



WRITTEN SUBMISSION

Supporting Submission to the Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care

Overview: This document provides a supporting brief to the Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care (hereafter, the Royal Commission), to support the attendance at a public hearing of the Royal Commission by Ms Jane Hunt, who is the Founding CEO at The Front Project (Ms Hunt's biography is provided at Appendix A).

This submission draws upon The Front Project's work across the early years system to support and build capacities in the workforce which is underpinned by our mission to create the conditions in the early years system to create and sustain high-quality, universally accessed early learning experiences for all children in Australia.

Specifically, this submission explores the critical role of the early years workforce in supporting children's development through high quality early learning experiences for all children, current challenges in workforce supply and potential solutions.

This submission focuses on:

- Current and projected workforce supply challenges
- Workforce attraction and retention
- Upskilling and professional development

Background

For South Australia to realise the potential benefits of early years for all children through their participation in high quality early learning experiences, there must be a well-provisioned, skilled and motivated early years workforce. Addressing the current workforce challenges and minimising future challenges is critical to improving the ECD outcomes for all South Australian children.

We know that from conception to age five, significant brain development and neural structuring occurs, with children's experiences shaping their developing brain architecture, the foundation for their future learning, behaviour and health. During this time, children's early learning experiences shape their neural pathways for motivation for learning and long-term educational attainment, while their neural pathways for the foundations of their future emotional security, sense of agency, self-regulation and social behaviour are shaped by their early interactions and relationships with adults and peers.

We also know that before children start school, there are crucial high-quality education, health and social service interventions that can shift trajectories not only in school education outcomes, but also throughout life – with most benefit to those facing disadvantage. **High quality early education can deliver substantial impact on children's lives**, particularly when extended beyond one year of provision (Joo, Magnuson, Duncan, Schindler, Yoshikawa & Ziol-Guest, 2019; Oberklaid and Moore, 2007).

Children can experience additional opportunity in preparation for formal schooling and in early intervention to support them to start alongside their peers. As the Early Years Education Program (EYEP) showed, children experiencing the most vulnerability would benefit from intensive early years for more hours from an early age. Indeed, evaluation of the EYEP showed large positive



impacts were found on children's cognitive and non-cognitive development – primarily IQ, and protective factors related to resilience and social-emotional development (Borland, 2019).

Research tells us that there are **strong links between the quality of the early learning and care workforce and the experiences and outcomes for young children**, citing that the most 'influential factors affecting quality, across age groups and service settings, are the education, qualifications and training of the workforce' (Pascoe and Brennan, 2017).

During our research with families in 2021, to better understand how families make choices and experience early years, we found that parents place high value on quality and strongly associate quality with early childhood educators and the early years workforce being well supported (The Front Project, 2021).

Current and projected workforce supply challenges in the early learning system

Current challenges

The early years sector is experiencing persistent challenges in the attraction, retention and building of a quality workforce. The inability to retain workers in early years has a significant impact on the provision of quality early learning experiences for all children.

Over time there has been an increase in vacancies in the sector, with the national shortage of qualified educators intensifying. Over the 3-year period (2019-2022) early years vacancies doubled, and in October 2021, advertised vacancies for educators reached an all-time high. Vacancies have grown a further 45% over the past 12 months (May 2022 – May 2023), to over 6,600.

Existing workforce shortages are creating an additional barrier to access to early years for children, as early learning services cannot operate at full capacity without the requisite number of educators. Staff shortages are most acute in non-metropolitan areas and there has been a sharp increase in regional and remote early years services requiring a waiver due to their inability to recruit suitably qualified staff. South Australia's early years regulator, the Education Standards Board noted a large increase in waiver applications by the sector (268% increase between 2019 and 2022), with an average of 160 waivers in place at any point in time, mainly due to shortages in early childhood teachers (South Australian Royal Commission, 2023).

Workforce shortages are also increasingly uneven between states, as educators move to pursue job opportunities (Roundtable, 2020). Current shortages have been exacerbated by the reduction in migration since the start of the pandemic, dramatically reducing the number of migrant early childhood educators, who have historically been an important contributor to early years workforce supply.

Projected challenges

A 2021 report (co-authored by several peak early years bodies) estimated that by 2025, the national demand for educators will increase by 11% for educators and 17% for Bachelor qualified early childhood teachers, almost double the national projected employment growth for all occupations for the same period (Investing in Our Future, 2021). Additionally, preschool reforms across the eastern seaboard in Victoria and NSW have been estimated to require an additional ~14,000 teachers and ~7,000 educators (Dandolo Partners, Gowrie Victoria and NSW, 2022).

An Australian Government workforce projection shows that demand for Bachelor-qualified early childhood teachers is expected to grow rapidly over the next five years, with 29,000 new teachers required, or around 5800 new teachers each year to 2023.



In South Australia, this Commission's Interim Report noted that delivery of a universal 3-year-old pre-school program, will require a significant increase in the early childhood education workforce, including at least an additional 50% early childhood teachers (610+) and at least 760+ additional early childhood educators (depending on the delivery approach).

There is an urgent and growing need to address the current and projected workforce supply challenges, in an environment of increasing demand.

Workforce Attraction and Retention

Workforce Attraction

Attracting people into the early years workforce represents a key challenge to the future growth of supply, and quality, in the system. Our experience working with school leavers through the Future Tracks Program (now called the Upskill Program) highlighted the complexity and challenges in attracting and keeping school leavers in early childhood teaching university courses. In the period 2015-2017, course commencements dropped by 11% (falling from 6327 to 5640) while completions fell by 15% also (down from 3636 to 3079). Consequently, falling course commencements put downward pressure on the number of new graduates available to enter into the early years workforce.

There also remain some strong, negative perceptions around taking a career in the early years workforce. For example, research conducted by The Front Project shows that the perception school leavers and their parents have about careers in Early Childhood Education and Care are often negative citing being 'concerned about low wages and hard work'. They thought early childhood teaching would be a 'thankless and under-appreciated role with a lack of respect for professionals in the field' (The Front Project 2019, p.9).

This is reinforced by other perceptions, that early childhood teachers are not as important as school teachers, there is a lack of consistent language used to describe the sector, and confusion among the wider community about the differences between an educator and a teacher (dandolo partners, 2020). These views have compounded the challenge of attracting young people into training programs, thus worsening the supply bottleneck into the early years workforce.

That said, there are clear opportunities to engage with people interested in joining the early years workforce. First, is that many of these perceptions listed above are being shifted through a change in political and social attitudes towards early years learning. For example, this is evident through many recent shifts in the political agenda, including the forthcoming Early Years Strategy, commitment to a National Vision for Early Childhood Education and Care, and many state-based policies, programs and initiatives to support access to and the quality of early learning.

Such moves have significantly altered perceptions and the wider legitimacy of the value and status of a career in the early years workforce. Consequently, this opens up opportunities to establish strategies and implement programs to capitalise on shifting perceptions towards the workforce. As we describe below, The Front Project's Upskill Program illustrates an effective programmatic response to attracting new talent into the early years workforce, specifically by connecting educators in training with universities and employers by responding to their needs as emerging professionals.

Workforce Retention

Alongside the need to attract more people into the early years workforce, a concurrent challenge is how to retain, upskill and motivate those already in the workforce. The early years sector is struggling to attract and retain educators and Bachelor qualified early childhood teachers. Educators at all qualification levels currently earn less than other similarly qualified women in the



Australian workforce (Jackson, 2018). Educators at the lowest end of the pay scale can currently earn more in other sectors, such as retail (Roundtable, 2020).

From working directly with early years staff, through Future Tracks, we know the early years workforce are not highly paid, are operating in a fractured system which is highly regulated and complex and are juggling competing priorities.

To minimise the impact of staff shortages, existing staff are taking on more responsibility, and post the pandemic we have seen increases in burnout most acutely felt in rural and regional settings and settings supporting children and families experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage, with many staff leaving the sector. A survey conducted in 2019 showed up to two in three early childhood educators in Victoria were considering leaving their role. High staff turnover — of up to 30% — is an enduring problem in early childhood services.

Research conducted by The Front Project (2019) showed how important upskilling is to retaining existing members of the early years workforce. However, they also found that 84% of educators surveyed said they faced major barriers in doing so. These include:


- Mixed perceptions and low awareness about the value and opportunities of an ECT role and qualification. Part of the challenge here is getting clarity around key aspects of the profession, including pay and conditions (see below), and awareness of supports for a demanding, often high-stress career.
- The challenge of managing workload and family commitments with study. Educators struggle to rationalise taking on extra workload, when their time and commitments are already spread too thinly. A key aspect of this is the development of key professional skills, such as time management, to help manage competing demands.
- Concerns about the value of university courses, academic supports and application process. Educators often feel that they do not have capability and capacity to take on a University course as part of their upskilling. Furthermore, the university-side concerns reveal perceptions that they do not fully recognise the value of work experience; that courses are not adequate, consistent or certain to give credit for prior learning.
- Limited support and challenging conditions within the workplace. There is a perception that workplaces may contribute to negative attitudes about upskilling. The Front Project's (2019) research shows that 34% of educators surveyed were unsure if their employers would support upskilling, while 43% indicated they would be inclined to study if they could obtain paid study leave.
- Financial burden and risk of upskilling is too high. Educators felt that paying for further study was not only too expensive, but also the knock-on risk on financial insecurity created by both the cost of training, and the missed work days taken to attend course delivery.

To deliver on the benefits of high-quality early learning for all children, the South Australian government will need to shift the current trend to focus on measures and interventions to support greater workforce retention among qualified early childhood teachers in the early years sector.

Pay and conditions

For Bachelor qualified early childhood teachers, the early years sector offers less attractive pay, conditions, career progression and professional development opportunities, than the primary school system.

The differences in pay, leave entitlements and employment conditions between Bachelor Qualified Early Childhood Teachers working in the early years sector, compared with those working in the



school settings are stark. Those working in early years are the lowest paid in the education sector, have vastly different leave entitlements (four weeks per year compared with 12 weeks per year) and are significantly more likely to be employed on a part time basis (60% work part time in early years, compared with 30% part time in school settings).

The South Australian government can benefit from the work and insights reflected in the National early years Workforce Strategy (the Strategy) and Implementation and Evaluation Plan, developed by ACECQA, which sets out a ten-year blueprint for ensuring a sustainable, high-quality education and care workforce. The Strategy includes a range of responses focused on: attraction and retention, professional recognition, leadership and capability, wellbeing, qualifications and career pathways and data and evidence, reflecting the need for a multi-layered solution (ACECQA 2021, 2022).

Possible solutions to address challenges of pay and conditions

To address the challenges of workforce attraction and retention and improve access to quality early years for all children we recommend:

- Development of appropriate funding levers to enable adjusting wages within the early years sector (e.g. through award levels) – including strategies to avoid increasing costs to families
- Adjustments to the Fringe Benefit Tax – for example, including an additional exemption to include not-for-profit (NFP) providers would increase the level of after-tax income for relevant staff. This would only be relevant for NFP service types, and the redistributive effects would need to be considered and estimated (e.g. flow of staff from for-profit to NFP services).
- Payroll tax exemptions – for example, an exemption from jurisdictional payroll taxes in for-profit services would increase the level of after-tax income for relevant staff. The cost of this change and redistributive effects would need to be estimated.
- Alongside any change to income for those working in the sector, the funding model must also support investments in workforce capability and professional development, both of which are other levers available to government and complementary to the outcomes of the sector.


Implications for Equity

Affluent communities often attract and retain higher qualified educators, offering higher remuneration and conditions, suggesting that families' ability to pay affects the quality of staff and experiences being offered (Jackson, 2018). We also know that there is more supply and availability of early years services in highly affluent areas, although approximately 29% of the population live in areas classified as childcare deserts.

More strikingly, about 1.1 million Australians living in regional and rural areas, are in areas where there is no immediate access to childcare with 'thin markets' offering little family choice. Educators are less well remunerated, often working with children with complex needs who face long wait times for wrap-around supports and early intervention.

We suggest that attention should be given to supporting skilled educators to work in communities of greatest need, where the impact of quality early years can be amplified for these cohorts of children. Support may include wage bonuses and other incentives for educators working in communities with high levels of disadvantage and vulnerability.

Upskilling and professional development



Offering professional development and upskilling opportunities for the existing workforce is an effective approach to addressing workforce retention challenges. Through the strategic approach taken through the Front Project's Workforce Initiatives, we have seen positive impacts among cohorts from the early years workforce.

The evolution of the Future Tracks Upskill Program

Future Tracks was developed by The Front Project in 2018 to understand and address the increasing workforce shortage and quality gaps in the early years system. In piloting a support program focussed on school leavers across their 4-year Bachelor program with the intention to increase the number and quality of Early Childhood Teachers in Australia, we learned that there was another cohort of students we could target with greater impact.

The school leaver career space is crowded and the barriers this cohort face in making the decision to have a career as an early childhood teacher were great. We recognised over time that the cohort of students who had completed their Diploma qualifications and who were already working in early years settings showed more loyalty to the career. Indeed, they needed a deeper level of enabling support than the school leaver cohort.


In 2019 The Front Project conducted research into [Upskilling in Early Childhood Education](#) that identified the motivations and barriers that cohorts experienced in upskilling their qualifications to become bachelor trained teachers.

Barriers to Success

We know that the early years workforce are not highly paid and they work in a complex, highly-regulated system with many competing priorities. We also know that demand for workforce outpaces supply, with a knock-on effect of increasing the demands on the existing workforce to deliver high quality education and care for children and families. The demands experienced by the early years workforce during the Covid-19 pandemic have not abated in the post-pandemic environment, resulting in increases in burn out and reduced retention rates across the workforce. These impacts have been acutely felt in rural and regional settings and settings supporting children and families experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage, and exacerbated by the prevalence of childcare deserts in these areas.

In this context, there are both programmatic and participation barriers to success identified by the Upskill program include:

- Reduction in capacity for individual educators and teachers to fund the support of the upskill program, especially those teachers and educators working in small and medium services or community run pre-schools.
- Reduction in time capacity to upgrade qualifications or do professional development because the workforce work longer hours to meet the increasing expectations of employers and the needs of children and families. Indeed, services are often unable to release the students to attend professional practice due to their ratio requirements and finding an educators who can backfill their role.
- Lack of buy-in from employers and service leaders to support upskilling. This is due to an understandable concern, and perceived risk that the newly graduated ECT might leave the service that supported them to work elsewhere.
- Financial constraints are a major barrier for participants from settings and services other than large for-profit LDCs. Smaller service providers are unable to fund access to the program without government support. Indeed, students who upskill are required to complete professional experiences (on average 30-50 days across the degree) where they



would be required to go without pay, because they are unable to work during this time. This is a significant barrier for students who are already on low wages.

We know there is a strong need to provide career development opportunities within the system and that there is a link between higher level qualifications and higher quality experiences for children (noted in the interim report). The complex mixed market and variability financial models across the system mean that there is often a disincentive (around staff mobility) for employers to support educators to upskill.

One owner operator at a small LDC service once asked: “*Why would I support my staff to upskill their qualifications? What happens if they leave?*” This raises a common theme among small services, constantly handling tensions between tightening operating budgets and access to suitable qualified staff, competition amongst services and deepening a scarcity mindset. These concerns are exacerbated by the pragmatic view that money invested in workforce capacity building at an organisational level can easily be lost if educators and teachers cannot be retained,

Enablers for success

The Upskill Program has a proven track record in improving retention rates - a consistent 72% retention rate across the intakes. This compares strongly against the national trend. The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) cites Federal data on completion rates for students who enrol in Bachelor of Early Childhood education courses is less than 15% over the last 10+ years.


To explain why the Upskill Program has been successful in retaining students, we draw from their direct feedback. This feedback tells us the reason the retention rate is so high compared to the retention rate for students without support is due to three factors:

- The personalised nature of the Upskill program, through transition webinars, the mentoring program and peer-to-peer support in the Online Community make a significant difference to early years professionals.
- Integration between the Front Project, university, employers and the students is a key enabler of success provided by the Upskill program, smoothing transition and communication pathways between key actors to support the early years workforce.
- Support for backfill so that students can be paid while they complete Professional Practice rounds, which also supports employers by reducing capacity constraints and allowing them to free-up staff time.

Current Upskill Program

Through partnering with large, LDC providers, the Upskill Program launched its first enabling program to support this cohort in 2019. The program works in partnership with the University and service providers. The key elements of the program are:

- **Transition Program** – offering students a live program that addressed the more prevalent barriers the research identified for the students.
 - Navigating the university websites.
 - Understanding higher education study expectations.
 - Building confidence in academic literacy in students.
 - Time Management and study skills.
- **Mentoring program**
 - Co-designed by experts and users in the early years system, the Future Tracks Mentoring program was designed to support students through their study journey.
 - Mature aged students who are working while they are studying and who are studying online are most at risk of non-completion of University studies according



to the [Grattan Institute](#). Thus, the mentoring program was designed to address key barriers experienced by these mature aged students.

- **Leadership Program**

- A key component identified in the Upskilling in Early Childhood Education report was the link between retention of early years staff and the quality-of-service level leadership, specifically the Centre Director. The leadership program was developed to be offered to students as an add on after graduation to increase the number of bachelor qualified teachers with leadership skills in the system

Online Community

The Upskill Program utilises an Online Community, in response to a review of the Upskill program in 2020 that revealed retention rates were impacted by the lack of connection and professional networking opportunities for Early Childhood Teachers and Educators. This is because they study while they are in working in the field. As a result, The Front Project developed and now delivers an Online Community. This was implemented in 2020 at the peak of the Covid pandemic and is available to all Teachers and Educators across Australia, regardless of service type, years of experience or role.


The Online Community has grown rapidly since 2020 and now contains over 500 members of the ECEC workforce. There are 9 sub-communities reflecting the different cohorts and groups and also the Connection hub which is the space where all members can interact together. The topics in the sub-communities focused on upskilling tend to be focus on assignment support, mentoring ideas and conversations about what they are learning at university. In the Connection Hub the topics are broader, questions are posed, and answers offered around dealing with burnout, identifying early childhood role models and the Early Years Learning Framework, current news, conferences and resources for their work in services. We are currently working with Evidence 4 Learning (E4L) to disseminate their evidence based professional development resources to the Online Community members. The Online Community is professional moderated by an Online Community Manager and is easily scaled.

The review also identified that due to the fee-for-service nature of the Upskill program model, it was only available to those educators working for large LDC services who could afford to support them. In 2020, Future Tracks diversified its model to create a highly scalable and financially accessible option for those educators working in smaller or community-based settings. At the same time, we also evaluated the benefit of renaming Future Tracks to Workforce Initiatives to ensure clarity around what is offered.

To increase the accessibility to the wider early childhood education and care workforce, the Upskill Program developed a three-tiered model which allowed students to engage with the program in different ways to meet their needs. Available now is a high touch model that we customise for the large, early learning providers so that the students experience the Upskill program as a seamless extension of the supports offered by their employer. There is a Government Tier which is able to be scaled and maintains personalised and real time experiences but is not specific to one provider or another and there is the individual tier which is a self-serve model which is pre-recorded and financially accessible for staff working in early learning.

The Upskill program has successfully enrolled over 600 students into the enabling program which sits alongside their bachelor's degree during their study journey. The key to the success of the program is the deep relationships The Front project holds with Universities across Australia. These relationships enable the Upskill Program staff to help student navigate through the university journey and seek support from academics and learning services as they come up against barriers in their study. It is this work, coupled with the mentoring program and the ongoing 24-hour access to their peers in the online community that has seen The Front Project increase the retention rate of the Bachelor of Early Education courses increase by 346% over the 5 years of the program.

Upskill Program in Partnership with the Victorian Government



The Front Project has a contract with the Victorian Department of Education and Training which supports early childhood professionals studying a Bachelor of Early Childhood Education in Victoria to step into an early Childhood Teaching role upon graduation. This opportunity enables 100 students residing in and attending a Victorian university to undertake the Upskill program and degree. Students who were **targeted** for this initiative:

- Live and work in Victoria.
- Work 'on the floor' in a setting service offering (or intending to offer) a funded 3-year-old kinder program.
- Hold an ACECQA approved Diploma.
- Intend to complete an ACECQA approved bachelor's degree and work as an Early Childhood Teacher in Victoria.
- Who face barriers like, English as a second language and first in family to go to university.
- Are those whose providers can't afford to support them and smaller providers facing other barriers.

Places were prioritised for those students living and working in rural and remote areas and services and settings that support children and families experiencing vulnerability.

During our most recent intake (March 2023), we enrolled 71 new successful applications into the Upskill Program, bringing our total student number to the required 100. We can see that our program has supplied an effective range of workforce support initiatives for educators and teachers entering the profession. Targeting these supports during teacher training, engaging participants in knowledge-sharing and mentoring opportunities, and working with service providers to facilitate access to support, is paying dividends.

Case Study: Lori Lillingston

To illustrate the benefits to individual participants in the program, we provide the case study of Lori Lillingston. Lori had been in the early childhood sector for 22 years, with her Diploma she had become a Center Director and an Educational Leader, but her true dream was to be an Early Childhood Teacher.

She studied online and accessed the support of the upskill program also online and whilst this gave her the flexibility to work full time it was isolating. For Lori, the support of the Upskill program was really useful. What she valued the most was the mentoring program.

"You have a lot of self-doubt, so the mentor gives you that little pat on the back so to speak, encouraging you to continue was the other thing I suppose. I needed someone to reassure me, so it was great to have that."

Lori is continuing to work at her service and has moved into a teaching role, supporting others leading the kindergarten program. Lori is now a mentor to others in her service and helps them become the best they can be.

Concluding remarks

It stands to reason that better, and smarter, investment in the early years workforce will help to deliver on the developmental needs of children and will set them up for success in their later life



Investment in the sector and its workforce leads to a range of more equitable educational and developmental outcomes for children, increased intergenerational social mobility, and higher female labour market participation (ACECQA, 2021).


We know that investment in the early years represent the greatest opportunity for an economic return on investment. Through [our economic analysis](#) we know that it offers a Return on Investment of 1:2 – for every dollar invested now Australia receives \$2 back over a child’s life, through stronger academic performance, as a key predictor for higher future incomes and better wellbeing.

This return on investment can be attributed to the skills and abilities children develop through early learning experiences and early years and reinforces the need to invest in and support the ongoing development of a well-provisioned, motivated and skilled early years workforce.



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Appendix 1 – Biography- Ms Jane Hunt – Founding CEO - The Front Project

Jane is an innovative and results driven social change leader who has dedicated her career to empowering people to improve the world. Jane's contribution to advancing social innovation has received international recognition by the Schwab Foundation who honoured her work and thought leadership with a global Social Entrepreneur Award, granting her a seat at World Economic Forum events. In Australia, Jane's work to strengthen businesses and communities has been recognised through the Victorian Telstra Business Women's Award and the Melbourne Business 3000 Award for Community Innovation.

As the founding CEO of the Front Project, Jane and the team are creating systemic change in early learning in Australia, with the goal to improve developmental outcomes for all children, especially those experiencing disadvantage. This work combines her passion for children's education, health and development and her commitment to empowering leaders to make change for the better.

In creating the Front Project, Jane was able to tap into her extensive senior experience across the for-benefit, corporate and academic sectors. Her various roles have included CEO at both Adopt Change and Fitted for Work, Non-Executive Director of Unison Community Housing and the Victorian Strategy and Operations Manager for Mission Australia. Jane also currently serves on the CEDA Vic/Tas Advisory Group, is a Director of the Parkville Institute and a Member of the Victorian Government Best Start, Best Life Taskforce Advisory Group.