

The Hon Julia Gillard AC
Commissioner
Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education & Care
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Dear Commissioner Gillard

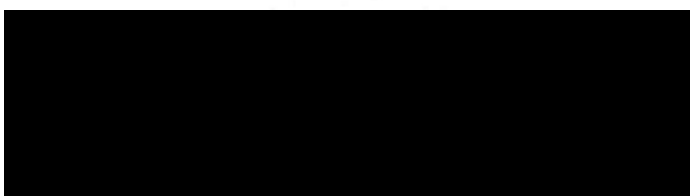
Re: SA Royal Commission into ECEC

Thank you for the invitation to appear as a witness before the Royal Commission into ECEC, to discuss the important topic of workforce supply with a focus on the delivery of universal three-year-old preschool. As requested, I am providing a succinct written submission, focusing on this topic, in advance of the hearing.

Also attached is a copy of my curriculum vitae which offers further details of my qualifications and professional experience in ECEC (See Attachment A).

I would be pleased to expand on any of the points raised, and to respond to other themes emerging through the Royal Commission Inquiry.

Yours Sincerely



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Introduction

There is growing international recognition of the contribution of early childhood education and care (ECEC) to children's learning, development and wellbeing in the immediate and longer-term, and, related to this, recognition that a universal platform of high quality (ECEC) services is the cornerstone of an effective contemporary education system. The Royal Commission into ECEC provides an exciting opportunity to enhance access to high quality ECEC for all children in South Australia, offering evidence and insights to inform the expansion of our ECEC service system across all Australian states and territories.

As defined within the National Quality Standard (ACECQA, 2023), there are many contributors to quality in ECEC. However, without doubt, the critical determinant is the professionals designing and delivering the education and care program. Educators' responsive relationships and positive and meaningful interactions with children are recognised to be the most potent influence in predicting children's ongoing learning, development and wellbeing (OECD, 2018; Ulferts et al., 2019).

The success of current ECEC reforms in Australia, including implementation of universal three-year-old preschool, are dependent upon there being a qualified and skilled workforce (ACECQA, 2021, OECD, 2019) whose practice is informed by a strong sense of purpose, professional body of knowledge and autonomy in practice.

Responding to current teacher workforce challenges

The extent and nature of current workforce shortages in ECEC is documented in *Shaping our Future: Ten year strategy to ensure a sustainable high-quality children's education and care workforce* (ACECQA, 2021), and has been recognised in the Royal Commission's Interim Report (April 2023). Acknowledging the professional work and contribution of all educators, and demand across all ECEC service types and roles, my focus in this submission is early childhood teachers in prior to school centre-based ECEC settings.

While there has been significant increase in unmet demand for teachers to work in prior to school ECEC settings, the challenge of attracting and retaining teachers in ECEC is not new, with long day care generally regarded as the most difficult context for recruitment (Productivity Commission, 2015; Irvine et al. 2016; McKinlay et al. 2018).

Providing strategic direction, and calling for collective action, *Shaping our Future* (ACECQA, 2021) identifies six interrelated focus areas for action over the short, medium and longer-term. In preparing this submission, and reflecting on current debates in early childhood teacher education, I have used the Workforce Strategy as a point of reference, with a particular focus on FA1: Professional recognition including pay and conditions, registration and community perceptions and value; FA2: Attraction and retention; and FA5: Qualifications and career pathways.

Preparation of specialist early childhood teachers

Historically, early childhood teacher education in Australia has covered the age range birth to 8 years, seeking to prepare specialist early childhood teachers who are knowledgeable in child development, early years curriculum and pedagogy, and working with families to teach in prior to school ECEC settings and the early years of school (i.e., reception to Year 2/3). There are several drivers that continue to underpin this conceptualisation of ECEC, including the importance of employing early childhood teachers in both settings, building a shared knowledge base to promote continuity of learning and successful transition to school, and optimising employment and career pathways.

As recognised by the Royal Commission, other programs have emerged, designed to prepare teachers to work with children birth to 12 years (with a strong primary focus) and more recently, to work with children birth to 5 years in prior to school ECEC settings (only). I question the capacity for in-depth coverage of early childhood studies in a birth to 12 program. However, I support recognition and registration of early childhood teachers who have completed a four-year birth to 5 degree, alongside those who have completed the birth to 8 degree.

To ensure equity and the best outcomes for children, teachers and the profession, I offer the following perspectives to inform policy and practice going forward.

- To enhance professional recognition, pay and conditions, registration, and community perceptions and value of teachers in prior to school ECEC (ACECQA, 20121), we need to support **one strong teaching profession** (Education Services Australia, 2018). There is strength in a united focus on one teaching profession that recognises and supports multiple career pathways and equitable opportunities for career progression in teaching and education.
- Teaching is complex professional work and all children have the right to well qualified teachers, regardless of age or education setting. At present, teachers need to complete a four-year (equivalent) Bachelor of Education program (AQF Level 7) or a two-year (equivalent) Master of Teaching program (AQF Level 9) to become fully registered in most states and territories. Despite significant teacher shortages, reducing qualification requirements for teachers in schools has not been supported. The premise is that it takes time to prepare knowledgeable and skilled teachers who are able to work with diverse learners and create high quality and inclusive learning environments.
- The emergence of three-year teacher education programs (birth to 5 years) to prepare early childhood teachers to work in ECEC is concerning. While responding to immediate need, there is real potential for this policy shift to have a negative impact on professional recognition, remuneration and career pathways in ECEC over the medium to longer-term. At present, employment options for three-year qualified early childhood teachers are restricted, and there are limited pathways that will enable these teachers to upgrade their qualification to a four-year degree. Of particular concern, there is evidence to suggest that some students in these programs are not aware of the vocational limitations of their degree. We need to ensure that in searching for immediate solutions, we do not inadvertently create a second tier or class of teachers working in ECEC.
- Recognising and valuing prior learning and experience, there are well-established articulation pathways from the Diploma of ECEC into four-year early childhood teaching

degrees. As one example, QUT offers 18 months advanced standing into the Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood) to educators who have completed a Diploma and have 2 years professional experience working in ECEC. The pathway has been mapped against the new National Training Package to support students to transition and succeed in their university study. Graduates are eligible for teacher registration and have the choice to teach in ECEC or school. There are similar pathways offered by other universities, some offering up to two years advanced standing into four-year Birth to 5 early childhood teacher education programs. There is opportunity to strengthen and expand this pathway, and, in doing so, make visible current qualification and career pathways in ECEC (Nutbrown, 2021).

- There are also some promising examples of accelerated teacher education programs emerging in the school sector which should be explored in ECEC. Common features include: a scholarship or bursary to assist students with the cost of study; an accelerated study plan; online study options; and continuing employer support including paid employment and/or paid Internship program. The Queensland Government *Turn to Teaching (Internship) program* offers one promising model. QUT is also partnering with G8 Education to offer the *G8 Early Childhood Teacher Scholarship program*, which offers an impressive example of an employer-sponsored scholarship program.
- While responding to the immediate teacher shortage, there is a need to exercise caution with regards to accelerated teacher education programs. It is vital to maintain a broad perspective to ensure that we are preparing knowledgeable, skilled and resilient teachers who will seek to build a career in teaching. At present there is a paucity of research regarding the efficacy and impact of accelerated and employment-based programs, and need for investment in the evaluation of new models of teacher education. There is also evidence to suggest that accelerated programs do not suit all preservice teachers, supporting the need for a range of study pathways for early childhood teachers.

- There continues to be a spotlight on initial teacher education in Australia, with multiple inquiries seeking to identify factors that influence the preparation of quality teachers (e.g., Report of the Quality Initial Teacher Education Review, 2022; National Teacher Workforce Action Plan, 2022; Teacher Expert Education Panel Discussion Paper, 2023). While many of these silo and exclude early childhood teachers working in prior to school ECEC, they put forward factors considered to be influential in preparing and sustaining a qualified and professional teaching workforce. To support quality and equity for children and teachers in ECEC, there is a need for consideration of the following ‘quality inputs’ in the context of initial early childhood teacher education, including birth to 5 year programs that are not currently covered by AITSL:
 - Entry requirements for initial teacher education;
 - Expectations in relation to literacy and numeracy capabilities;
 - Demonstration of professional knowledge and skills against the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (APST), meeting Graduate level expectations to graduate and be eligible for teacher registration.

- In 2018, AITSL accepted the recommendation that all early childhood teachers in Australia, regardless of their employment setting, be required to be registered by teacher regulatory authorities (Education Services Australia, 2018). This was accompanied by a commitment to review the APST to ensure these were more reflective and inclusive of the work of teachers in ECEC. This work, yet to be undertaken, is critical to progress movement towards one strong teaching profession and advancing shared workforce goals identified in *Shaping our Future* (ACECQA, 2021) and the National Teacher Workforce Action Plan (.).

- Retention of quality teachers is a crucial part of elevating the teaching profession, at all points across the education continuum. This includes visible career pathways, equitable access to mentoring and continued professional learning and enhanced opportunities for all registered teachers to gain recognition and career progression through the Highly Accomplished and Lead Teacher (HALT) accreditation process.

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