

TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS

THE HON JULIA GILLARD AC, Commissioner

THE ROYAL COMMISSION INTO EARLY CHILD EDUCATION AND CARE

**TUESDAY, 23 MAY 2023
AT 09.45 AM**

This transcript is intended as a guide only and as an aide memoire with respect to the audio-visual record, which constitutes the official record of the hearing on 23 May 2023

SARAH ATTAR, Counsel Assisting

COMMISSIONER

Okay. I think we can get underway. So welcome everybody to day two of our public hearings in the North of Adelaide. I will start by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we meet and in a spirit of reconciliation, paying my respects to elders past, present, and emerging. Counsel assisting, I will go over to you. Thank you.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

Thank you, Commissioner. I call Helen Gibbons, our first witness today.

< HELEN GIBBONS AFFIRMED

COUNSEL ASSISTING

Are you currently the Executive Director of Early Education within the United workers union?

HELEN GIBBONS

Yes, I am.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

How long have you held that role for?

HELEN GIBBONS:

Since the Union was formed, it is a recent merger that was three years ago. But before that I led the, I was Assistant National Secretary also in charge of early education and have done that for more years than I care to remember really. I think I've worked for the union for nearly 20 years, always working in a role with early educators.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

And I believe going back a bit further, you've had involvement working within the education sector yourself.

HELEN GIBBONS

That's right. I trained as a teacher. I spent many years working in outside school hours care and running vacation care programs, but then moved on when I qualified to work in long daycare and worked in a number of services in Adelaide adding up to about 20 years in the sector.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

And the United workers Union, where you currently hold your position, that represents, I think over 150,000 workers across the country in a broad range of industries, but roughly how many representatives from within education and within early childhood education, can you give us a ballpark figure?

HELEN GIBBONS

Yeah. There's thousands of educators that work in long day care that are members of United Workers Union, so well over 12 or 13,000. Plus we have a lot of educators that work in different roles across the school sector across the country. So we've got a really diverse membership that includes education assistance in some states as well as long daycare workers, as well as outside school hours care workers.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

And is it fair to say through your role that you're in constant contact with people across the sector, as you've described, hearing their concerns about their employment, but also canvassing solutions for improvements?

HELEN GIBBONS

That's right. We've got a very active member base in long daycare - and I focus in long daycare - very active member base, an amazing group of advocates I work with on a daily basis. And we are a Union that spends a lot of time working with our members and working with our delegates and leaders and making sure that they are getting the opportunity to shape and run their work and their campaign.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

In the submission you've provided to the Commission you point to some statistics that won't surprise anyone in your sector, that about 30 to 48% of educators leave the sector each year. The Commission has already heard from a range of sources about concerns over pay and high turnover and obviously pay and bargaining are very important. And they're the focus of a large part of your written submission, but the Commission today would like to draw on that rich interaction that you have with the sector on an everyday basis to look at some of the other concerns in addition to pay, if we can, and try and perhaps have a discussion about what, what the workers are telling you might actually improve conditions. So can I start by asking you, in addition to pay, what are driving people to leave early childhood education? What are the key factors?

HELEN GIBBONS

We did an enormous survey of educators a couple of years ago, and we asked them exactly that. We asked them about their intention to stay, what would keep them in the sector and what were the key drivers about what they were thinking in relation to whether they would stay or whether they would go. And you are right to call out that the number one issue was their pay. And it's not just about being able to pay their bills. It's also about how they feel valued by the community and how much you're paid is a really concrete expression of how much the community values the work that you do. So putting that to one side, although I really want to stress that that is the, the key driver, absolutely the number one issue and our educators tell us very clearly that if you don't fix that you don't fix the sector. But the other two issues that really let put out in our survey was workload. And then the isolation or the, the kind of lack of support that they felt for their role. And both of those led into a sense of frustration that they knew what quality early education was, and they really wanted to deliver it for Australia's families, but really struggled to be able to do so in an environment where they felt isolated, where they felt undervalued and where their workload was overwhelming

COUNSEL ASSISTING

In terms of isolation, for those who perhaps aren't familiar with the sector, it's important to recognise that sometimes we might have educated or university trained teacher who's the only teacher within a small provider and might work with a team, very small team of other diploma or certificate qualified providers. Is that sort of one example that we see of the makeup of smaller centres?

HELEN GIBBONS

Yes, that's right. You may only have one or two teachers in a service, but it's not just the teachers that told us that they felt isolated. Most long daycare services will have between 17 and 25 educators. They are working in rooms. They tend not to move around across their rooms. They don't have usually anything much to do with the centre down the road that is providing the same sort of education and care to the same sort of community. But they don't have time. They work full-time jobs. They're really busy, they're really stressed. And so there's not a network of support or interaction across the sector. It's really hard to build that.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

I suppose it's a different scenario to a primary school where you might be able to duck out at lunchtime and seek the views of, of a teacher in a different class if something came up for example?

HELEN GIBBONS

Absolutely. And I think in, at schools and certainly I'm sure they have their struggles as well, but most teachers will have their lunch break together. And there is an opportunity there to

network and to share as well as staff meetings and other times where they're able to talk to each other and do professional development together. Early educators don't get their lunch breaks together. They tend to rotate through because people need to stay with the children. Professional development is often done out of hours at the end of a really long day. They don't have much opportunity to talk to educators and other services and to build a skill base that is drawing from their educator community.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

And as you said, and the Commission has heard how important professional development is to the entire sector, whether you are an educator or a teacher, what are people telling you would, would make a difference? Is it programs that are offered within working hours and not on the weekend? Is it that they need to be structured differently with different content? Can you give us some insight?

HELEN GIBBONS

I think there's, there's two things that educators have told us. And one is that all of, almost all of their professional development is out of hours. And they're already working incredibly hard and trying to do professional development at six o'clock at night, or even later, depending on when the centre closes after a really long day is really hard and they don't feel that that's the best learning environment. And they're very frustrated that they're not able to do most of their professional development during the day. The other thing they find really frustrating is their lack of ability to choose their professional development. And it depends on their employer, but sometimes their employer will say, this is the professional development that you are doing and the educator doesn't have much agency in that process. And so you'll find that educators will pursue other ways to get professional development, where they get to choose what they're interested in and what they would like to grow their knowledge in, but they end up having to pay for it themselves.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

Can you give us some examples of those options that people are pursuing, but paying for?

HELEN GIBBONS

Well we run a whole bunch of professional development for our members and that they don't pay, it's a free service that we provide to our members. Educators are really interested in trauma informed practise and thinking through how best to support children. We've also had a lot of interest in a program that we're running called mental health first aid, which is really trying to build on an educator's wellbeing and give them some tools to be able to manage some of the stresses that they're feeling. But there's a whole range of different training programs and there's, educators have lots of different interests and lots of different areas where they would like to specialise.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

Do you see a role for government in trying to make available broader resources across the sector?

HELEN GIBBONS

I think there's a, there's a bunch that the state government could do around thinking about the cost of training programs so the educators don't have to pick up the cost, but also supporting services and educators to be able to release educators during the day, so that they're in the, the best head space and best learning environment to be able to learn rather than trying to pack it in on a weekend or in the evening.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

Workload was the other associated pressure that you raised at, at the outset. And by that, do you mean not only just the sheer amount that needs to be done in the day, but also an associated toll on, on mental wellbeing?

HELEN GIBBONS

Certainly the mental health of early educators and their wellbeing has been under significant strain over the past few years. And I think the whole community has found the pandemic really stressful and really difficult. But educators kept working throughout it. They were often dealing not only with their own difficulties with their own family and their own health, but having to deal with the young children that they cared for and counselling the families who use those services. It's been an incredibly difficult time. And a lot of the exodus that we saw out of early education happened towards the end of the pandemic when educators felt burnt out and unable to continue to contribute their all.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

What are the most important conditions in your view for supporting the ability for, for teachers to deliver quality teaching, but also to support their wellbeing?

HELEN GIBBONS

Yeah, I think that there's a couple of things I was thinking about in relation to this, and I'd really like to share some of the thoughts that, I've got a, a group of educators that I talked to in preparation to talking to the Royal Commission and they gave me some ideas, after we talked about pay. One of the, I think there's three things that is worth thinking about in terms of what adds to an educator's workload and their feeling of being overwhelmed by the amount that they have to do. I think one thing in a really positive way would be to really start to unpack the flexibility that they're seeking. Often, their hours are really inflexible and centres find it really hard to roster for rostered days off or for shorter hours for, to allow educators to pick up their

own children. They find it really difficult to roster for programming time and planning time and to go to professional development. And I think there's some work there to unpack what support the centre directors and educators need to be able to roster in a way that supports educators and gives them some flexibility. When I worked in long day care, I was the assistant director and it was my job to do the roster, and I know how difficult it is. And at the moment, they're trying to do that in an area of enormous shortage of early educators and where they're dealing with a lot of casuals and a lot of agency staff. But I think it's worth unpacking and thinking more about what support we can give the sector to be able to think creatively about rostering and sharing resources and finding ways to release early educators. The two other things that educators have raised with me as really adding to their workload was the programming, planning time and they're related to rostering, but the inability to get consistent programming and planning time in a chunk. It's often in bits and pieces. Often, it doesn't happen if there's a shortage of staff, it means that educators are taking work home with them. It snowballs. They end up in a position where again, they're feeling like they're not delivering the best quality early education because they're not getting the planning time to be able to really plan the best quality learning environments for the children in their care. So there's some, I think there's some work and some thinking that can be done about supporting centres around that programming and planning time and maybe expanding it, but also what support do they need to be able to consistently deliver it? And it's not a tacked on afterthought after everything else has been managed within the service. And the final thing that got raised by every educator that I spoke to was the workload that comes with having children with additional needs in your services and the lack of support that they feel they get for that and their, their experience of trying to access additional supports and how frustrating that is, how long that takes and how much time that takes.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

Can we perhaps unpack a couple of aspects of each of those issues. In terms of the flexibility, towards the end of your answer about that you mentioned a proposed idea of sharing resources. How would you see that work? Can you give us a bit of a picture?

HELEN GIBBONS

One of the things I hear really frequently from centres is how expensive agency staff are and they don't often don't get the same agency staff. And so they may have a consistent request for agency staff, but they'll get a different person each time. So centres are so close together. Is there a way that centres, even though they're not the same employer, are able to share people more locally and find a way that provides a decent job with decent hours to an educator, but that educator works across a number of services to provide for planning time and for sick leave. But that requires a bit of creative thinking about how they're paid and how they're structured and who manages them. And often centres don't have time to kind of think that through.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

In terms of programming and planning, again, do you see, or what would you like to see government do to try and implement proper or more broader access to planning time?

HELEN GIBBONS

Yeah, it's a good question because the challenge for programming and planning time is the ability to get staff to release other staff. And I think it relates to that whole issue around rostering and resources to be able to release people and thinking through how, how can we support centres to have stronger rosters that are shared amongst maybe a number of services to be able to have staff, to release people, to be able to do their planning time. The key thing that's holding centres back is if you've got three staff off sick, how do you release staff to do their planning time? But there's never a, there's never a good day.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

In terms of the workload issues and in particular, the concern that the sector is telling you around support for children with particular needs, what needs to happen? Is it just that funding's not getting where it should?

HELEN GIBBONS

Can I with, with your permission, I've got an email from one of the educators who I've been working with and she's given me some examples. Would it be okay if I read out that email?

COUNSEL ASSISTING

Yes. If she's happy for them to be shared.

HELEN GIBBONS

She is her name's Rebecca Styles. She works at a service not far from here at Hillbank Community Centre. And she's sent me through some thoughts about it when I was talking to her the other day.

“Accessing any kind of support for children within our service is extremely difficult. Over the past year or so we've had a large increase in children with additional needs within our service, along with children who come from a trauma background. We're able to access funding for a support educator for our service through the inclusive support funding through Gowrie. But as far as I know, that's the only stream of support funding. This funding can only be applied for, for those children who have an official diagnosis, which we must be able to supply proof of. This doesn't include children who have trauma or those who we suspect have an additional need or behavioural difficulties, but doesn't have an official diagnosis yet. To gain this funding we have to apply through a portal that is very difficult to navigate. There's a great deal of

information that needs to be added, and it needs to be done in a very particular way to prove that we require the additional support. This is something that has to be completed by the service. It's a lengthy process. I personally spent three plus hours on the initial case with my ISS person sitting right next to me telling me exactly what I should do. After several weeks it was then sent back and required even more information. This was in January. And I've yet to hear if this has been approved. I previously had two funding cases for two children with very high needs. One of which started in the baby room, which is when I originally applied for funding. I didn't receive the funding until about 12 months later when he'd already moved to the toddler room, which meant that I had to reapply as he'd changed rooms. And so had the ratios and conditions. Despite him being in for a full day, our funding was only for five hours. Therefore we had to decide when the support was needed most. The second child we have has extreme needs and moved from our toddler room to the kindy room. Therefore, we now have both children in the same room together. Despite applying for new funding to include both children in the kindy room we've yet to have it approved. One of those children's original funding initially expired in April, and we're currently self-funding for additional educators to support them. This of course affects our budget and our bottom line. And we've heard of many centres, including private, particularly private centres where this doesn't happen. And the educators are expected to support the children with minimal staffing, which leads to further burnout, not to mention the detrimental effect it must have on the children who require that support. Other than these two children, we have three children with trauma background. One child recently diagnosed, two undergoing waiting diagnosis, several children who we believe should be assessed and several children with behavioural difficulties all in the same room. Yet, I have only been able to apply for funding for two of them. Their needs range from autism, global development delays, speech, and social and behavioural difficulties. As I'm sure you can imagine, this is extremely challenging for the educators in the room who are already burnt out. It would be very beneficial if we were able to access allied health professionals to help support the children and educators. However, this is yet another difficult process. We're able to apply for a particular stream of funding called Innovative Support Funding. I know of very few centres who have attempted to apply for this as we only go through another lengthy process and we have to create a business plan. I strongly believe that this is the main reason that centres don't access the funding and therefore go without. It shouldn't be so difficult. We should be able to access speech therapists, occupational therapists, and psychologists when we need them. This can only benefit the children and the staff. We all know that early intervention is paramount so why is it that we can't get the funding? For some children and families we're their only access for help and support. And despite our educators being highly qualified, they're not fully trained in allied health and therefore many children are missing out on this early intervention. This is another example of early education not being seen as part of the educational setting. Yet our services are educating children the moment they enter their doors, which can be from as young as six weeks."

You can hear in that statement that she sent me the frustration that she feels, but also the time it's taking her to be able to try and get funding that takes months, and in one case a year to arrive, and that whole time, that child is missing out on the extra support, but also the educators working in that room, and she's the centre director, are having to manage and work out how best to support those children. It leads to incredible burnout and incredible stress. It

drives up their workload and they get so frustrated that they are unable to offer the sort of support that the children in their care and the families need.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

There's clearly room from that very powerful response for structural change to make the process easier and provide support for smaller, particularly smaller providers, who are trying to access that funding, that comes through very clearly. But what also strikes me from that is the importance of professional development to try and buttress wellbeing on an ongoing basis, given that these problems aren't going to be solved overnight. Would you agree with that in terms of pressure on staff?

HELEN GIBBONS

Absolutely. But I think that the educators are in need of support to be able to manage through the process, but also need support while they're waiting for that process to deliver what they need in terms of being able to get the additional support. I, it just, the other thing that strikes me is that it shouldn't take 12 months. Like, you know, it's just kind of nuts and because it takes so long to get a diagnosis that just adds to the time because children can often wait six months to get a diagnosis.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

And anecdotally you're hearing these concerns broadly across the sector. Is that accurate?

HELEN GIBBONS

Yeah. I've got a, the educators that I've been meeting with in preparation for whenever I come to the Royal Commission, I think there's six of them, they they're from all over Adelaide, working in long day care services and that, it was the number one thing that they raised with me at the very first meeting is how frustrated they are, that they have these children with additional needs, increases their workload. They want to deliver for them. And they feel are really unsupported.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

Have they canvassed with you any of their personal aspirations for what improvements should be made in the first instance?

HELEN GIBBONS

So they're very keen for a more efficient system, a quicker system, that's easier to use where you don't have to spend three hours on a portal trying to navigate it. A simplified process to access funding, and that there is funding that is available while children are waiting for diagnosis, because of the enormous delays in getting diagnosis, particularly in some areas. So

speeding up the process and then being more generous at the end of that process. The idea that you've got a child with really significant global issues who is there for 10 hours, but you're only getting additional funding for five hours, seems like there's an expectation that the early educators, as well as all of the other work that they're doing, would pick up that extra and they're keen for more generous arrangement for that.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

Thank you. I'll try and come back to that because it's such an important topic, but there are several others I want to try and cram in this morning as well. You make a point in your submission that recruitment is, and I'll you, "in disarray". Can you help us understand that descriptor and help us understand what providers are going through at the moment when they're trying to juggle staffing shortages and rostering?

HELEN GIBBONS

Yeah. The shortages are really widespread and there's waivers all across the state where centres are unable to find suitably qualified staff. And so they ask for a waiver for that period. And often those waivers are longstanding. It's really hard. And of the educators that I spoke to who is the centre director said that she had had a waiver in place for her teacher for three years because she couldn't find a teacher to work in her service. So they, so those are enormous shortages of suitably qualified people. What that leads to is a lot of agency and a lot of casual staff, which is not a great outcome for the other educators that they're working with, but especially not for the children, because we know that it's really important that there is a stable environment with strong relationships with educators and children and families. It also leads to really new graduates being put in positions really quickly because there is a shortage. And so you might be a new graduate with a diploma and you'll be managing a team of people really early. You might be a teacher that is put in a more senior position really early because you are the only one, there isn't anybody else to do that role. And that I think leads to a lot of the new entrants being put in a position where they've got too much responsibility too quickly, not enough scaffolding and support around them to be able to ensure that they're successful. And so you get this kind of vicious cycle where that continues on.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

And we've touched upon ongoing professional development, but I'm interested in your insights and from the sector as to how we can better prepare graduates for the workforce and what can be done to manage that transition to work and early career support. Is there anything you'd like to share about that?

HELEN GIBBONS

I think there's, going back to my earlier comments about that idea of how isolated educators are at a centre and that they don't have time to network and talk outside of their services. I think there's a role there, or some work there that could be done about scaffolding, some

networking, and some support across services where you can have professionals sharing ideas and sharing support. And it doesn't necessarily need to be, you know, days long worth of conversations, but pairing up educators with a fellow educator at a centre down the road where they have a relationship or mentoring relationship or a small group that networks together, that shares their problems, you know, problem solves how to resolve some of their issues and thinks through collectively the work that needs to be done in early education, I think would be really useful, but it's not something that will happen all by itself. It needs some scaffolding and some support because centres are quite isolated from each other.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

It needs support to actually help the, the buddies meet up and exchange those ideas. So that someone's left in the room while they're having that meeting.

HELEN GIBBONS

Yeah. And thinking up the system, I mean, it could be that it's entirely virtual as well, but somebody somebody's got to kind of instigate the system and start to drive an idea that there is a buddy system or a mentoring system across the sector.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

You've mentioned that there there's a range of programs or resources that the Union makes available within the sector. Are they all offered virtually and what can the Commission learn about how we might broaden access to early career support and professional development, perhaps through some of the ways that you are offering resources?

HELEN GIBBONS

Yeah, we hadn't intended to offer them all virtually, but we launched our program called big steps, professional learning, uh, and then the pandemic hit almost immediately. It was like a trigger for it. And so we ended up doing all of it virtually for the first few years. And we offered a whole bunch of different professional development from, we outsource the delivery, so we don't deliver it ourselves, we employ people who are experts in delivering different ideas. And we have a group of educators that guide us and the sorts of programs that we should be offering. We do some things face to face now that we're able to and in particular, the mental health first aid programs that we've been running, we run sessions online, but we also run sessions face to face. And I think that that's really useful, particularly when talking about mental health and wellbeing to actually have a conversation in the room and, build up that sense of, you know, a community, I think is really useful. You can do that online, but it's always better to do it face to face. The challenges that we have because we are not the employer, we are providing this to early educators, it has to be in the evening or on the weekend. And so that's challenging for those educators who have big jobs, to be able to find the space. And that's why we've continued most of it online so that they are able to finish their day's work, get home, get a sandwich and sit down and do something online in the comfort of their own home.

If we were able to provide a professional development that would be supported during the day and their employers would release them I think that that would be much better, but at the moment, because it's outside of that, we do it in the evening and on the weekend.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

Are you aware of any programs or models we might look to, perhaps in other states, where they have trialled integrated within the work day opportunities for development?

HELEN GIBBONS

Well, there is professional development that you can do during the work day, but it relies on the employer to facilitate that and release people and that can be challenging. And it depends on the good will of the employer.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

In terms of those smaller providers and standalone services, I'm assuming that the challenges feel greater for them. What's your, I suppose, vision for, you've spoken about connecting up smaller providers. Do you see this working in terms of perhaps a government led state wide initiative to provide mentoring and connecting providers? What, what's your vision for how it might work?

HELEN GIBBONS

Yeah, I think that that would be, when you look at the large providers, they're able to do that across, like, you know, Goodstart will have a different networking and support structures because they're a large provider and they get those economies of scale. And so is there a way to replicate that without having just one employer and having a whole bunch of employers? And I think that there is a role there and some thinking there that can be done about how can we do that? We, it's interesting because we do a little bit of that at the Union, in that we've got delegates at services all across the country. They get together really regularly, face to face and online. And although we might be there to talk about a union campaign, the first few hours are always talking about, well, I'm doing this in my room and I'm doing that in my room. And if you thought about doing it this way, they like to share, and they like to network. It's just that they very rarely get an opportunity to.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

We're going to look a little bit later today at tertiary study options, lengths of degrees, and whether an option for South Australia to look at a shorter three year degree that focuses just on birth to five. And I'm aware that there are very differing views and what we're going to consult with some of them later today. But one of the concerns raised about shortening degrees in this space is cutting off opportunities for career progression and leadership options. From your interactions with the profession, are you getting a sense that people would be

reticent about studying a degree that would limit them to birth to five, rather than giving you an opportunity to move into early primary? Can you give us some insights in that area?

HELEN GIBBONS

I worked in Tasmania for nine years and they had for a short period at the University of Tasmania, a degree that was just for early education and it didn't get enough support in the sector. And maybe some of that was economies of scale with Tassie's a small place, it's not the same sort of population, but what they, and they ended up discontinuing it, I think, and the, the educators at that time said that they didn't want to do it because they didn't want to limit their career opportunities. And they weren't necessarily thinking that they would go on to school, but they didn't want to rule out being able to go on to be a teacher at school. So I've not seen, I think that there is a frustration from educators that people who do a degree that also covers and prepares them for teaching in school, don't spend enough time focusing on early education, but I think that's a different conversation than doing a degree that is solely early education. And I've not, I think there's really mixed thinking about that. And it's probably mixed up with this whole idea of 'we're paid so poorly, we want to have an opportunity to move into the education stream if we can'.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

In terms of the early childhood sector you've raised already that often people can find themselves in leadership positions very early in their career, or perhaps being the only educator in a small service. Are you aware of any models the Commission can look to in terms of supporting leadership that are perhaps specific to leadership rather than professional development more broadly?

HELEN GIBBONS

Well, I think that going back to my earlier comments about mentoring and support, I don't have a particular model where I've seen this work really well, but I think that if you are going to be a brand new graduate and you're gonna be put in charge of a team, you need support, and you can't just get support from your centre director, who is also astonishingly busy. Is there a way to connect those new graduates up with other new graduates or more experienced mentors?

COUNSEL ASSISTING

And sticking with some training and development issues, there'll be some evidence later today about some difficulties that are being encountered within South Australia about access to placements as part of study. Are you receiving feedback from, you know, graduates within the sector about difficulties encountered during the practical component of their studies?

HELEN GIBBONS

I hear it more from the other side about the difficulties that educators have supervising their students and depending on the nature of the student, whether that is adding to their workload or not. It can be hard, I mean, I used to do it, it can be hard work, supervising students, especially doing it really thoroughly. And I think educators at a time when they're really stressed and when there's an enormous workforce shortage, having a student in your room can be really useful, but it can also be really difficult.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

What, what is required to try and alleviate some of those issues? Is it a structured program that gets provided to the service that, to give them some guidance? Or is it simply that at the moment, there's not enough staff to actually share the, the additional workload of supervising?

HELEN GIBBONS

Yeah, I think that, I mean, the elephant in the room is, is around the workload and stress and shortages of educators. I think, rather than providing additional support for services, it, maybe it's worth thinking about how students are prepared to go into a service so that they're not seen as an additional workload. They actually can be really helpful and can engage really quickly and don't need as much hands on supervision.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

We started off touching on one of the figures that you've provided in your statement about the numbers leaving the sector. And we know from various sources that surveys keep being done and at any given point, the survey inevitably says, a lot of staff are considering leaving early childhood. Are we gaining any of those people back? And I suppose I'm thinking now of the cohort who, I understand often leave, young mothers or mothers generally after having children. Anecdotally, are we gaining them back? And what can we do to try and, you know, encourage that.

HELEN GIBBONS

I think there's, there's young mothers who leave when they have their own children. But there's also a whole bunch of people who left at the end of COVID and neither of them are coming back. I think that young mothers often are looking for flexibility. And when they do come back, they come back as casuals because it's the only way they can get the flexibility that they need to care for their own families, within a fairly structured roster that doesn't provide them flexibility and being a casual does, or agency staff, which is essentially the same thing, you are in control of your own hours. The people that left at the end of COVID, we haven't seen them come back and we have for years said that we have a leaky bucket and that we keep attracting people to the sector that they just keep leaking out the bottom. I think the holes in that leaky bucket have gotten larger and we've lost even more. And we certainly, I can't think of a single

educator that, you know, that we engaged with and had a relationship with that left and has since come back, they've all gone on to other things. And I think that the, you know, coming at us at a rate of knots, on July 1st aged care workers are gonna be paid significantly more and I would expect that we're gonna get lose even more educators to the aged care sector.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

Just before I hand over to the Commissioner, I overlooked when we were talking about study and preparedness for work, there are some differing views about the role that accelerated degrees might play. And we've touched upon this in trying to help with some of these workforce issues. Are you hearing anything from providers and employers about concerns they might have if we start to accelerate training and send graduates in even sooner.

HELEN GIBBONS

I hear it more from educators. I think that often providers are very keen on accelerated degrees because it gives them a graduate much more quickly, but I think educators are often really concerned about what they're missing out on in their acceleration and whether they're doing, whether they're really grounding themselves in the skills and knowledge that they need in order to be able to do their work. And at the same time they're also working, and trying to juggle both the accelerated learning and the work that they're doing, it can be really challenging. So I think that weighing up, there's pluses and minuses of both. And I know that there's a lot of educators that get recognition for their, their existing work when they are going for a diploma. They don't necessarily get that when they do a degree, but we've got to get the balance, right. We've got to be able to make sure that they are getting the training and the experience and skills that they need to be able to do their job properly and into the future. And an acceleration shouldn't take away from that.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

Commissioner.

COMMISSIONER

Thank you very much for your evidence so far. I know we all know this, but I think it would just be good to get it clearly on the record. When you look at your union membership of early childhood educators, how feminised is the profession?

HELEN GIBBONS

About 97% of people who work in long day care are women.

COMMISSIONER

Right. And looking, clearly the pay lever is not in the hands of the state government and consequently Council Assisting has been taking you to other areas which may relate to attracting and retaining staff. But just, once again, for the record, this Royal Commission will be delivering its final report in August and we are very conscious we are doing that against a changing backdrop because there are many things happening at the federal level and one of the things that's happening at the federal level is changes in bargaining arrangements for childcare. Are you able to summarise what those changes are and likely time frames on those changes?

HELEN GIBBONS

Yes Commissioner, the bill came in at the end of last year.

COMMISSIONER

So this is a federal bill.

HELEN GIBBONS

Yeah, federal bill that changed the way that you can bargain in this country. It comes into effect on June the sixth, and there's a number of different streams that have been set up. The stream that we are really interested in is the capacity to do multi-employer bargaining in a supported stream. And what that means is that we can bargain not just employer by employer, but we can actually get a group of employers and say we all share a common problem and we want to bargain together and, you know, get a bit of a cross section of the sector. But the supported stream also allows us to get the government as the funder, the federal government as the funder to participate in that bargaining. So we'll be, early education will be going to the Commission and lodging an application for supported bargaining on the first possible day that we can do it, which we think is June the sixth. We will be asking the Commission to grant us orders to start the bargaining process. And then in due course, we'll ask the Commission to make an order that the government participate in that bargain. That process will take some time, but the intention is that there is true tri partite discussions between employers, unions, and government, about how best to fund wages and conditions in the sector. And certainly it is our intention, and this is the employer's intention, that this is an opportunity to drive up wages in the sector in a way that doesn't drive up costs to parents.

COMMISSIONER

And even under current arrangements, which are employer by employer, you do have enterprise bargains with some employers, for example, Goodstart, I understand you have an enterprise bargain with. Apart from pay what are the key conditions that you have sought in those enterprise bargains?

HELEN GIBBONS

There's a number of things that educators always pursue. Often it's additional sick leave because they get a lot of things from children.

COMMISSIONER

I can imagine.

HELEN GIBBONS

The one thing that children like sharing is their germs. Educators are often very keen on setting up structured processes for them to have a say over their work and to be consulted about their work. And so building in a role for advocacy and voice. Programming time, they always pursue additional programming time because the award is very limited in what it provides. And some employers will only provide what the award applies, which is two hours a week. We did some work around under the roof ratios where there was a limitation set on the ability to move children around to achieve efficiencies about ratios, which just drove up workload. And so we put some limitations in one agreement around that. Rostered days off, flexibility for hours and say about their rosters, additional leave arrangements, paid parental leave.

COMMISSIONER

And just to focus on the programming time. So the award amount is two hours in total for your programming time for the children that are in your room and consequently directly in a relationship with you as an educator. What sort of aspiration do you tend to pursue under bargaining? What do people want as programming time?

HELEN GIBBONS

We try and get in bargaining, what that looks like for each educator in the room, because the award is often interpreted as, by employers, as two hours for the room rather than two hours for the educator. So we try and get an entitlement for each educator. We also often increase the number of hours depending on the number of children that are under your care. As you can imagine, if you've got over the course of a week, 30, 40 children that might be coming through your room, managing to do proper programming and planning time for that amount of children is really challenging. And so we've try and get a sliding scale when there's more children there's more time available.

COMMISSIONER

And one of the things that you explored with Council Assisting, and I'm wondering, if you can sort of war game this forward in your head, we are clearly concerned that we might end up with quite, there are already different conditions between bigger providers and standalone providers. And that's, you know, simply explained by economies of scale, obviously, for

example, Goodstart in our round table discussions has indicated that because it's an at scale provider, it can do things like have its own allied health professionals that it can then mobilise to meet children's needs. That's not an option that's gonna be available to someone who's running a standalone long daycare centre. Are you concerned as we move into these bargaining rounds, that there might be even more differentials between bigger multi-site more at scale providers and what standalone providers can do for their staff. And that that will then create retention issues, particularly in one part of the sector?

HELEN GIBBONS

So through the multi-employer bargaining Commissioner, is that what you're referring to?

COMMISSIONER

Yes, yes.

HELEN GIBBONS

So we will start off with an initial trench of employers, at, for multi-employer bargaining come June 6th, we're very keen to get going. But it is our intention over time that will be some consistency across the sector, and we are calling it the new standard in early education. And we want to set a new benchmark and try and bring as many of those employers as possible up to meet that benchmark. Some already do in relation to professional development and delegates rights. Nobody, I don't think, pays 25% above award. So certainly there's, everybody's got room to grow there. But we would like to see more consistency and you're quite right Commissioner that there is a real diversity across the sector at the moment, there is a lot of educators that only get the award payments. Some will get a little bit more than the award. Some will get really significant different conditions. Some will get a completely different classification structure. We would actually like to try and see at least a minimum consistency. And that doesn't mean that some services won't want to do better and hopefully they will but we've got to try and lift all boats and it is our intention that over time we will pursue that across the sector.

COMMISSIONER

And in terms of holding workforce in the sector, I mean, you know, people have got choices and they can go and work in any part of the economy. So, you know, clearly, how people are valued, pay, the other terms and conditions, you know, they're passionate about what they do. All of these things come together to hold people in their current jobs, but looking at the immediate sources of competition for educators, Council Assisting talked to you about the potential that people can go and work in schools and what may drive decisions to go and work in schools. What about what may drive a decision to move from being an educator in long daycare to being in a government preschool here in south Australia?

HELEN GIBBONS

If you look at the number one issue that drives educators to leave long daycare it's pay, and if there is a significant difference between pay in long day care and government preschools then government preschools are going to be more attractive. And there's different qualifications, right? So there's probably different drivers for people with a teaching qualification than there is for people with a diploma qualification. Because certainly people with cert threes and diplomas don't go off to work in government preschools, they're more likely to go into something that has a higher hourly rate and often something that is what they consider as less stressful, because they're feeling overwhelmed by the work that they do. So they pursue things like retail, or I think that increasingly, although it's certainly not less stressful, we might see people go into age care because it's going to have a much higher hourly rate. In terms of the teachers, they have more options about going into schools and maybe into government preschools as well. And I think that as much as it's great to build stuff around what we are offering people to work in different environments, when you're paid a low rate of pay, that's almost always the first consideration. And so we, we are gonna have to think about that and about making sure that there's parity and that there's consistency. But better support, better conditions, better networking, better scaffolding, I think is all things that drive people's decision making in this as well.

COMMISSIONER

Thank you. And I was struck by what you said, and it's not the first time we've heard it, it's certainly been raised in the round table format, how mind numbing these portals can be when people try to get on them to do the various additional funding applications. And in addition to that, people have talked about other administrative loads to do the reporting that they're required to do against quality standards and all of those sorts of things, which are clearly important. But are you aware from some of the bigger providers, the at scale providers, of digital tools that are lessening that kind of administrative workload for educators, which could potentially be shared? You did talk to Counsel Assisting about how some things that at scale providers are doing might potentially be replicated, reflected in smaller providers, are digital tools part of that set of things you were thinking about?

HELEN GIBBONS

I think that it would be really useful to look at what providers like Goodstart and other large providers are able to do because they have the resources and because they do work at scale and they often are faced with these problems and are able to think creatively about how to do that across, you know, the five or 600 services that they have. And you're right to call out that the Hillbank Community centre in the northern suburbs of South Australia, that is a standalone, not for profit service, does not have those sorts of resources. And it would be interesting to see whether there's pieces that are shareable or that are usable across the sector. But reflecting on Beck's statement that she sent me, Rebecca Style's statement, there was a digital portal and she was sitting there for three and a half hours trying to work out how to use it with somebody who was an expert on how to use it next to her, and then still that wasn't enough.

And so I think that, I would just have some nervousness about creating more tools that create more work for educators to do. And I think that the drive needs to be simplicity in relation to that it needs to be simplicity and speed because it's just madness that we've got six months waiting for a diagnosis and then a year to get a decision about whether there's additional funds to support that staff and that child.

COMMISSIONER

I understand it wouldn't fix the portal problem as such, but I was wondering if there were other areas where it might lessen loads. You would've seen the Commission's interim report and some of the findings we made about supporting professional development and also supporting inter connections between services, what we've been informally referring to as 'the glue'. Have you got any reflections on those findings that you'd like to share with us?

HELEN GIBBONS

I particularly focused on the findings around professional development and just, I thought it was a little, I was unsure in the report about whether the promotion of professional development was just for people with a teaching qualification or also extended to the diploma staff. I think it's really important that diploma staff are included in that, especially as the Commission is making recommendations about diploma staff and being able to run three year old programs and often there's a lot more diploma staff than there are teaching staff. And we really rely on them in the sector to be able to deliver high quality programs. And often it's the diploma that will be the educational leader because there's such a shortage of teachers. So that was my most immediate reflection.

COMMISSIONER

Okay. Thank you. Let me just think again if there's anything else from my notes I wanted to raise with you. Yes. I did just want to dig in a little bit to this competition with aged care because you are clearly seeing that as a potential alternate employment destination for people who are in early childhood education at the moment. Intuitively, people mightn't see that, they might think, you know, these are very different roles, very different jobs. But obviously when you step back a bit, they're in the, you know, caring professions and interconnecting with families and people who get a lot of satisfaction out of that kind of work might want to go from setting to setting. But can you flesh out for us what's made you think that there could be a flow out of early childhood into age care? Have you heard people talking about that?

HELEN GIBBONS

Certainly the providers are very nervous about it.

COMMISSIONER

Right.

HELEN GIBBONS

And so they're hearing it from educators as well, and we are hearing it from educators. It's an amazing win for aged care workers to get a 15% pay increase. And the Fair Work Commission has already said that they have more thinking to do about that. So we are expecting that it might even go higher than 15%, which, 15% is a significant amount of money for early educators who are paid so poorly. And so it might be that it's within the caring sector, of which is a significant part of the role of an early educator but it's also about pay. I think that it'll be interesting to see how it plays out though Commissioner, because I think that working in age care is also incredibly stressful. And there is an enormous shortage as well, but there's going to be active advertising and poaching and aged care has a workforce crisis as well. And they are seeking people to come and work in age care and will be wanting to seem attractive.

COMMISSIONER

And in terms of poaching and advertising, do you hear your members, who are all around the country, talk about potentially moving interstate for better conditions? There's a bit of a lively interstate competition at the moment. Do you see that reflected in what people talk about?

HELEN GIBBONS

Absolutely. And particularly to Victoria, and whenever you get a group of educators together nationally and they get chatting, they'll often talk about the adverts that they've seen, that Victoria is running about the relocation payments and the support that they get to be able to move into state. And I think it's very high profile. It's very well known and clearly it's delivered for Victoria and that they've got the lowest waivers in the country. It'll be interesting to see how that plays out over time. And I haven't seen stats about whether those educators are staying and whether they're becoming Victorians, in that process or whether it's a temporary arrangement. But certainly it's a very attractive proposition. And I know that there's incentives in other states, like Queensland's doing some work as well, but the, the real one that we always hear about is Victoria. Maybe it's that South Australia is so close to Victoria. Maybe that's partly related to that people aren't attracted by the good weather in Queensland in the same way. I don't know.

COMMISSIONER

Okay. Thank you. That that's all I've got. That's been very useful. Thank you very much.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

Thank you. The witness can be released and I'm hoping we have our next witness here.

I call Jane Hunt.

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COUNSEL ASSISTING

I understand you are currently the Chief Executive Officer of The Front Project. And in fact, the founding CEO.

JANE HUNT

Yes, that's correct.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

Can you outline for the Commissioner a little bit about your background and how you came to be in this current position?

JANE HUNT

Yes, absolutely. So my background is as a social entrepreneur in Australia and the reason I became very interested in early childhood education and care is I've worked for a long time with people who experienced disadvantage and vulnerability. So as the inaugural CEO of Fitted for Work as well, and have served on a number of organisations in housing and homelessness, and there were two reasons to start the organisation. The first one was an experience actually of a person who was a tenant in our homeless services. And we were at a Christmas function and he said 'oh can you tell me what's on the menu'? And I said, sure. And I passed him the menu. And he said, 'I can't read it'. And so I asked him about his experiences of education and very early he had very disrupted experiences of education. And he talked about the value for his children, of being in early learning, and I started thinking about how do we ensure that that system is equitable, accessible for all children. And then I started to look at the area and with Michael Traill, he was the founding Chair and I was the founding CEO, we decided to establish The Front Project to work systemically, to look at the early childhood education and care system as a whole end system. And think about where in that system we could make improvements to drive better outcomes for children.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

Now, as you've outlined the work that The Front Project has done has been very broad ranging across issues of relevance to the early learning system and there's many amazing papers available on your website. But today, as you know, we are having a focus on workforce and we have invited you to share with us information about one project developed by The Front Project, which I think is presently called the Upskill Project.

JANE HUNT

Yes.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

And we'll come back in a moment to that project, but just by way of an initial summary, is it accurate to describe that as a program designed to assist diploma qualified educators to move in and complete university qualifications with a scaffolding support behind them to help overcome some of the barriers that exist for people who are looking to move into tertiary studies?

JANE HUNT

That's correct. Yep.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

In terms of how you came to focus on that, however, I understand you started looking at high school students.

JANE HUNT

We did.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

And their interest in potential careers as early childhood teachers. Can you just briefly tell us what that yielded and how it morphed into a focus on the cohort who were already in possession of a certificate or diploma qualifications?

JANE HUNT

Yeah, absolutely. So in us thinking about the early childhood or early learning system, we were very strongly recommending three year, offering three year early learning for all children. To do that you need a qualified workforce, and we know that the outcomes for children rest on those interactions between educators and teachers and children. So we were conscious that we had a workforce that there weren't enough teachers and educators to meet demand if we bring in three year old kinder or access to that for children, we had a significant gap. So when we looked at the whole system, we were saying, okay, this is an area of need. We then looked at all the programs that were available and we couldn't find one that supported at the time attracting school leavers into early learning. So that's where we first started. And we did some research in that area and we engaged YLab so that they could talk young people to young people about their career options. In that process, we discovered that young people, more or less, more or less, formed their view around career options in around year nine and families, their peers and their schools were very influential in that as we would understand. Their view of early learning or becoming an early childhood teacher at the time, so this was 2018, was that it was a low paid job, that they, the perception was you did it if you liked children. And many of them had siblings that they were, you know, feeling slightly more ambivalent about. And so

they just didn't see themselves in that career trajectory. So we realised there had to be a lot more work done at that, in those school years to build up the knowledge and understanding, and the, you know, of the sophistication of working with children. That was a very long term proposition. So, and the need was becoming great in the sector. So we did some work reframing the career proposition. Once we talked to young people about impact, as in you help shape a young person's life, there was considerable interest. There was interest in it being not a desk job and there was interest in career trajectory and that there were jobs available, that was attractive to people. So we started reframing that, but we realised that we had to solve the issue quicker. And so then we started looking at the cohort of educators and how we might help them upskill to be teachers. And we did a piece of research on what the enablers and barriers were for them, and they sort of chunked down to sort of individual centre and then sort of more, you know, sort of systemic issues. And from that we developed the Upskill Program.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

Can I ask you to highlight for us some of the key barriers that that initial research revealed but first of all, I was probably remiss in not covering this with our first witness. Can you just provide just something of an explanation for people tuning in about some of the key differences between the roles that diploma educators play in the sector compared to those with bachelor qualifications?

JANE HUNT

Yeah. So a bachelor qualified teacher sets the curriculum, the pedagogy, and the educators implement that. Saying that there is, you know, in many centres, educators play very significant roles in the lives of children. So this is not about saying one is better than the other. They're just different roles that they take up in relation to children. We do find a lot of early childhood teachers become centre directors quickly. So they find themselves in leadership positions quite quickly as well.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

In terms of the research that you commissioned when you started to look at, leaving the high school children aside and looking at this cohort, can you summarise for us, I understand there was a literature review and then something of a publicly available survey to try and tease out what those key barriers were that were standing in the way of diploma qualified people considering upskilling. What were some of those key barriers that you unearthed?

JANE HUNT

Yeah, absolutely. So some of them are individual, some of them are centre based and some are much broader. So some of those barriers for people upskilling at a personal level was the complexity of juggling work, family and study. There are a high number of single mothers who work in this area. So it's a burden you know, a time burden on them to do that. Many of them hadn't been told by their services what the pay difference would be. So their perception was I

would be doing more work and not really getting much more pay. That's been started to be dispelled by the sector. And in fact was in response to the report being released. So there's that. There was also a financial cost to upskilling, as we know. And as Helen outlined, many of the educators are not highly paid, so they would have to forego income or take it on top and in the hope of building over time, enough income as a teacher. So those barriers. At a service level, the barriers included things like not support for upskilling, a concern that if they helped someone upskill, they would leave and they wouldn't see the benefit in the in the centre. Not enough time for paid study leave. So many of them felt that the organisation wouldn't support them to have time off the floor or help pay for their study leave or the costs of upskilling. So those barriers. And then many of them face barriers in that they didn't know where to go to get information, portals to universities are complex and confusing. The language is not often the language, if you have a vet qualification, that is then used in the tertiary system. So for example, we have people in the Upskill Program who didn't understand the difference between applying for a degree and enrolling in a degree because nobody had explain to them. And so many of our upskillers are first in family to go to university, so didn't have all that informal knowledge gathered through their, you know, family. And many of them have English as a second language. And so they faced those more structural barriers, if you like to upskilling, yeah.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

Taking those barriers then as your starting point, what was the model that was developed that now is what we call Upskilling?

JANE HUNT

Yeah. One of the things we should mention are the strengths as well. So what we do find is an enormous commitment to the sector and to children. And so there's a high level of motivation that sits there as well. So I just wanted to mention that because it can feel, sound very much like there's only barriers. And for many educators being around other educators and teachers who are upskilling was also important because then they saw a future for themselves. So what we did was we put in a transition program that helps them navigate the entry into university, helps them understand higher education language, and study expectations. We talk to them, you know, their first essay they have to write, walk them through how to do that. We link them with the supports that the universities offer as well. So between the university and The Front Project, if we notice a student who may be vulnerable to dropping out, one of us is able to step in and help that student. So, and we basically help them with the time management, how to juggle work, et cetera, so there's that sort of transition support. Then we offer a mentoring program. So that was co-designed with representatives from the sector. So educators and teachers, and then some academics and providers. And in that we developed a model of where we have a mentor to a number of students. So they're in a peer mentoring environment. And so they work with them on issues they may be experiencing in their workplace in doing this, but also in the higher education process, essays and things like that. So they meet around six times a year, but sometimes more depending on what the student needs. And then our team provide weekly office times out of hours where they're available. So people can say, 'I'm

really struggling with this. I don't know how to do that'. So we are triaging there. At the same time we also offer an online community that links all teachers and educators in that community together and together. We had 12 founding members, very senior people in the sector who were the founding sort of knowledge experts. And then they helped the teachers and educators solve issues. And that could be anything from challenging behaviours, impact of COVID, through to if they're studying, study skills. So that combination is what is offered through the Upskill Program. I think one of the keys is the integration and the work with universities where, and it's a fairly modest cost, The Upskill Program. So where it also works is where scholarships are offered to students. So if we take Victorian, we have a contract with the Victorian government to upscale a hundred diploma qualified educators to be teachers, they're also able to access the state government scholarship at the same. And that removes that financial barrier. Yeah.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

I want to unpack some of that if we can. The transition program is the first aspect offered, is that offered online to participants.

JANE HUNT

That's correct. And that was because of accessibility. So we need to be able to reach, this is a national program, and we have students at 15 universities across Australia. So we need to be able to reach them in all different parts of Australia, but also at times that work for them, which is often out of work hours. Yeah.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

In terms of the mentoring program, you mentioned one mentor per small group, given the national nature of the program, a mentor might be in one state and a mentee might be in another and I assume an online platform is used again?

JANE HUNT

Yes, that's right.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

We'll talk a bit about funding in a moment, but the mentors, are they recruited and trained and funded by The Front Project?

JANE HUNT

That's right. And they're paid for their time. So it was very important for us that those who are mentoring in the sector are recognised for their contribution and their expertise. So they are paid for the mentoring. Yeah. We have 29 trained mentors. Yep.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

And are they across different qualification levels and different states?

JANE HUNT

They're all early childhood teachers and they're all on average, about three years post their degree. Yeah. And yes, they're across Australia. Yeah.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

Now I don't want to overlook, there's a leadership aspect of the program, but I want to come back to that. In terms of how the Upskill Program is being offered, there are, I think, three tiers at present or three ways that people can access it for employees. And you mentioned that you're currently partnering with about 12 universities across Australia, but none currently in SA?

JANE HUNT

No that's correct.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

So this is very much a model that South Australia can look to. Can you explain those three tiers in terms of how the program's being accessed?

JANE HUNT

Yeah, absolutely. So the first tier is a provider tier. So that's working directly with providers. They contract us to upskill people within their services. That's the stream that we are most able to nuance to the provider themselves. So many of them have other existing mechanisms internally, you know, ways of accessing information on pedagogy or teaching, you know, depending on the size and scale of the provider. So we are able to dovetail that into their existing processes. So it becomes seamless for the student. It's an effective way of upskilling because then the employer is able to provide access for the student or the employee to work in different centres as well, when they're doing their practical components of their degree. That works for larger providers, less so for smaller providers. Then we have a tier that we developed for government and that's where we are able to provide it as a standalone program, but with government providing other sources of funding like scholarships and so on. So that's that tier. Then we have an individual tier, which is for educators who want to upskill, and they don't necessarily have the support, through the funding, from their provider. And we make that the lowest cost tier, we can it's \$300 a year, because we recognise how difficult it is for educators to self fund. That is the tier that just, it supports individuals. It has less integration obviously into their providers systems and processes because it, you know, they're doing it as individuals. So they're the three tiers. We do have some variations, like every model. So we do

things like provide mentoring for some students who are enrolled in accelerated ITE degrees, and we just offer the mentoring component for them. The whole, the reason that upscale program is the way it is, is it's to bend and flex depending on the needs of the provider and the needs of the students. So that's why it can be scaled easily and all components are run online for that reason. Yeah.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

You mentioned there's presently a contract between the Victorian government and The Front Project to put a hundred educators through the program. First of all, are there any particular eligibility requirements that The Front Project sets and also did the Victorian government set any particular entry requirements as part of their utilisation of the program?

JANE HUNT

Yeah, absolutely. So for us, all the educators need to be in an ACEQUA recognised diploma. So, because they need to be eligible to go into the bachelor degree. The Victorian government, obviously they want people who are living and working in Victoria. They wanted them to be working on the floor in a service. They had to hold the ACEQUA approved diploma and they had to complete an ACEQUA approved bachelor teaching qualification. This cohort also needed to demonstrate or show that they faced barriers to upskilling. So that could be English as a second language, first in family to go to university, and/or they had to show that they could not afford to support themselves to upskill and their provider could not. And certainly for the Victorian government, there was a priority, given the rollout of three year old kinder, that we were able to help supply teachers to meet those rollout targets

COUNSEL ASSISTING

And did 100 students end up enrolling?

JANE HUNT

Yeah, we have, I think it's 103 at the moment, yeah, that's right.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

And is that the largest sort of scaled cohort that you've supported?

JANE HUNT

No, we have another large cohort through a large private provider as well. Yeah.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

In terms of the way that the model worked for targeting students through the Victorian department, they could be completing any ACEQUA approved diploma and then choose their university of choice.

JANE HUNT

Yes, that's correct. Yeah. So our largest cohort is at Latrobe University, but we do have yeah, across a number of universities.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

In terms of that individual program that you advised for \$300 a year and an individual who might not feel supported by an employer can access all aspects of the program for that one off fee. How widely accessed do you find that that is?

JANE HUNT

Not very at the moment because we've only just launched it.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

Right. Thank you.

JANE HUNT

Yeah. Because we were realising we weren't capturing a whole group of educators who did want upskill.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

Will that program follow the same small group mentoring?

JANE HUNT

Yep.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

And the same transitional and other components.

JANE HUNT

Absolutely. Yep. Yeah. And now we've proved that the model was working because our retention rates are about 72%. We have 20 graduates who've already graduated from Upskill. Because we've done that we can say, okay, now we can take it to individuals. Yep.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

Is it one key factor or necessarily a combination of the supports offered that you think result in that 72%? Because that's quite phenomenal.

JANE HUNT

Yeah. So when we asked the educators in the program for them, it was the combination of factors. Most important once they're in the degree is the mentoring support and the peer group that they form. Yeah. Yeah. But they say it's a combination of, at different stages, you need different things. Yeah. For our graduating students, we did have four take up the leadership program you mentioned before, and we are trialling a micro credentialing with the University of Melbourne. So we have four of our students completing that leadership program at the University of Melbourne.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

Can you take us through the components of that leadership program? Is that an add on with additional cost to provide the service?

JANE HUNT

Yeah. So we pay that cost. It's about, I'd have to get, just over \$700 per student. And they do that through the University of Melbourne and it's leadership in pedagogy and practise.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

So at the moment, that's limited to people who are able to study within Victoria.

JANE HUNT

Yeah, at the moment, yeah. But that doesn't preclude us exploring other options. There are other universities who we could easily link that. The reason we felt that was important was we know that once you're qualified as a teacher, you will be starting to be taking up leadership roles. And we know that centre directors are absolutely critical in supporting the workforce of educators and teachers in their centres. They can literally create a rich environment or not. And so what we were wanting to do is solve a problem later on where we are building the awareness and understanding and capability in a leadership role as well. That's why we're trialling it.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

That micro credential that's being trialled, how long is that in terms of the program?

JANE HUNT

I would have to check and get that one back to you. Yep.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

That's not a problem. And I think you're looking at, well, as part of that model, there's exploration as to whether that in itself might then be eligible as credit towards a masters in terms of further upskilling.

JANE HUNT

Yeah. That's the other reason we chose it, we wanted to encourage teachers to look at options for further study, because it's a cyclical thing, isn't it. If you don't have your pipeline through your degrees, you then don't have a pipeline going on to postgraduate study and doing research in this area. And so we also wanted to build people's familiarity with tertiary institutions and thinking about postgraduate study.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

And you made a comment before about the way that the Victorian contract is showing that the program works well with scholarships. I suppose the barriers to just solving the problem by scholarships are all the reasons that The Front Project exists in terms of here's some money, but it's not helping with all of the things you've taken us through. Is that the importance of that combination?

JANE HUNT

That's right. It's the combination that works. There are, for some educators, the financial barrier is significant. Yep. So you need both. Yeah.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

We've, the Commission has consulted and heard a range of indigenous voices. I wonder whether there is any particular support built in if a government wanted to try and encourage indigenous workers to upskill?

JANE HUNT

Absolutely. So we would work with SNAICC on that. They are fabulous and they have culturally appropriate ways of supporting educators. And I know they are, they have some

programs underway and they're looking at that. We have, one only 1% of our upskillers identify as Aboriginal first nations. Certainly what we would be doing is looking to support SNAICC in the work that they do.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

I should have asked you, I know you've got 100 through the Victorian model and there's another large cohort, but how many do you think you've had, roughly, go through the program nationally?

JANE HUNT

Yeah. So this has been very interesting for us. We have had 600 commence, but COVID saw a large proportion defer or withdraw. So we, and they're clear about this, 140 left because of COVID. So the rest are still in the program and we are still recruiting. I mention that because COVID had a profound impact on this sector. At the same time that they needed to continue operating, many of them were also trying to educate children at home, which is really challenging and many of those in Victoria and New South Wales and some of the jurisdictions that had long lockdowns experienced high levels of burnout through COVID. And so we definitely have a cohort who left upskilling because they really couldn't handle it on top of everything else that was happening. And we have got educators on our online community that talk about the increased workload for them at the moment, but the increased number of issues they're dealing with children who have not had a lot of exposure outside of the home environment, quite understandably, if you've been in lockdown and then you're re-joining group settings, and higher presentations of stress trauma, and challenging behaviours. And so for many of them coupled with pay and conditions, that's a really difficult and challenging workplace. And so yet there were a significant number during COVID that weren't able to upskill. We encouraged a number to defer rather than to withdraw. And so we keep in contact with them.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

And they can effectively hold an Upskill place if they decide to return?

JANE HUNT

Yeah.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

You mentioned a couple of times the online community that's been developed by Upskill, but I understand that's actually available more broadly nationally to the sector, whether you've participated in Upskill or not?

JANE HUNT

That's right.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

And I have assumed that that's funded by Front Project.

JANE HUNT

Yeah.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

Was that implemented at the height of COVID, am I right about that?

JANE HUNT

That's right.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

Was it always intended to be a national online platform?

JANE HUNT

Yes. It got accelerated under COVID. So what happened was we did a survey of educators and teachers and through all our connections in the sector, we were getting a lot of feedback that people were feeling very isolated and very alone and struggling to solve issues. And particularly if you're in those more regional, rural areas where you may be, you know, a small workforce or the only teacher for a, you know, a big geographical area. So we did some work with the sector and put in the online community as a result. And it's real intent was at first to alleviate the isolation and loneliness and to provide support. It is now taking up much more a role around disseminating evidence based information, supporting each other, translating evidence to practice. So I would say it will continue to develop. It is, we have a full-time community manager who is employed to support that community. And so it is driven by the needs of the educators and teachers who are in that community. And our job is to respond and support them. Yep.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

Roughly how many members do you have from an education workforce?

JANE HUNT

Yep. At the moment, three, just over 300, just over now. Yep.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

And I should clarify, is that free for people to access?

JANE HUNT

Yes.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

We had, the previous witness use a similar term, isolation and dovetailed into a discussion about how important it is to encourage greater connection and collaboration in the sector. Is this one of the larger projects that have been trialled in terms of trying to roll out broader access to mentoring?

JANE HUNT

That's right. So there are some specific online communities, so the Union run a great vibrant online community, and we should say online communities vary in platform, some of them are Facebook groups, that's an online community. And some of them are moderated in the way that ours are. So there are various levels in the sector. Early Childhood Australia did one which was on pedagogy for a period of time. So there have been absolutely, online communities that we've learnt from and built off. We would recommend to educators and teachers that they find the place that is appropriate for them and works to support their needs. So many of our educators and teachers are participating in online community supported by the Union and this online community. It's, yeah, it's important that they're connected. Yeah. But yes, it's the largest we know of. Yeah.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

Do you see a role in, I mean, I know that you mentioned to me when we connected last week that The Front Project had had some role in advocating for funding for back filling of staff while they upskill. And we've seen the recent budget supports that. In a more visionary sense, what would you like to see, to try and address some of these structural barriers to upskilling in the pathway that you've outlined today?

JANE HUNT

Yeah. The back filling is really important. And the networking of organisations, so that, one of the challenges for some of the degrees that you have to go outside of where you are working to be able to do your practical component. And I hear the advantage of that. You're, you know,

you increase your exposure, exposure to new ideas and new ways of working. So it's important, but that's, that is a difficulty for it. It doesn't matter if you're a preschool or a long day care provider, that's really hard because you lose someone for so many weeks during the degree. And so we were looking at networking providers so that they can swap people between them and provide greater exposure. One of the difficulties in this sector is the fragmentation and different segments. Often, if you work in one segment, you don't transition to another segment easily. And so we set up, I think I mentioned to you, the Apiary fellowship to counter this. And that's a group, every year we bring in 24 people from the sector, we call them leaders, they can occupy a role anywhere in the sector. They can be educators, teachers, CEOs. They have to represent the diversity of the sector. In doing that, they together solve problems, systemic issues because they're often driven to just solve at a centre based level and not join up together. And so through input from the Apiary fellowship, but through others, we would be encouraging more innovative approaches such as being able to network organisations, the back filling components as well. And I think many of the educators or people looking to upskill often don't really understand what it means to be a teacher. And there needs to be a way of helping them in that transition and providing them with experiences and exposure. And so for us, it would be building abilities to do like work experience, you know, getting a taste for this thing. But also supporting those mentors and leaders in the sector to be able to share their knowledge and practise and understanding. There is nothing more beautiful than hearing a skilled teacher talk about how to help a child learn and what we need is those people to be celebrated in the sector and to be able to pass on their knowledge and create that commitment to it as a profession and a career and that excitement. So we need to be helping foster that in the sector as well.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

You've given us a sense as to the combination of wraparound supports offered being the enablers of the success of a program such as Upskill. Are there still though programmatic or participation based barriers that you're aware of within perhaps smaller providers and others in the sector reaching out and taking it up?

JANE HUNT

Yeah, I think we are still confronting those barriers around not valued in the services that they're in; and if they did upskill, they wouldn't be able to keep a job there because there wouldn't be a teacher's role available in that centre. So that's difficult if you have a connection to your local centre and the children and families that becomes a barrier, because you, there isn't a role for you there, a job. So there's still those barriers. There's still issues around how some services can afford to upskill their workforce, or value placed on the upskilling experience. So there's still, yes, I don't think we've solved the problem through one programmatic response, but it is, it is absolutely making inroads into it. Yeah.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

In terms of the concern of employers on retention, if they encourage upskilling, how do we start to combat that?

JANE HUNT

Yeah. So some employers have put requirements around if they support you to up skill, how long you must stay in the organisation. There are strengths and weaknesses to that. So particularly if they're, you know, putting in a significant financial, so the equivalent of the scholarship for their employees. So that's one way of doing it, of incentivising people to stay. I think if, and I think there is willingness to do this, if we built coalitions of providers willing to invest or are incentivised to invest, then what you would, everyone would increase together. So it wouldn't matter if you picked up a teacher from another service and your teacher went to another service because you are all operating on the understanding and the premise that upskilling is important. And so I think there are structural ways you could incentivise providers to be able to support their workforce. Yeah.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

Any particular

JANE HUNT

Well, like the scholarships yes. Like networking them together. Yeah. Those kinds of things. And then I think you would start to see it being incorporated as business as usual. Yeah. And we're all invested in doing this. Yeah.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

I want to leave the Commissioner some time, so I'll hand over.

COMMISSIONER

Okay. Thank you. I want to ask a series of questions, but I want to start back at the beginning with the young people that you surveyed the year nines who were thinking about what to do for a job. And when thinking about early childhood education their instinctive response was low pay and given siblings, they weren't entirely sure how much they like children.

JANE HUNT

It's hard to know when you're in year nine, isn't it?

COMMISSIONER

Yeah. The second of that's probably a less solvable problem, but when you reframed it around impact, you got more interest, but that reframing doesn't fix the low pay bit. So how, if you got more interest, how were young people then processing the low pay bit in making their career decisions?

JANE HUNT

So this is where there was a difference between young people and parents.

COMMISSIONER

Right.

JANE HUNT

So parents were very concerned about pay and conditions. Young people thought the figure sounded fine relative to them

COMMISSIONER

Because they haven't got a bench mark.

JANE HUNT

Yeah. That's right, compared to a casual job it does seem fine. They would quickly discover that that wasn't fine. Just on the reframing around attractiveness, one of the things I found very interesting is when you, for young boys and young men, when you reframed it around, you'd be active, you would be creating, you know, impact, they were really attracted to it at that point because they didn't like the sound of a desk job, you know, being in an office and being confined. And that was curious to me because we find it really hard to attract young men into early childhood education and care. Yeah. So there was a difference between parents and teachers perceptions and young people. The other thing the young people saw is lots of job opportunity. And with that qualification, they can travel.

COMMISSIONER

Right.

JANE HUNT

And that was attractive at the time. But the stability...

COMMISSIONER

And when you're saying with that qualification, you're thinking of the diploma qualification or degree?

JANE HUNT

Both.

COMMISSIONER

Okay.

JANE HUNT

You could travel and that was attractive to young people. Yep.

COMMISSIONER

Okay. And you made a comment when asked about these issues that your aim, the aim of your organisation is to solve these problems quicker. And obviously from the point of view of providers that don't have the qualified workforce they need, I can understand why that was a problem that providers want to solve more quickly. But I just wanted to be clear, did you also mean that young people had that perception that they were 'okay, I'm interested, I could get a job, there are jobs available, let me at it, but I don't want to spend many years getting the qualification'. Was that a theme or not?

JANE HUNT

Not, no.

COMMISSIONER

No. Okay.

JANE HUNT

Sorry, if that was misleading. No. So there was a cohort that did change their mind, but there was still a significant cohort that didn't see it as a career option for them.

COMMISSIONER

Right. Okay. But the time spent getting the qualifications wasn't looming as a factor?

JANE HUNT

No.

COMMISSIONER

Okay. And then you, when people were then working, so for example, at the diploma qualification, you said that there was a misunderstanding, a common misunderstanding, which was changing, about the pay differential between diploma and degree, which helped people think more clearly about the cost of the qualification. Can you just flesh that out a little bit? And what is changing those perceptions?

JANE HUNT

Yeah. So there is still the reality that they are a lower paid workforce and a highly feminised workforce and pay and conditions need to be addressed. Saying that, there is a lot more variability in the sector now, because there is a shortage of teachers and in some places, educators. So we are finding teachers and educators who are paid various rates depending on where they go. And so the perception is that there is in some instances where there is high demand, a little more bargaining power at the moment with providers. And there are certainly some providers that are paying above award to attract teachers. And so that's been a shift for some people. It still doesn't address the fundamental issue.

COMMISSIONER

Okay. And You talked about how the work that you do helps people navigate university websites and navigate the barriers that can be there because they're first in family and those sorts of things. But I just wanted to just get sort of clear advice from you. I mean, in a lot of upskilling pipelines, in many professions, the pinch point would be even when you are assisted to do the navigating, you can't get the place. You know, so, you know, people would be familiar every year with the publicity about how many students are trying to get into law or whatever and there are so few places. But in your experience, if people are able to navigate universities, places are available.

JANE HUNT

Yes. So there are places available. There are some students who don't meet the criteria for university. We do have students who have overseas qualifications who need to go through the process to have those recognised. That is a fairly slow, the experience of the upskillers is that's a slow experience. So we, the university still hold the rigour around who's admitted into the degree. And they need to do that. So there, every time students come through our program and we support them, there will be a group who don't progress and then we work with them on their options.

COMMISSIONER

Okay. But, but generally having met the entry requirements, there are places available.

JANE HUNT

Yeah, that's right. And because our partnerships with the universities are strong, they know the cohort that are coming through and they work, you know, that the intent is to help them upskill.

COMMISSIONER

And then another pinch point in a lot of upskilling pipelines is access to the placements. And spoke about that from one perspective of, you know, you leave your current service to go into a placement elsewhere, which has got all sorts of advantages, but all sorts of issues for that service, but sort of pulling back to a more macro view, how constrained are the placements, and do you end up with people who are mid qualification and they can't complete, get to the next stage, because they can't access a placement.

JANE HUNT

Yeah. It's a pinch point. The other pinch point is once they graduate and they're working towards being recognised as a teacher and they need mentors in that moment, that's the other one.

COMMISSIONER

Right.

JANE HUNT

Yep. So where they can't complete that aspect of their degree and have the number of supervised hours, that's also a pinch point, those two.

COMMISSIONER

Yep. And talking through sort of from a whole system perspective, what do you think could be done to resolve those pinch points? Is the placement, the evidence we heard earlier from Helen Gibbons was, you know, understandably if you're going to supervise students and supervise them well, that's another load on an already busy person. And so there may well be educators, teachers, services, who just say, 'the whole thing's already doing my head in, I can't also supervise students'. Is that the predominant pinch point?

JANE HUNT

Yeah, that's right. Yeah. So a couple, just to unpack that slightly, so yes, and if you're in a regional, rural area, you may not have another teacher near you to provide.

COMMISSIONER

Right.

JANE HUNT

So that's why the online community is important, because you got access to a greater number of people. So we need to be able to support those educators and teachers who are really vulnerable in those, you know, settings where they don't have a lot of resources around them. So they're the other cohort as well. Yeah.

COMMISSIONER

And can you just unpack for us the mentoring supervised hours bit, is that basically the same set of constraints; you've got to find someone who's willing to do it and if you're in a regional centre, they may not be available.

JANE HUNT

Yeah. Which is why we started paying mentors.

COMMISSIONER

Right.

JANE HUNT

We're recognising that they're doing this on top of their roles.

COMMISSIONER

Right. Whereas commonly are people not paid for that mentoring role?

JANE HUNT

Yeah.

COMMISSIONER

And are services not rewarded for doing the student placements.

JANE HUNT

Yeah, that's right. It's really hard for them. I mean, they're rewarded in that they've got a potential pipeline.

COMMISSIONER

Yes, yes, yes. So you're connecting with a potential workforce.

JANE HUNT

That's right. And again, that comes down to what is, how does a centre or service think about this? Do you know what I mean? If you are valuing your pipeline of teachers, you would invest in it, but it is also true, they're very busy places and they often don't have the resources. Yeah.

COMMISSIONER

And I just want to drill a bit into the clarity of the evidence around upskilling and retention. I mean, there's obviously no doubt that upskilling and quality are going to be very strongly related. So if you don't have teachers and then you upskill and you have someone with the teaching skills, that's obviously a quality improvement. If someone doesn't have a diploma and then they get the diploma and they've got those skills, that's quality improvement. But from the retention point of view from, you know, is it clear to you either surveying or talking to the cohorts of people you work with that if it wasn't for the upskilling opportunity, they were intending to exit the sector.

JANE HUNT

I don't know we would have strong enough evidence to draw that link. The, as in survey evidence. I mean, retention is a significant issue in this sector and our initial hypothesis, still holding true so far, is that if we help people upskill we'll retain them. But at the moment we're retaining them as they're upskilling. So that makes sense. We only have the 20 who have graduated because of the length of the degree. Of those 20 they're working in the sector. So I would find it hard to say absolutely strong evidence. My hypothesis, based on talking with the upskilling students, the program managers for this, and the sector, is that it would provide an incentive to stay. There are a lot of systemic issues that are challenging for people in the sector. So whether it counters that enough, I couldn't tell you at the moment. And a lot of those are COVID related things that are still being worked through for the sector.

COMMISSIONER

Yeah. And I did want to come back to the COVID. You said, and I may not have recorded these figures accurately, so if I've made an error please correct me, but I think you said you'd had 600 upkillers commenced.

JANE HUNT

Yeah.

COMMISSIONER

And then 140

JANE HUNT

Yeah, that's right, 129, sorry.

COMMISSIONER

129 deferred or withdrew expressly because of COVID. And then you said that you've got a 72, percent retention. So I'm assuming that of the ones not retained, COVID is the single biggest explanation.

JANE HUNT

That's correct. Yeah.

COMMISSIONER

Which hopefully should abate over time as the pandemic is increasingly in the rear vision mirror. What are the other big explanations though because, just during my maths, COVID is not explaining all of it.

JANE HUNT

So we also had a small group who had employer changes and then they couldn't transfer their upskilling to another employer.

COMMISSIONER

Just explain that to me. So they were getting paid support for the study time and then they changed their employer or the management of their centre changed and that wasn't available.

JANE HUNT

That's right. So there was that and then we had some employers who we were working with who changed the condition. So I was asked before, how do you get employees to commit to this? And so some of them have put in that requirement that they then work for three years, post the qualification. There were some at that point who wanted the flexibility, who then withdrew from the program.

COMMISSIOENR

So they didn't want that sort of lock in feeling like they needed to stay with their employer for three years.

JANE HUNT

Yeah. And partly, that's why we've created the individual tier, to prevent some of that.

COMMISSONER

Okay, I understand. That does mean that you must be very effectively mitigating the first in family style issues though, because usually a big cause of dropouts for people unfamiliar with the university sector is that it continues to feel like an alien environment to them.

JANE HUNT

That's right. And we're also successfully mitigating the, sort of mature age students have high risk of dropping out as well. So we are managing to hold that cohort of students in the program. Where we want to see some more improvements is more work around culturally and linguistically diverse participants in our Upskill program and supporting them.

COMMISSIONER

I'm almost dreading asking this question, but what are you defining as mature age in that context?

JANE HUNT

We use the university's definitions for those things. Yeah.

COMMISSIONER

So very young.

JANE HUNT

Yeah, that's right.

COMMISSIONER

So we're talking sort of like kind of mid twenties on aren't we.

JANE HUNT

Yeah, yeah.

COMMISSIONER

And so those students you think are particularly at risk that may well be in the family formation stage and that kind of thing.

JANE HUNT

That's right. I think Grattan Institute did some work on those mature age students and they have high risk. It makes sense.

COMMISSIONER

And just, you referred of course to the feminisation of the profession. Is that being, I presume that's just replicated in your upskilling cohort because of who you're starting with.

JANE HUNT

That's right. Yeah.

COMMISSIONER

Okay.

JANE HUNT

Yeah. All women.

COMMISSIONER

Yeah. All women. And then under the Victorian placement, Victorian scholarship scheme, so the arrangements that you've got in Victoria are there any penalties? What happens if someone accesses a scholarship, but then doesn't complete.

JANE HUNT

Yeah. So, that's, the Victorian government have set that up. And so they incentivise and you have to, over time, you get payments. And so that's the way that they have done it.

COMMISSIONER

So the student is still paying the course fee. But the Victorian government is reimbursing them so if you ceased, then you could end up with a residual fee.

JANE HUNT

So I would need to check that, whether there is a penalty for the students when they withdraw because I wouldn't want to get that wrong. So I can come back to you on that, on the conditions of the scholarship. I know that it's staged payments depending on how much you complete.

COMMISSIONER

Right. And just remind me, the scholarships, are they making them, you obviously said you've got to live and work in Victoria, makes complete sense for the Victorian government supporting them. But are they skewing them to people who are resident in areas that have more acute staffing problems?

JANE HUNT

Yeah. So they definitely ensure that they are people working in areas of higher disadvantage or vulnerability and regional rural areas are a priority. Yeah. But we can get you the scholarship selection criteria.

COMMISSIONER

Great. Thank you. So just, last question, is because you work with so many universities in so many different places, is there any observation you've got about structures of degrees, pedagogy of teaching degrees, even semester patterns, and I know it's early days, so you're not going to have a statistical base here, but that you intuitively think are being more attractive to people, more correlated with, 'yes, I could do that'?

JANE HUNT

So a few things. We get a lot of feedback on, well, how much teaching and how much emphasis is placed on the early years relative to later years of primary school. And that for some educators upskilling, they don't feel they get enough on child development and on early years. So there is that. There is feedback on not understanding how each of the university's places an emphasis in a different way on the curriculum and the style of teaching. So they often want to be able to select a university who might have a similar philosophy or a similar way of, accessible way, of teaching. And they find that really hard to sort out. We're national. So we've got students enrolled in birth to 12, birth to eight degrees, and understanding the difference, because many of the degrees can be done online. And so helping educators understand the variety of offerings out there. So we have had some educators start a degree

and say, 'ah, that's taught in a very theoretical way. It's not as applied as I would like it' and have sought to go to other universities, which they then perceive to be more applied. So I think there is not often enough information helping educators really understand the way the university degrees are taught and the philosophy, if you like, they're using and drawing on.

COMMISSIONER

And does that imply in some ways that many of the people who you are engaged with who want to upskill, their starting mindset is, you know, 'I'm in early childhood education, I've got a diploma in early childhood education, I'd like to be a teacher in early childhood education. And then maybe I could become a centre director and that's my career path.' Rather than they're saying to themselves, in those jurisdictions where it's possible, 'I'd like a teaching qualification, which would enable me to choose whether I work in early childhood or I go into the school system'.

JANE HUNT

Yeah. Because our program is clearly targeted at upskilling to stay in the early years.

COMMISSIONER

Right. You're self-selecting.

JANE HUNT

You tend to have people that want to do that. I think it is a significant issue for early diploma qualified educators who upskill, who then move into the school system, it's definitely an issue. And yeah, retaining them in the early learning system is challenging for all the reasons we've talked about.

COMMISSIONER

And, but because your cohort is starting from that perspective, then how much of the curriculum is actually on child development as opposed to classroom school teaching and how much of it knits with their day to day work so it's applied as opposed to theoretical, they're big attraction factors.

JANE HUNT

Yep. Absolutely. It is really important that early childhood teachers understand transitions, understand the movement from early childhood education into the school system, so that's needed and they would all say that. But yes, when they start the degree, how much is relevant to them is a factor. Yeah.

COMMISSIONER

That's fantastic. Thank you very much. I learnt a lot. Thank you.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

We'll have a short break and the next witness is via a video link at midday.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

I call Dr Jane Lomax-Smith.

< DR JANE LOMAX-SMITH AFFIRMED

COUNSEL ASSISTING

Dr Lomax Smith, you are currently the Lord Mayor of Adelaide and also for our purposes today, importantly, the current Chair of the Teachers Registration Board. Is that correct?

Dr LOMAX-SMITH

That is correct.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

How long have you held that role at the Teachers Registration board for?

DR LOMAX SMITH

Six years.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

And many of those tuning in today will be familiar with you from your time as Lord Mayor and as a state Member for Adelaide. And I understand that during your years as an MP, you oversaw the Education and Tourism portfolios, is that correct?

DR LOMAX-SMITH

Yes. But more importantly, I was the Minister for Education when the Act was put in place for the teacher's regulations.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

Yes, thank you. I was coming to that. And so today we obviously want to focus on the role that the Board plays within the sector and to help understand, for those who are tuning in, but obviously for the Commission as well, how the regulatory scheme works. So I'll try and truncate the process and have you help us go through the steps. The Board was created under the South Australian *Teachers Registration and Standards Act* in 2004. Is that correct?

DR LOMAX-SMITH

Yes, it is.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

And is it correct to describe it as an independent statutory authority that regulates the teaching profession?

DR LOMAX-SMITH

It is.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

The functions are set out, in terms of the key functions in the Act, but can you just give us a summary as to what the key functions of the Board are?

DR LOMAX-SMITH

Well, our major role is to protect children and that's set out in the Act, but also to ensure quality in our teaching workforce. And we also have the role of accrediting initial teacher education programs. The Board is entirely supported by teacher's registration fees. So we are a statutory authority but it's at arm's length so that the Minister cannot compel us to take certain acts.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

We'll come to those two key functions in terms of registering teachers and accrediting initial teacher education programs in a moment. But in terms of the makeup of the board, I understand it's a 14 member board and is it correct that at all times, there's a requirement that there be a practising teacher in preschool education appointed to the Board?

DR LOMAX-SMITH

Correct, that is a condition, yes.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

And the remaining makeup, are they representatives from across the education sector?

DR LOMAX-SMITH

It is. There was one slight change that was brought about by the parliament when the Act was changed recently, that was in 2021, and that to remove was condition of having a representative of ITE courses. And that is one challenge that may have an impact on the matters we're discussing.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

Now, when we use the phrase ITE, it we're talking about initial teacher education programs, is that correct?

DR LOMAX-SMITH

Yes, in the university setting, not in any other forms of education.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

Yes. Thank you. And if we can come to the heart of some of these issues, in terms of the regulatory scheme that the Board implements, can you explain to us what is required for the Board to accredit an initial teacher education degree in early childhood in South Australia at the moment?

DR LOMAX-SMITH

Well, firstly we comply with the national requirements and the ITE regulations are very precise. The matters are decided with across the nation so that the courses have to have so many hours, they have to have the Australian Professional Standards taught.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

I'm sorry to interrupt you Dr, we're just having some difficulties with our sound and I don't want us to lose your evidence.

DR LOMAX-SMITH

Okay.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

We might just pause for a moment. I'm sorry.

DR LOMAX-SMITH

The matter of approving the ITE courses, this is a national series of standards and it's been set by AITSL, that's the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership. They set out the standards and guidelines for accreditation of university courses, and we follow those guidelines very precisely. The matters are benchmarked with inter state representatives on the panels and it's a multi-stage process, which is, I agree, onerous, but the whole of the education sector is onerous, there are a lot of people with feet in the paddocks here. So TECSA¹, and ACECQA as well as AITSL² all have a say about the quality of teachers. The important part of the ITL course is what are the steps we go through? Well, the first step is someone has to make an application and unless someone applies to us, we don't go out hunting for courses. We wait for someone to come to us. And sometimes it's quite a simple process because it's just an amendment of a previous curriculum that makes it a less onerous and a rather quick procedure. But generally the multistep process can take some months to go through and that's nothing peculiar here, we follow the standard guidelines across the nation. In terms of the sorts of courses we are accrediting, we have applications generally from nought to eight years. And so I understand some people believe we should change those years, but it's not for us to decide what applications come to us. And I think the commitment to have one profession is also a national commitment. I think it was now five years ago that the one profession document was agreed across the nation and there was a sense that there should be one standard of teachers for the nation.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

So can I ask a number of questions by way of clarification to help understand that, and then we'll move to some of the differing views. Is it the case that within South Australia at the moment, the Teachers Registration and Standards Regulations stipulate that what can be accredited must be a minimum of a four year higher education study?

DR LOMAX-SMITH

Absolutely. And that has been a standard that we have moved toward over the course of maybe 30 years. And that's because South Australia has had a peculiar history in terms of quality standards, not just in the early years, but across the whole teaching profession. So we were one of the first parts of the nation to believe that teachers should be fit and proper people. And that decision was put in place in the last century. So we'd been ahead of the criteria for teaching across the nation. And one of the issues was when there was a decision to move to four years, which we accepted as part of a national decision making process, we were the early uptake leaders in this field because we've had a history of accreditation and quality, and particularly that's affected the early years because as a state we probably have had a hundred years start on some of the other states in terms of quality preschool, early years education. The four years has been in place as part of our regulations and not the base act,

¹ Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency

² Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership

but that condition of accreditation has been in the regulations since 2004 so we have a long history of quality in this sector.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

You've mentioned at the moment the qualifications being offered within SA being from birth to eight. But you've also mentioned that we have this concept of the one profession. So theoretically if I went into teaching by way of an arts degree or a science degree and obtained a master's, theoretically, would I be eligible to seek accreditation and work as a teacher within the early years, albeit an employer might take a different view.

DR LOMAX-SMITH

Absolutely. We have one register, not a divided register. And one of the issues that we are aware of is an employment issue and having been Minister, I know how difficult it is to staff schools. And one of the issues that I believe you will be addressing is workforce development and skills development. And it's true that if you're an employer, you have lots of teachers who tend to teach outside their core area of training. So it's quite common to get teachers in schools, teaching maths or English or history, for some courses. If we divided the register so that we said you were only a maths teacher, or you were only a year 12 science teacher that would limit employment capacity for our ministers and our sectors. So there's a reason that it's to the advantage of the employer. In terms of the employee, the advantage is that it allows flexibility. In the context of the early years, one of the things that we would talk about in employment terms is that you can have a career path that will lead you to a leadership position, say in a kindergarten, because we only allow the director in a leadership position to be a qualified teacher. So having that one profession allows you to teach, to be a leader in the kindergarten, but more peculiarly, if you had a naught to year eight qualification, you might well be working in a school that had a kindergarten and a primary area. And that site would allow transition of that early years teacher into the position of being the principal of the school. And occasionally that happens. So it's flexibility. My personal view is that where some employers would rather like a nought to five qualification, the justification for that from the employer's point of view is to lock those graduates in a career that locks them into one sector and would allow them to pay a lesser salary. So I'm not implying that all of your submissions come from people who want to lock teachers into a second class pay structure, but by having the flexibility, it means that those early years teachers are compelled to be on the same pay scale as the teachers in the rest of the profession. And that actually speaks volumes to the way we hold them. We hold them in high esteem. They're looking after our most precious children and their job is so important. It's not a second class teaching profession.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

I want to come and tackle all of these issues in a moment, but I just want to make sure that we've made clear the scheme and the differing requirements before we get there. In terms of the accreditation of initial teacher education programs, you've mentioned there are competing guidelines. I just want to make sure that this is clear. The Australian Institute for Teaching and

School Leadership provides the basis for accrediting primary school curriculum based degrees. Is that correct?

DR LOMAX-SMITH

Yes. AITSL have APSTs, which are the Australian Professional Standards for Teaching, for teachers. And they are the basis for teacher education and training and the AISTL recommendations about ITC accreditation are the ones we follow, but degrees are also, um, registered through TEQSA and ACECQA.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

Yes. And within the SA regulatory scheme, we have adopted and placed reliance on the AISTL guidelines. Is that correct?

DR LOMAX-SMITH

Yes. And the Board has adopted those standards. Yes.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

When we look at what is offered within South Australia, in terms of a birth to eight year degree, is it correct that the birth to five portion must meet standards met by ACECQA and so we've got these dual requirements?

DR LOMAX-SMITH

Yes. But ACECQA and TEQSA do not deal with the quality standards in the same way. And I know this is complicated, but to become a teacher, we believe you don't just need a degree. A degree doesn't make you a competent teacher, if you've just had a three year diploma or a degree, because one also requires English language skills, which are not a compulsory part of the standard university in Australia's course, it requires a LANTITE pass. And it requires a certain number of placements to comply with the quality standards. So it's about the content of the degree, the quality of the placements, the length of the placements, and also the demonstration that at the end of the day, the teaching, the TPA has been passed, the LANTITE has been passed and the person is fit and proper. So it's a different standard for registering teachers.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

I want to ask you to help us understand that position. Perhaps if I can read back the way it is put in the submission and in the written submission the Board states "ACECQA approved three year qualifications do not provide graduates with the same levels of understanding of Australian curriculum, learner development, or teacher development as provided under APST focus within ITE accredited programs". And elsewhere in the submission that's been put before

the Royal Commissioner, there is speak of a push down of curriculum. Can you help us understand what is the evidence base for holding the APST standards as more rigorous? How has the Board reached that position and what's it based on?

DR LOMAX-SMITH

Well, you'll understand that I'm not a teacher but I do believe that the curriculum is an important guide for teachers. Now you get back to the difference between educators and teachers. We will be transitioning these small children into a school setting, and it is necessary that they have the building blocks for literacy and numeracy. And AITSL have put a lot of work into understanding what those guidelines are and what the professional standards are. And by giving the kindergarten teacher those skills, you are making it more easy for those children then to be passed on to the next stage. And this is a national agreement. It's not a quirk of the TRB. This has been a position that has been agreed nationally, but the AITSL standards are the ones that the early years teachers should have.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

Now we know that there is precedent in other states Australia to offer three year birth to five degrees that are ACECQA accredited. I'm interested to understand what you think makes the ACECQA program less rigorous in terms of equipping a teacher with the necessary knowledge and skill base to teach in those crucial early years.

DR LOMAX-SMITH

Well, I believe that the ACECQA qualifications are a university degree, but they are not equipping those graduates for the teaching profession. I think, my understanding is that the three year degree does not include all the elements for teaching and particularly they don't have the compulsory professional placements. They don't have the English language requirements, they don't have the LANTITE requirements and they don't focus on the APST standards, which are part of the teaching professional training. That's my understanding. I'll just ask if I missed something, may I just ask my advisors if there are, did I miss anything?

THIRD PARTY

It's more about the development across the curriculum and transitioning from early childhood through the sector.

DR LOMAX-SMITH

And I think I didn't miss anything. It was just the transition from early childhood to education.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

Well, I want to talk about that in a moment, but I'd like to stick with the differences, the different focus between AITSL and ACECQA. Would you agree though that the ACECQA qualifications are accredited against a framework of the Early Years Learning Framework, and that it includes numeracy, science, and technology, and language and literacy, at an appropriate level and taking into account the play based pedagogical approach that, that has been found to be most effective in those early years?

DR LOMAX-SMITH

I agree they, they are in, in the system. But we are talking about teaching and the ACECQA qualifications may be a cert three, not even, not a degree. And if someone had a certificate three or a bachelor degree, they would be accessible as a teacher, if they then wished to take the master's course. So there is a pathway in with those qualifications, but they're not regarded by AITSL as making your teacher.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

I understand that, but there is precedent interstate for three year ACECQA accredited degrees, particularly in Victoria, under the dual register, for those teachers to then be accredited teachers within the birth to five. Is that correct?

DR LOMAX-SMITH

That is in the divided register. And one could say that they are laggards in the quality agenda, whereas we are ahead of the range. I think the four year qualification shouldn't be painted as an obstructionist idea. In my view, it's about quality. It seems

COUNSEL ASSISTING

I'm sorry to cut you off. I'm really interested to try and understand what in particular you point to within the ACECQA recognised bachelor degrees that is less rigorous in preparing a teacher to teach in those crucial years, given what we now know about brain development and the importance of child development content within degrees.

DR LOMAX-SMITH

I think what we know about brain development is it's more complicated than just child minding. It is an honourable profession. We know that children are benefited by quality education and the impact of a teacher. And I do think there is evidence that teachers make a difference in people's lives. If we believe that a teacher need only be three years qualified, that's fine. You can have that view. We can change all our regulations, but it would be a shock to me if under a Labour government, our standards went backwards and we moved away from the position that's been held for more than a decade, that the early years are so important they require just

one person in a centre, we're not talking about the whole staff, but just one person in the centre to lead that process. We're not talking about the entire employment force. We're talking about one person in a centre having those skills.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

And I'm trying to unpack why it would necessarily be a backwards step given, you know, the, the counter arguments, if I can put some to you, are that, given the requirements of a birth to eight degree and the requirement to fit in the AITSL standards that doesn't leave time to delve into what teaching in those early years requires, which is a holistic child and family learning environment, and a competent understanding of brain development and early childhood development. What do you say to the view that others might espouse that a three year degree that focuses solely on those issues actually might produce a more rigorous teacher within the birth to five?

DR LOMAX-SMITH

I think that the rigour is based on the nought to five assessment and your belief that we should, you know, we should focus on that period and have maybe a divided roll, but the issue is it's hard to believe that in three years you would learn the spectrum of statistical analysis, understanding data, understanding evidence, recognition of the role of the curriculum and all the other elements. I think that we can't, we shouldn't conflate not to five with the three year position, they're different issues. The three year argument is incontrovertibly less likely to produce a good outcome than are four years. That seems incontrovertible to me. What I would happily agree with is that a nought to five course could focus on the early years, but they're different issues. So it, it's difficult to conflate them and come up with a rational argument because I'm trying to separate the ideas.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

I'm certainly not trying to conflate them. I understand the Board's position is that you're not philosophically opposed to a degree that would focus on birth to five. And the Board is entitled to that view. I'm very much trying to understand what you feel we lose if South Australia looked at moving from four to three years. And if I'm understanding you correctly, it's a concern that there wouldn't be sufficient rigour in terms of some of those aspects of the AITSL requirements. Is that correct?

DR LOMAX-SMITH

It's not just the AITSL requirements, it's the LANTITE, the English skills and the TPA requirements. They're parts of, you could compress those into a short course. That's, that's not the core issue. The, but the core issue is perhaps a political one, but it will be a pity if this period allowed us to downgrade the skills of early years teachers and potentially take away the equivalence of pay structures. I think that as far as I'm concerned, the early years teacher has the most important impact, the highest impact on the child's life. It's the most important period

in terms of setting them up for a career. And all the evidence suggests that this is where the investment and the quality needs to be. By the time a child's in year 12, it's too late to really so easily change the trajectory of their lives. But having said that, I absolutely agree. This is the most important part. That's why it's counterintuitive to think that you would have a shorter lesser course for teaching those children.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

You mentioned the LANTITE a couple of times, that's the literacy and numeracy test for initial teacher education students that's required to be completed within AITSL framework degree. That was brought in, I think, in 2019 at the federal level, is that correct?

DR LOMAX-SMITH

Yes. I think that's an important benchmark, but I should also mention the English literacy language skills that we impose on foreign graduates. And one of the issues that one would have to consider here, and there's no mechanism for this in a TEQSA or ACECQA qualification that might be three years or might be something else, or a cert three or a cert four. One has to consider that there's a career path through the early years, which I feel really strongly about, in that it supports often women into employment and a good career, and many young women work as just initial entries into the childcare sector. They could become educators. And there is a pathway through our SAT programs into teacher qualifications that gives them a career path. And I think that it's, we should not underestimate that opportunity for people to upskill and get into employment. One of the difficulties of course, is that if there were, and we'd have to manage how this were carried out, I feel that one would not want either overseas qualified graduates or cert three qualified or completed, young women to go straight onto a teacher's role, without evidence of English language skills. And that's something that you would not get with just a straight cert three or some three year courses that were ACECQA regulated. And one of the important roles of the TRB is about quality assurance and making sure that our teachers are fit and proper. And that's not just about the character test, it's about their capacity to do the job.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

Just sticking with LANTITE for a moment. Now that wasn't a requirement that was made retrospective so teachers who had already qualified are continuing to teach without having passed that. Now I accept the importance of everything you've just said about proper language knowledge and understanding. What I'm wondering is if South Australia was interested in exploring a three year birth to five, ACECQA style degree, would it be open to amend regulation to require an additional, proficiency in LANTITE, for example, that the TRB would then oversee, is that a potential?

DR LOMAX-SMITH

We, we don't want to oversee LANTITE tests because that's something that has to be managed by the ITE. The ITE is taking students. And if they have any incentive to make sure they pass their degree, it has to be to make sure that they have literacy and numeracy skills. I think it is opening up the whole system for rent seeking, let's say, if universities could accept students without the knowledge that they were responsible for LANTITE. I think taking that away from them would be wrong. It has to be part of the qualification for their degree and that's how it works now. It is a step before that student can graduate from their degree. It is not a condition of registration. And I would be absolutely opposed to the notion that universities could transition people through their degrees, give them a debt, and then pass on the responsibility of passing LANTITE to us. Anyway, that's another matter.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

Are you able to help us understand how it operates in the Victorian model then in terms of teachers being able to obtain accreditation and registration after completing a three year ACECQA degree?

DR LOMAX-SMITH

Well, I think that you, you have to ask Victoria how that works. I don't know, but I'm, I'm opposed to it here. The issue we do take a role in is English IELTS tests and that's essential for us as we recruit teachers from overseas. And very much as we go through the ITE accreditation course here, we do go through their degrees and we have specific requirements in terms of teaching placements, and content of their overseas degrees. But the most important issue is to make sure that they have English language skills. And I think some of those English language tests are quite challenging for overseas teachers, but we regard it as essential to have English skills in teaching and dealing, with teaching children, dealing with parents. So we do that, we don't administer them, but we use them as part of our admissions process.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

You mentioned before a concern about the practical teaching component of the ACECQA framework. Can you help me to understand, there's still a requirement for a certain number of days of supervised professional experience, as I understand it, under the ACECQA requirements.

DR LOMAX-SMITH

Yes.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

Can you explain the concern you have with respect to that?

DR LOMAX-SMITH

Well our requirement, I think is for 45 days and they have 30 days. There is an issue that I do appreciate is a challenge. We, I, you know, I realise that there's an extreme shortage of staff in this sector. And one of the challenges that seems to be not a rationale for a nought to eight, but makes nought to eight education easier for ITEs is that the placements have to be put in a location where there is a qualified teacher to oversee them. And so there are limited numbers of qualified teachers and placements in the early years sector. So currently those placements can be in a nought to eight school, where there are relative abundance of supervising teachers. So that is one area of placement issue. We also have of course the difficulty of placements when someone's out of state, but that's another complication.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

Am I correct though, that your concern is with the ACECQA requirements, the number of days that it's a minimum of 30 in early childhood settings, but I think requires 80 days supervised professional experience overall. But do I understand that that's your concern with that aspect of the ACEQUA framework?

DR LOMAX-SMITH

Yes. I mean it stands to reason that you can only do three years worth of work in three years compared to four years. I mean, it's obviously less.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

I think perhaps the more important question is to flesh out what opportunities there are to leverage content more specific to the learning requirements of birth to five perhaps. And I know you've said philosophically, the Board's not opposed, but that is what the Commission is exploring partly in today's hearings in terms

DR LOMAX-SMITH

Well we're not, there's no, I think that there are various mechanisms in terms of, on the job training, let's say, and that's how our Special Authority to Teach mechanism works. That gives on the job training, it allows a salary. It allows progression to teacher status. I don't believe that anyone has ever had Teach for Australia systems put in the early years but that's obviously a mechanism that someone might like to look at.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

Before we come to that can we just come back to the concerns you raised about hindering or boxing in professionals and stymying chances for further development. I understand that models that might be under consideration for, particularly UniSA, and they're coming along after lunch, are looking at always making available a 12 month or so additional option to if an educator decides they do want to pursue primary to upskill in that regard, does that go any way to alleviate some of the concerns you've raised in that area?

DR LOMAX-SMITH

Oh, that seems perfectly reasonable. They can then be, I think that they're not talking about educators. We were talking, I thought we were talking about teachers. I'm sorry. I must have misunderstood.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

That's my mistake. I should have used the word teacher.

DR LOMAX SMITH

We're talking about early years educators becoming teachers with one year of extra, we do that now.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

What I'm speaking of is in terms of you,

DR LOMAX-SMITH

I'm sorry. I'm cconfused.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

That's okay. You raised a concern as I understood it earlier that a three year university degree focusing on birth to five would, if I understood you correctly and correct me if I'm wrong, create a second class of teachers who were then locked into early childhood, is that one of the concerns that you have?

DR LOMAX-SMITH

Absolutely. And not only would they be locked in, but there will be the possibility that they could be paid less by the sector. What I didn't quite finish saying was that the TPA is usually part of those placements. And that's one of the criteria for registering a teacher. That's another complication, I'm sorry, that I just throw in. So I'm sorry I keep giving you these extra steps. But

by having a reduced number of placements, one of the issues you have to deal with is the TPA,³ which is the last step for graduation. And it's a requirement of the degree, not our requirement. It's a part of another assessment.

THIRD PARTY INTERJECTS

COUNSEL ASSISTING

I'm sorry I don't want to labour the point but can I ask for the witness to answer the questions and not the other people in the room.

DR LOMAX-SMITH

I'm sorry, what I didn't say was we actually have no objection nought to five, it's only we were concerned about the shorter course.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

And I want to ask two follow up questions about that. When we look at the concern you've raised about locking people in, my earlier question before was perhaps put badly so I'll rephrase it. If a university built in the, if a proposal was put that could be accredited leaving aside the regulations for the moment, a three year focus, birth to five, if a university then had a ready made one year additional masters that would enable you to upskill from your birth to five bachelor degree, to attain that additional qualification, would that allay any of the concerns that you've raised in terms of boxing people in?

DR LOMAX-SMITH

No, but that's, they can do that now. That's, that's how it works now, actually. So I think that's fine.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

Okay. Thank you.

DR LOMAX-SMITH

We have no objection to any of that.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

The teaching performance assessment, that's the TPA acronym, I think you were using earlier, that's the final

³ Teaching Performance Assessment

DR LOMAX-SMITH

Yes, I'm sorry.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

That's okay. There's an awful lot of acronyms in this space. I'm still getting my head around them. That's the final assessment tool that's undertaken by teachers who complete generally the four year AITSL degree. I want to try and understand, obviously there's a rigour with a final teaching assessment, and I understand that. Can you help us understand though why that necessarily has to be a component of our thinking when we talk about the different ways in which children are taught within birth to five and, and is, is rigour built into that in other ways, rather than perhaps focusing on a final assessment, I'm just interested to unpack your thoughts about that.

DR LOMAX-SMITH

It's a relatively new proposition and I don't think that they yet had a very accurate assessment of its impact. But there was a concern that the quality of those exiting from the education system wasn't good and this was imposed within the last three years as a means to overcome that issue. It's, the point of it is it's benchmarked and it's assessed across the sector and it is allegedly lifting the quality, but we don't have the data for that. We are just following the rules.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

I just want to clarify, did I understand it that

DR LOMAX-SMITH

It's a national initiative, I might say.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

Yes, but the teaching performance assessment was that, that was what was brought in within the last three years, is that correct?

DR LOMAX-SMITH

Yes.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

So previously there wasn't a focus on a final assessment component?

DR LOMAX-SMITH

Not in this way. And this was introduced by the Commonwealth, with the ministers for education and endorsed by AISTL. And it's been a very complicated process where each university or collection of universities has had to develop a mechanism for a TPA assessment. And it's still, I wouldn't say controversial, but it's early days to understand what its impact has been. I think the problem with this whole sector is there are so many feet in the paddock. You know, there are just so many layers and overlays and complications that it's really a burden for universities to have to fight their way through all the layers. And I think it's a reflection of everyone's fear about the quality of teachers. And that's why I think that South Australia has really held onto the view that we've been ahead of the pack we've been, you know, we're the only ones who've really been pushing fitness and propriety, and we're one of the first to move to the four years. And I should say that the four years issue has had an impact on many teachers in this state, because obviously some people have come from interstate or overseas where their degrees have not been recognised. And we have worked with them to give them a special authority to teach while they go and study to get their qualifications up to the four year status and there have been a number in the early childhood setting. But I think the challenge for us would be having spent 20 years lifting the standards and encouraging, and in fact, in some cases, compelling people to do the fourth year it's quite difficult to then go back and say, well, three years is enough. So that's why we appear to be holding on to this, what you, what people say is antiquated and old fashioned thinking, four years, but it's actually in our view, it's about quality.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

And I want to give the Commissioner some time, but can I just ask has a university within South Australia approached the board with a four year model in the past, looking at birth to five?

DR LOMAX-SMITH

Not to my knowledge.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

Have there been any sort of discussions with any of the universities about any permutation of models, whether it's three year plus one, or in terms of offering just a birth to five degree focus?

DR LOMAX-SMITH

Well, we have three years plus, one that's here already. We do that, that's routine. As far as I know, no one has suggested anything and I suspect it may be the employers who may want a different collection of qualifications. And I say employers, I mean the education sector. I understand that the early years providers may want a specific birth to five, but there's, there

must be something peculiar about the employment sector and the main employees of course, are the state and the Catholic sectors. And I don't know why they want, they feel so strongly, but my perception is they want flexibility to allow teachers to teach across the year ranges. And I know that sounds counterintuitive, and you may think it's mad, but in early years, teacher would ever want to teach in secondary schools, but sometimes in regional areas, they have to.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

Just so that it's abundantly clear, if a four year model that met the AITSL requirements was brought to the Board, provided it met those requirements, there would be no obvious impediment to accrediting that, is that correct?

DR LOMAX-SMITH

No, absolutely no, no impediment to nought to five whatsoever.

COUNSEL ASISSING

Provided it met the four years.

DR LOMAX-SMITH

That's right. And, but I've just given you the objections that I understand exist and the issues about employment, certainty, pay scales and flexibility for employers. But our job is just to accredit the ITE that is delivered to us. We have no personal vested interest in what comes to us.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

And if the option of a three year degree were to be explored, I'm just, I want to make sure I understand whether that would in and of itself require further regulatory change for ACECQA standards to be capable of accreditation in South Australia?

DR LOMAX-SMITH

Well the ACECQA standards presumably would be complied with, with a three year course, but we would not be accrediting teachers at the end of that if it were not a four year AITSL, APST included and all the add-ons that we expect of a teacher. So we would, you know, they would, you could suggest to the Minister that we have a divided role, registration role. You could suggest that there would be a different category of early years teachers and if that were done, we'd have to comply, but we would suggest it would be a retrograde step.

COUNSEL ASSSITING

Yes. I understand that. The Victorian model, when you say divided register in effect, you're either registered to teach in primary or across birth to eight, or you're solely registered and accredited within age five. Is that how that operates?

COUNSEL ASSISTING

I think that you are registered as a teacher under the same circumstances us, but if you are only, let's say only early years trained with a three year cert three or four, then you can go on another register. And I think that's important to have a register. So, you know, who's in the profession and you can make sure they've got working with children checks and all those sorts of things. But it is in, in the view of most South Australian experts, it's a lesser qualification in quality.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

Is there any research or literature that people point to in defence of the position that it's a lesser qualification, that we should be aware of?

DR LOMAX-SMITH

I haven't read any data on that, but we could get you some.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

Yes. Thank you. I want to give the Commissioner the remainder of the time.

COMMISSIONER

Thank you very much for your evidence and we're obviously today considering workforce issues at the Royal commission and we'll will keep working on it. I did just want to dig a little bit on a couple of questions. One, I do want to assure you that what's before the Commission does not lead you to the conclusion that the three year qualification for zero to five being used in other parts of Australia is correlated with lower pay outcomes. That's not what the evidence shows. In fact, there's been multiple points of evidence that Victoria, which uses that kind of qualification is actually, paying, teachers more, and advertising to take workforce from other states. So I think what's going on there is, it's not just a matrix around qualifications, it's obviously around supply and demand. And we've taken evidence this morning that there's changes to the federal industrial laws, which will enable new bargaining structures in long daycare centres, including for teachers, that take effect early in June, which are likely to lead to higher pay outcomes. So we're not sort of worried about that correlation, that this is somehow being put forward as a way of diminishing wages and conditions. In fact, all of the evidence is going in the other direction. We are though trying to think of good ways of solving the problem that we don't have sufficient teachers in the preschool and long day care settings now; that

many places get waivers so that they aren't quitting the requirement of having a teacher. And that those problems are obviously going to be added to with the aspiration to add three year old preschool, where we are going to need more teachers, not less, in preschools and in long day care settings. And so one of the problems we're trying to solve for is how do you expand workforce? We've clearly taken evidence through round table formats that there is competition between primary education and early childhood, which is leading us to think about the zero to fives. And we are taking evidence today really about the best content and structure, if you were looking at a zero to five course. And I've heard your evidence so far on that time, you know, four years and three years are obviously different amounts of time, but we would be talking about something quite differently curriculum wise configured wouldn't we, because my understanding is the amount of time spent in the zero to eight qualification, the teaching to get you a zero to eight qualification, that the amount of time spent on the issues around early childhood development is actually quite a small component of the four years of teaching. So what I'm trying to ask is if we had a three year qualification, we may in fact, be graduating teachers for early childhood who have spent more time, not less on the content that is relevant to teaching zero to fives.

DR LOMAX-SMITH

I think that that might be true, but it might also not be true. It would depend on the nature of the curriculum. My sense is that a lot of what goes into university teaching is not specifically for the brain development or anything else, it's about how you structure pedagogy, what curriculum means and how you prepare and assess. So some of it will be kind of, I don't know, I don't know the statistics, but one imagines that maybe half of it would be generic educational teaching. And it's hard for me to interpret what would be specific, but clearly, you can be very specialised and drill down into one area, and that would give you content knowledge and would be fabulous. I don't think anyone would object to having more content knowledge, but sometimes you'd have to get the basis, the basic generic issues covered as well. So I'm not qualified to talk about percentages, but the ITE accreditation is a formulaic rather tedious tick a box system that is complicated and requires a knowledge of the APSTs and the set up of the process. I think it's a very difficult process to just distil down into 25% and 75%. I think there's a more complicated assessment that's worth looking at. And I think that one really has to get the universities to develop a course before we know what it would mean. And speaking in a vacuum is really not, not doesn't allow me to say anything useful on this.

COMMISSIONER

Okay. Thank you. And the only other question I had was on placements and you did speak before about how it can be hard to access placements in early childhood education, because you know, in say a long daycare setting or a preschool setting, you've only got so many teachers and for them to be supervising a student is another additional load and that it can therefore often be more convenient to do placements in primary school, where by definition there are many more teachers, and consequently more possibility, that you know, there'll be teachers available to do the supervision of the student on placement. That did lead me to think if we had a zero to five qualification, we would presumably then need the placements to be

entirely in early childhood education and care. Is there anything from your contemporary experience about how hard it is to get those placements that might inform the Commission's thinking about how that could be done?

DR LOMAX-SMITH

I think that it is an issue that's been raised with us and apparently placements often occur in reception or higher because it's easier. I think that historically they used to have model schools, and there was I think even a model kindergarten where they were training sectors. So maybe that's one mechanism. I think also one wonders why the placements can't occur in the kindergartens that exist, or nursery settings that are a part of the universities, because the universities also have their own childcare centres so that would be a captive audience one would imagine. But I think that we do, you know, we do have several hundred qualified preschool or early years teachers in the system and one of the things that I do feel might help would be some financial inducements. Currently practicums and placements in schools for teachers are supported by a small disbursement of fees. It's not a large amount of money, but sometimes that helps. And maybe that inducement should be not just to the teacher, who's doing the supervising, but maybe the centre could get some of that cash as well. So maybe a little money would have a good impact. The other area that I think might allow some movement would be even to look at Teach for Australia. I know there are a lot of political objections to it, but it is a process that's working in the school sector. We've got a trial here of a dozen or so teachers there. I don't see why one couldn't take some educators and put them in a fast track training program. And we do know that, I've just got some figures here, that we have 249 early childhood teachers who currently have got registration and 89 of those have special authorities to teach. And the special authorities to teach are really quite a compelling workaround for hard to staff areas. They were originally introduced for, I remember introducing them, we introduced them for tradies, for technical skills and language teachers, but they they've also been used in early year settings. And the advantage of them is that someone's paid, they get temporary registration, provided they're enrolled in a teaching course, providing they are on an ITE course and providing they pass all their exams and units. And we monitor that and people do transition to provisional and full registration. And that is a career path for people who might otherwise struggle. And again, some financial incentives, because if people are on low pay and they're educators in a childcare setting, the prospect of a debt might be daunting. And so some inducements there might help them to get into those training programs. If you were minded to go along a separate register route or to have a three year qualification and a separate register, they would have to be some work done by the Board to look at how we might register teachers who came through that program. And it might require some transitional activity from say a three year course to registration. And there might be a mechanism that we could have some steps that they might take, whether that might be, and I'm loathe to say English literacy at the end, because one doesn't want someone to get to the end of a three year course and then fail literacy tests, but a series of placements or training programs that might make it possible for us to feel able to put them on the general role or to have a divided role. So we'd have to work at that depending on the recommendations.

COMMISSIONER

And, and just to make sure I'm understanding it, of that 89 early years teachers, early childhood teachers, who have the special authority to teach, they're likely to be people who moved from interstate or overseas and have got

DR LOMAX-SMITH

No, I'm sorry. These are people who have got no qualifications when they start and are without the prerequisites to get these positions, but we take a commitment and proof that they are going to enrol in university. They enrol and then they get a temporary period of registration. And they have to demonstrate at the end that they have attended the course and passed at least one unit. And then we will keep rolling it over and some of them take several years to get a qualification, but they are given special authority to teach. We have their names, we have their registration, we can follow their careers. And we know that currently 89 have a SAT, we've got 66 onto the provisional role and 94 have been fully registered. And the thing that I find quite, it's always quite emotional to see that they've got through because these young women, or middle aged women have often had quite difficult lives and they've managed to get onto the role. And interestingly 65% of those that have got on the role since 2014, when we started doing this, have held registration. So their retention is as good as the rest of the profession, if not slightly higher. So we think that that is a good mechanism for getting people into the system.

COMMISSIONER

Yep. Okay. And so you are doing that in places of, because you're recognising there are workforce shortages, if there's someone who's in, for example, a hard to staff regional area, they've got the special authority to teach and they're training at the same time.

DR LOMAX-SMITH

Yes. So we started doing that in the legislation thinking it would just be in regional areas, but now it's being taken up by early childhood centres across the Metro area. So now it's becoming a mechanism to get people into the workforce and get them qualifications. And it's actually quite a success I think in that it takes people who otherwise have not the educational skills or the capacity to move into the workforce and gives them a career. So I think it's actually a success story and I would, you know, the more we had of that, it would help. It won't solve the problem we have, but it's one stream of skills development that's worth enhancing.

COMMISSIONER

Thank you for that. And just, I mean, this is by way of interest as much as anything else, but the Teach for Australia candidates in South Australia, how are you dealing with their registration?

DR LOMAX-SMITH

We've given them special authorities to teach as well because this is a good catchall mechanism. We've used it for Aboriginal workers as well to get them into the training in the past. We've used it for tradies. We've used it for religious teachers. But it actually is a mechanism that allows not just them, but we've also used the SAT system for COVID stress, where there have been insufficient teachers. So where there've been a shortage of teachers, we've given a special authority to teach to final year ITE students and allowed them to work in a setting with supervision. So it's actually quite a good mechanism to give us short term opportunities for employment. With TFA, Teach for Australia rather, they've moved out into hard to staff areas in the regions, but we are waiting for the reports on their achievement. It's the first, I think we're into our second year now and it's backed by federal support and funding. It's run from a university in Victoria. I think that there's been a lot, I'd be frank to say there's a lot of disquiet in the profession and from the unions, they think this is not an acceptable means, but I think that it's inevitable that we will need to be more creative in getting people into the teaching profession. And we've been anxious to make sure that the people involved in that program as well as the COVID program are properly supported with mentors and support in the system because we don't want young people or middle aged people lets say in the TFA system going into hard to staff areas without support, without mentoring and without institutional care, because it could burn them badly. So the risk in the private sector in the early years would be that there wouldn't be a lot of mentoring for these people. So you have to be very careful for TFA staff and for SATs. But we've had particular luck we found, I thought with the SATs and they have transitioned well,

COMMISSIONER

Thank you. That's very helpful. So thank you very much for your evidence. And I think we will conclude our session there.

COUNSEL ASSISTING

Yes, the witness can be released and we are resuming at 1.45pm.

< HEARING ADJOURNED UNTIL 1.45PM