



National Investment for the Early Years
ABN 680 953 07538

31st January, 2011

Mr Ben McLean
Early Childhood Development Workforce Study
Productivity Commission
LB2 Collins Street East
MELBOURNE VIC 8003

Dear Mr McLean,

On behalf of NIFTeY Australia I have pleasure in attaching our response to your November Issues paper.

I think that the response to the issues you have raised will be significantly affected by two important factors:

- The time of year in which the Commission has sought submissions
- The restricted understanding of potential respondents as to what professional categories might be encompassed within the Early Childhood Development workforce.

I would not have considered that child and family nurses in the health sector would have been considered as belonging to this workforce without careful examination of the Issues paper – it is only in Victoria that they are seen as part of the ECD workforce by virtue of the policy direction coming from the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. There are some very pertinent issues about this workforce – in terms of its training, ongoing professional development, and demography – that I suspect you will not receive many comments on the health workforce – a view supported by the absence of anyone from this sector in responses to date.

In view of this, I think there would be merit if there was a way in which you might consider late submissions.

Thanks for the opportunity to comment, albeit under difficult circumstances.

Yours sincerely

Professor Graham Vimpani AM
Chair, NIFTeY Australia

Productivity Commission: Early Childhood Development Workforce Study

1) Issues impacting on supply and retention of qualified staff.

Priority needs to be given to the supply and retention of qualified staff and in particular to University qualified early childhood teachers. This is essential to meet the current staffing needs of existing services as well as Government plans to provide quality early childhood programs for all of Australia's children in their year before school. NIFTeY sees specialist early childhood teachers as critical for a universal early childhood education and care system. Their leadership can provide a model for the provision of good quality programs and for the critical role of building trust with families.

The demand for services is unlikely to change unless there is an unexpected fall or increase in the birth rate or if Government policy and funding changes significantly. The demand for services varies significantly with Government priorities. The COAG Partnership Agreement for access to a preschool program for 15 hours each week for children in the year before school delivered by a four year qualified teacher is an example of a policy which is having a significant impact. It has different implications across the country including for some States/Territories that there are just not sufficient preschool places to achieve this goal without a capital investment and/or serious issues around having a supply of qualified teachers where States do not have this as a required qualification to work with children in long day care centres currently. In NSW and most other States where there is an aging teacher qualified workforce many three year qualified teachers may leave the field rather than undertake further formal study.

The issue of affordability for families is also a major influence on demand. This is particularly the case for low and moderate income families.

The introduction of paid parental leave should result in some reduction in the number of young babies being enrolled as the legislation will mean more parents will be able to choose to remain out of the workforce for longer.

- The shortage of qualified staff will continue unless attention is given to and change occurs in the areas of remuneration and conditions. In the case of early childhood teachers there needs to be parity with teachers working in schools.
- Child Care staff should be paid so they can afford to use a children's service for their own child. This is not the case for many staff due to low wages.
- When services are provided by staff that are underpaid, not valued for the work they do and have less favourable conditions than those working in other education sectors then retention and attraction will remain a serious problem. Supply of staff and particularly qualified staff will not be able to be met and the quality of programs for young children will be put in serious jeopardy. There is plenty of research evidence showing the importance of qualifications and adult/child ratios to the quality of programs and the

impact of poor quality programs on the outcomes for children, particularly vulnerable children.

- Incentives need to be made available to attract and keep qualified staff in areas where it is difficult to attract applicants eg in rural remote areas. These incentives need to be funded by Governments as local communities cannot support additional costs. It is also important for the quality of services to children so that those in low income or isolated areas do not end up with poorer quality programs due to the lack of, or turnover of qualified staff
- There are limited opportunities for career paths in the field. This is due in part to the fragmented nature of early childhood services where many services are not part of large systems but are stand alone such as preschools in NSW and Victoria and owner operated long day care centres. This places limits on the career paths available and thus people leave to seek employment elsewhere where career progression is possible.
- When improving remuneration of staff it is essential that this does not result in services becoming unaffordable for families. This is already an issue for many families eg preschool costs in NSW. Government payments or subsidies need to be reviewed and increased to ensure universal access to a quality early childhood program is a reality. This would require a review and increases in State/Territory subsidies in some States eg Victoria and NSW as well as the Commonwealth Child Care Benefit.
- The problem of attracting and keeping qualified staff is discussed constantly in key peak forums but much of the evidence is anecdotal. NIFTeY recommends that a study be undertaken to look at job satisfaction and turnover so there is an informed research basis for decisions.
- Industrial awards or the modern award needs to include recognition of additional qualifications such as for those who obtain additional qualifications in working with children with additional needs or family support.
- There are existing anomalies in pay and conditions. In NSW early childhood teachers working in preschools in Government schools are paid at a much higher level than those in community based preschools and they have a career structure available to them. These conditions should be available to teachers in all services.
- Government at a Federal level has a policy commitment to an Education Revolution with the goal that Australia should have many more people with higher levels of educational attainment than is currently the case. If this is to be realised then urgent attention needs to be given to ensuring early childhood education services for children prior to school age are accessible and of high quality. Currently many families cannot afford to send their children to a service due to the cost. This in turn keeps a downward pressure on the wages and conditions of staff which in turn impacts on quality. More funding is required to make services affordable and to ensure that staff are attracted to and see early childhood education and care as an exciting career. This will only occur if wages and conditions are improved.
- The early childhood workforce includes more than staff in children's services which have been the focus of this submission to date. It is also essential that there is a supply of

well qualified and remunerated staff available to work in all areas involving young children and their families. This would include health, family support, early intervention, supported play groups etc. A submission from NIFTEY NSW gives further information on this and some of the impacts for integrated services.

- Recent evidence provided by academics, employers, unions and others in the NSW Industrial Relations Court provides more details and research on these issues particularly around the employment of teachers and is a useful resource on these matters. (Matter Nos. IRC 2349 of 2008 and IRC 2551 of 2008)

2) Increasing Complexity and Change in Education and Care Services.

NIFTEY welcomes the proposed introduction of National Standards within the National Quality Framework (NQF) and the proposed bringing together of Regulations and Accreditation.

The introduction of the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) has been welcomed as a significant step forward which can assist in improving quality for children, accountability of the profession and enhanced understanding in the community that early childhood is both care and education and involves professionally qualified staff planning for learning through play.

The role of early childhood staff has expanded and increased in complexity over the years. Many children used to attend a service 5 days a week but now these places are filled by children who attend 1, 2 or 3 days each week. This has placed increasing demands on staff in many ways including the need to maintain developmental records and to plan for increasing numbers of children.

The number of children with additional needs, particularly those with high support needs, has also increased and although there is some funding to assist with inclusion it is said to be a contribution and is not sufficient to cover the full costs. This makes planning more complex for staff and requires child free time to collaborate with other professionals working with the child and their family.

More recently there has been a growth in integrated services employing multidisciplinary teams. Early childhood staff need to form relationships and work with a range of individuals and organisations in collaborative ways and to bring their particular expertise to the delivery of programs. It is also important to have early childhood educators who can take on leadership roles in these teams. This is made more complex as staff in other professions may have quite different philosophical and theoretical approaches to work with young children and their families. This needs sensitivity and child free time for building professional relationships and for early childhood educators to share their knowledge of pedagogical practice with others. (see Cheeseman. S. (in press) for more details.

- Work in early childhood settings has increased in complexity over the years as has the levels of responsibility of staff and in particular those for the directors of services. Wages and conditions have not increased commensurate with these demands.
- The role of the early childhood educator is poorly understood despite increasing attention to the brain research and the critical importance of learning from birth. To inform the community of the importance of this time in a child's life and the role of early childhood services requires the use of many different strategies to ensure an understanding of teaching and learning in the early years. Apart from improving remuneration etc there needs to be community education programs explaining the importance of relationships, learning through play in the early years, the critical importance of the family and the role of children's services in this development. Our society does not recognise the knowledge and skills required to work with children prior to school. Other countries manage this better so exploration of how this has been achieved could inform our approaches and play an important part in improving the status of the profession.
- The language associated with services needs to change. It does not help community understanding when we have labels such as preschool as education with "school" in the label whilst other services are referred to as care eg long day care. In fact these services provide both education and care. The educational program involves intentional teaching. (See definition in the EYLF). It is also confusing to many when the EYLF and the proposed NQF refer to all those working with children as educators and make no clear distinction between what is the work of qualified teachers and for example a staff member with a Certificate 3
- The changes to a national approach to National Standards to include staffing requirements including qualifications and adult/child ratios as a requirement for the National Quality Framework is welcome but there is a need to be sure that the current requirements for university qualified teachers is maintained at all times and improved over time. Improved adult to child ratios in the NQF should have a positive influence on the workforce making the work more rewarding. There should be no reduction in staffing standards in any jurisdiction as a result of the introduction of the NQF.
- The regulatory burden has had an impact on staff retention and it is hoped that the introduction of the NQF will relieve some of this but until the final details of how it will work in practice are confirmed it is not possible to be sure it will have this positive outcome. However if the change is not well resourced and so well understood, many experienced staff may resign.
- Significant change needs to be supported by well resourced professional development and resources. This has not happened with the introduction of the EYLF and it appears that there will be limited support for the introduction of the NQF. This results in staff leaving the sector. This would never happen when major changes are made to curriculum in schools and should not happen in early childhood. When the Quality Improvement and Accreditation System was first introduced for long day care in Australia the support including information sessions, seminars, workshops and an

availability of a variety of other resources including videos and written material was quite extensive and so created a positive feeling of support for the change. Many groups were established to support and mentor others through the process. This time the lack of consultation in the change process for the NQF and the limited support for the introduction of the EYLF are disappointing and an unanticipated consequence could well be staff leaving work in the early childhood field.

3) Courses and Professional Development

- Registration of teachers could assist in gaining better recognition and status as a profession as exists in other professional occupations. This should include requirements to maintain currency of knowledge and skills and a commitment to ongoing professional development. There are different views as to whether this should be part of a national system for all teachers so as to improve the status of the profession or whether a separate registration institute could better reflect the requirements to work with very young children and their families and for the specific leadership roles in these settings. If separate it would be essential it was not seen as a lower level but rather different to that required of teachers in schools.
- Preparation of teachers should remain in Universities where there is a requirement for academics to be engaged in research. This informs course content at a higher level than just through translation of research. The significant change in moving courses from Colleges of Advanced Education to Universities has been the production of Australian research where in the past the field and policy makers relied almost totally on the United States and England to inform current practice through research findings.
- It is important to get a national system of approval of qualifications in place so there is some consistency about fundamental requirements across Australia. This should include a review of what is required in the preparation of teachers so that they are able to meet the basic requirements of positions in the workplace upon graduation. There has been criticism of many courses provided by Universities and RTO's in terms of the content and the practicum experiences provided. This has included concerns that now, for example in NSW, the Institute of Teachers requirements are undermining the content of courses in preparing graduates to work in prior to school settings. Concerns have also been raised about the quality of different courses offered by RTO's and the lack of checks on course delivery in the vocational education area. Anecdotes about the exploitation of trainees is also of concern.
- Pathways for upgrading qualifications need to be affordable which is currently not the case. Consideration should be given to a waiving of HECS fees.
- There needs to be more resources provided to support professional development. Services often cannot enable staff to attend courses because of the difficulties in finding replacement staff and because of the cost which has to be recovered through fees to families. Funds to support buy out time and costs of travel need to be available. This

should be a particular priority to support training of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander professionals.

- Professional support programs need to reflect the wide variety in learning styles and be of high quality with appropriately trained providers who have current expert knowledge and experience in the content as well as qualifications in adult training. One would expect greater use could be made of technology although this should not be based on an assumption that all staff have access to a computer. Many State funded services do not have a computer on the site.
- It is essential in any plans to meet the supply needs for qualified staff that the integrity of courses is not compromised. Pathways for upgrading qualifications should be clearly communicated as well as the financial and other supports available to encourage such study. This should include RPL for many currently unqualified staff that have many years of experience, understanding and skill to bring to their positions. Wages need to better reflect the gaining of the qualification as currently this is not the case. eg to gain a certificate 3 has no major impact on remuneration. Loss of these staff to a service would not only be costly in terms of replacement costs but the loss of the contribution they make now could not be easily replaced. Many of these staff may have English as a second language so courses need to support and encourage their involvement.

TG /NIFTeY January 2011