

The following is a personal response to the Early Childhood Development Workforce Productivity Commission Issues Paper.

My responses are based on teaching in the TAFE ECD sector for 13 years, working in both long day care and kindergarten in Victoria and my Masters research which looked at the struggles between ECD staff and families.

I have responded to the questions where I can use my knowledge and experience.

What are the key factors influencing an individuals decision to work in ECD sector? Do these vary for different ECD occupations?

My own influences include the overwhelming desire to educate young children and be part of their early development. I did a degree course at a Higher Education University. I now teach in the TAFE sector and that has taken some getting used to – my first year students give me a variety of reasons why they are in the course such as:

“it was their fifth choice”,

“their mother said it was a good thing to do”

“my marks weren’t high enough to get into anything else”

“this course did not need an enter score”

“I want to work with young children and the degree courses did not offer part time study options”

My experience is that students in the TAFE sector that will be qualified to work in long day care but not as a teacher in a kindergarten have many different reasons for selecting this course. Under the new framework there are also students who are working in the field without qualifications and now are returning to do their Certificate 111, which will be the baseline qualification for all early childhood staff.

The TAFE sector is a great pathway for students who were unable to get into a degree course to enable them to begin their ECD career however their pathways are limited, some universities do not regard a TAFE qualification as a pathway into a degree course in a Higher Education University. The best option for students in the TAFE sector is to continue into the degree course in the same University as the TAFE and there is examples in Victoria where this is happening.

In the sector and the general community there are perceptions of the quality of the ECD staff who have trained in a TAFE course and those in a Higher Ed course. Those ECD staff whose qualification has rewarded them with the name

“teacher” have always been seen as superior to those who qualify as a child care worker (ie one was qualified to teach and the other only to care. Fortunately under the new framework there is a recognition of this division by introducing the term early childhood educator.

Why are ECD workers paid less than those working in related sectors? Are the wages and salaries for workers in different ECD occupations appropriate, given the skills and qualifications required? If not how might this be best addressed?

Disparity in wages, conditions, respect from community are all issues that separate and divide the early childhood sector in Victoria. The rift is extended when you add the dimensions that include teachers and early childhood educators are represented by different professional organizations, are covered by different unions (as they have different conditions of employment etc) and attend different conferences. In Victoria there are specific conferences for teachers and another for Early childhood Educators. So over and over both groups of the same profession are reminded they are different from each other. There are other groups of Early Childhood Educators who work in the home and in schools in before and after care situations who are further discriminated against in regard to where they fit into the early childhood sector in Victoria.

There need to be big cultural shift in the whole sector beginning with a rethink of the rights of young children. A new premise that all children are entitled to the same care and education no matter what services their family can afford or what services their family needs would be a good start . With this premise as the starting point then a more equitable approach to the entry into tertiary institutions and the qualifications all early childhood professional need can begin to be addressed.

How appropriate are the qualifications required for entry into various ECD occupations? Do differences in qualification requirements restrict workers' abilities to move between jurisdictions or ECD sectors?

The first issue is that the qualifications are different depending on whether the student is entering the TAFE or Higher Education tertiary institution . The Higher Education system asks more of the student than the TAFE sector and so begins the inequality and division in the sector. Higher Education asks students for a higher mark and an “ENTER” score is submitted on which the student is granted access to a degree course in early childhood teaching . Within individual universities students can be accepted from high school into a Masters program in teaching. The degree course can be expensive (although a variety of scholarships and other assistance is available) and is usually fulltime. The degree course results in a teaching qualification in the early years up to 8 years

old. The teacher can teach in any early childhood setting and in the early years of school. Kindergartens or “preschools” are under the jurisdiction of the state where pay and conditions are superior to those qualifying through the TAFE sector and often those qualified through the Higher Education system are the ones who reinforce their superiority by choosing only to work in the “state” funded system of pre schools and kindergartens. If they chose to “teach” in the day care system they would be under the “federal” system which offers much lower pay and conditions. The new framework has “teachers” in the day care system in its sights – this will be interesting to watch. Already those trained in the TAFE sector and already working in the day care setting are resentful of the “intruders” from Higher Ed “invading our patch”!

On the other hand entry into a TAFE course does not have an entry mark or other entrance requirements, can either be free (depending on government initiatives at the time) or a few hundred dollars. The different entrance expectations and fees can be seen to indicate that students being educated through TAFE are getting an inferior qualification (often cannot get a degree at that university and have difficulty having their TAFE qualifications recognized in the Higher Education sector). Unlike teachers TAFE qualified professionals cannot “teach” in a kindergarten or preschool.

Do newly qualified ECD workers have the necessary skills and attributes to be effective in the workplace?

My experience says that the qualifications are not keeping up with the needs of children and their families using early childhood services. Families are more complex than ever before and children are presenting with more complicated and distressing behaviours.

Two examples of this are:

1. As someone who provides professional development to the early childhood sector I am become more and more concerned about the lack of knowledge and experience the sector has in relation to managing children’s behaviours. The traditional “behaviour management” plan that relates to excluding children when they are unable to stay in the group for whatever reason is so inappropriate and actually damaging to the child if their behaviour is a result of trauma and abuse. These children need comfort and reassurance that they are safe and OK not further “abuse” by the lack of understanding by the early childhood staff. This lack of knowledge is across the sector not exclusively to those trained in TAFE.
2. Lack of experience and confidence in working with families. My masters research looked at this issue and while identifying issues from both the early childhood staff and parents in the way they interacted with each other, the major

finding was that early childhood staff (my study was in long day care) felt that they did not have the skills or knowledge about families and how to build an equitable relationship with them. Some of the EC staff in my study could trace their fear of families back to their undergraduate course where, on placement, they were not encouraged to communicate and build relationships with the families. In a two year course there is only one subject (in two parts) that is about the role of families in the early childhood centre and how to communicate with them, gain information from them about their children and utilize this information in planning for the child. The EC staff in my study when asked "how would you describe your job" only mentioned "looking after children" and when asked about their families said they were not part of their job. Since the results of my masters has been published I am receiving more and more requests to speak to early childhood educators about how to include families into their thinking and practice.

To what extent are qualification requirements a barrier to entering the ECD sector? How could such barriers be overcome?

A baseline entrance into the early childhood sector is needed which may have several levels that all lead to the same course i.e a level of mark and interview, or ENTER score etc to allow students with different skills and abilities but the same commitment to early childhood to have a chance at gaining entrance. The course then needs to begin at the same level such as cert 111 in the TAFE sector, maybe diploma in TAFE sector as well then all have the opportunity to obtain degree and higher qualifications maybe in the higher ed sector.

One of the problems I come across in the TAFE sector is that the students are "spoon fed" as it is a competency based system making it very difficult to actually fail anyone, they get another chance and another chance until they are deemed competent. Attendance in class is not required to pass competencies, of more importance to the University as they get paid per attendance/enrollment etc. I don't think this style of learning puts any responsibility on the student to take on responsibility for their own learning and outcomes.

I wonder if there is an argument for taking early childhood courses out of the TAFE sector and rethinking the entrance into early childhood courses in the Higher Ed sector. This would include needing to provide part time course as well as full time, a variety of entrance options and fee options to be able to include the students from the TAFE sector.

Are workers who obtain additional skills and qualifications sufficiently rewarded? Is expertise sufficiently recognized and valued? How could opportunities for career progression within the ECD sector be enhanced?

Are in-service training and professional development programs meeting workforce developmental needs? Are there barriers to ECD staff accessing training and developmental programs? If so, could such barriers be overcome?

The early childhood professionals who have graduated from the Higher Education sector are rewarded with pay increases until they reach the top of their level. They are also given professional development days that are paid for and actively encouraged through this process to go onto further study.

Early childhood professionals from the TAFE sector are less likely to be rewarded for additional qualifications which they would have had to pay for themselves and complete in their own time. Professional Development opportunities are difficult for privately operated child care centres who pay base level rates to their staff and cannot afford to pay for staff to update qualifications or go to professional development opportunities. When staff meetings are held after hours in the professional's own unpaid time it can be difficult to add additional qualifications that will also have to be in own time and paid for by the professional rather than centre or government.

The difficulties on this issue begin with one level of government being responsible for part of the sector and the federal government the other part. Until all early childhood professionals are able to be educated equally, paid equally, and receive the same conditions this would also then include access to paid professional development and financially encouraged to obtain further qualifications and skills.

Do you consider professional status to be an issue for the ECD workforce? What factors determine professional status in the sector? How might a change in status be achieved? What would the effects be of such a change?

Yes, the professional status of the early childhood "teacher" who has needed a high level of education and results to get into the Higher Ed course, has a better paid job and better conditions, is able to continue study at a post grad level that enables a career that may include University lecturer etc has a much higher status in the community and within the profession.

Alternatively the professional status of the qualified TAFE early childhood educator who did not need a high academic score to get into the course, has a limited career path, is poorly paid, has poor working conditions and no access to post graduate courses has a much lower status in the community and within the profession. Some would argue that the TAFE course does not produce "professionals" with a career but "workers" in a job.

As mentioned above all early childhood students being educated at the same level, having the same opportunities, career paths, conditions etc would be a good start.

Keeping children's rights to the same level of education and care no matter what service they are in, the financial means of their families and the needs of both children and their families, would be a good start to thinking what sort of educators do all children have the right to.

Are training providers and courses of sufficient quality to meet the needs of the ECD sector?

No, all students should be able to access their course in a University for the full length of time that a course needs to take to properly educate the students to be able to provide young children the education and care they have a right to. There are too many private RTO's that are providing a shortened version of the university courses and giving students the same qualification that another student in a university setting (TAFE) twice as long to get. Many of the small private owned long day care centres do not recognize the difference in the qualifications that are provided by versus private providers.

In the years I have been in the TAFE sector I have seen the full time 3 year diploma become a 2 year and now an 18 months and the part time and certificate 111 shrink even more. There is no way that an 18 months course provides the same skills as a 3 year. The fast track certificate 111 course that is available now has the students on placement continuously (to get the appropriate number of hours) while they have not learnt in class the basics to enable them to take full advantage of what they are learning on placement, many of these students are struggling.

What can be done to ensure that there is adequate supply of skilled trainers to meet future increases in demand for training?

It is all the same discussion really, students in the TAFE sector deserve the same quality education as their counterparts in the Higher Education sector. The teachers teaching them in the course need to have the same pay and conditions and their counterparts in the Higher Education sector. The TAFE sector is struggling for teachers as the expectations and responsibilities and workload increases but the pay and conditions seem to get worse (if that is possible).

All children deserve the same early childhood education by highly qualified early childhood educators who have been exposed to a high quality undergraduate course in a Higher Education setting with high quality teachers and lecturers.