove preschools and the inference that there should be a separation of education and care seems to contradict this original idea of a unified system. If this idea stems from a question of how services are funded then this is an example of the fact that the Commission has missed an opportunity to recommend bigger picture thinking that aligns the funding for preschools under the same system as other education and care service types. The report recommends a streamlining of current rebates and benefits which is on the right track but needs to go much further with more radical reforms that represent a view of investing in the future as opposed to managing the cost of the education and care system.
- The recommendations that relate to qualification requirements for children under three years seem to be the greatest concern. It seems that that all the theory and research that underpin the introduction of qualification changes under the NQF have been ignored. The notion that learning isn't relevant for children under the age of three is harking back to unenlightened times when substantial brain research was not available to support the significance of the first five years of life (when 85% of brain development occurs.) This notion seems to be counterproductive to the idea of encouraging workforce participation as it ignores the intricate, complex relationship that underpins parent's ability to productively participate in the workforce. The key factor is knowledgeable, experienced qualified educators that families can trust the responsibility of caring for and educating their most precious children.