![AECTEN - Australian Early Childhood Teacher Education Network]

July 16, 2021

Submission from the Australian Early Childhood Teacher Education Network (AECTEN)

Quality Initial Teacher Education Review

The Australian Early Childhood Teacher Education Network (AECTEN) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the *Quality Initial Teacher Education Review[1]*.

AECTEN comprises leaders of early childhood teacher education degree programs in the higher education sector across Australia. It has five branches: New South Wales/Australian Capital Territory; Victoria; Queensland; Western Australia/Northern Territory; and combined South Australia/Tasmania, representing in total, 43 higher education institutions. Established in October 2016, AECTEN advocates for the delivery of high-quality early childhood initial teacher education and seeks to inform national policy on key issues relating to early childhood education and the early childhood teacher workforce. In December 2017 AECTEN began operating as a network of the Australian Council of Deans of Education.

AECTEN upholds the internationally accepted definitions of early childhood – understood to cover birth to eight years of age – and early childhood teachers as university-qualified teachers equipped to teach children from birth and up to eight years. There is diversity in the early childhood teacher education programs offered by member institutions, with a focus on birth – five years, birth – eight years, or birth – 12 years. Respective graduates are therefore eligible to teach in early childhood education and care non-school settings only (birth – five); early childhood education and care non-school settings, school-based preschools/kindergartens, *and* the early phase of school (birth – eight); or in early childhood education and care non-school settings, school-based preschools/kindergartens, *and* primary school (birth – 12).

1. *Lack of attention to early childhood teachers in the Discussion Paper*

We begin our submission by noting the school-centric focus of the Discussion Paper and the exclusion of early childhood teachers employed in non-school settings. The Alice Springs

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[1] This submission has been developed by Associate Professor Marianne Fenech (USYD) and Professor Sue Irvine (QUT), with input from AECTEN members. See pp. 10-11 for a list of AECTEN members and institutions.

(Mparntwe) Education Declaration[2] recognises the critical role quality early childhood education plays in the meeting of its vision for "a world class education system that encourages and supports every student to be the very best they can be, no matter where they live or what kind of learning challenges they may face" (p. 3). It follows that the commitment made by all governments in this Declaration to "strengthening early childhood education" (p. 7) should include attention to supporting the quality of the whole of the early childhood teacher workforce, beyond early childhood specialist teachers employed in schools.

Recommendation 1: The Quality Initial Teacher Education Review expand its focus to issues pertaining to attracting, developing and retaining quality early childhood teachers employed in early childhood non-school settings.

The remainder of this submission discusses the two foci of the Discussion Paper – attracting and selecting high-quality candidates into the teaching profession and preparing ITE students to be effective teachers – with respect to early childhood education (birth – eight) and paying particular attention to teachers employed or qualified to be employed in birth-five non-school settings.

2. Attracting and selecting high-quality candidates into the teaching profession

Improving the supply and quality of the early childhood teacher workforce within the birth – five non-school sector is a focus of a government-endorsed, ten-year early childhood workforce strategy currently being developed[3]. The Strategy is, in part, a response to entrenched early childhood teacher shortages in this education context, with conservative estimates predicting that a further 7000 early childhood teachers will be required by May 2023[4]. Juxtaposing this increased need is a decline in enrolments into early childhood initial teacher education programs since 2012[5]. The experience of AECTEN members, reflected in research[6], is that the majority of graduates of birth-eight and birth-12 ITE programs choose to work in schools, most often citing professional standing and remuneration as the reason for

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[2] Education Council. (2019). The Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration. https://www.dese.gov.au/alice-springs-mparntwe-education-declaration/resources/alice-springs-mparntwe-education-declaration

[3] ACECQA. (2021). *Consultation on a ten year National Children's Education and Care Workforce Strategy (2021–30)*. https://www.acecqa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-04/WorkforceStrategy-ConsultationPaper-2021.pdf

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Fenech, M., Wong, S., Boyd, W., Gibson, M., Watt, H., & Richardson, P. (2021, online first). Attracting, retaining and sustaining early childhood teachers: An ecological conceptualisation of workforce issues and future research directions. *Australian Educational Researcher*. doi:10.1007/s13384-020-00424-6

their choice. Further, for some graduates of these programs who do teach in non-school settings, this can be to 'buy time' until they can secure a teaching position in a school. These issues appear exacerbated in jurisdictions such as Western Australia, Tasmania and the ACT where preschool/kindergarten (early education for children aged three-five years) is part of the formal school system.

While there are challenges to the recruitment and retention of specialist early childhood teachers in schools, these are heightened in early childhood non-school settings. Key barriers extending beyond initial teacher education prohibit attracting suitable preservice teachers and retaining them in the profession post-graduation[7], the most significant being low wages and poor working conditions. Early childhood teachers employed in early childhood non-school settings have long experienced a lack of pay parity with teachers employed in schools, earning up to $30,000 less than their primary and secondary counterparts[8] despite having equivalent teaching qualifications and, in most jurisdictions, being professionally registered and accountable to the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers. AECTEN believes that until pay parity is established, attracting and retaining qualified and experienced early childhood teachers will remain a critical barrier to the provision of high-quality early childhood education, irrespective of any other strategies that are put into place.

Recommendation 2: Implement policies and strategies conducive to achieving pay parity for all early childhood teachers, irrespective of where they are employed.

2a. All governments in Australia commit to universal (free) early childhood education for all children aged birth – five years, irrespective of the setting they are enrolled.

2b. Tie universal early childhood education funding to salary and working condition benchmarks conducive to high-quality early education in early childhood non-school services[9].

2c. Implement regulatory requirements where an Exceeding or Excellent National Quality Standard rating[10] requires early childhood non-school services to pay early childhood teachers a salary commensurate with teachers in schools.

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[7] ACECQA (2021); Fenech, M., Wong, S., Boyd, W., Gibson, M., Watt, H., & Richardson, P. (2021, online first). Attracting, retaining and sustaining early childhood teachers: An ecological conceptualisation of workforce issues and future research directions. *Australian Educational Researcher*. doi:10.1007/s13384-020-00424-6

[8] https://www.ieu.asn.au/news-publications/news/2018/01-3-1/news-release-heres-why-early-childhood-teachers-need-pay-rise

[9] Australian research (Harrison et al., 2008) has reported that early childhood non-school services rated as high quality allocate, on average, over 80% of their budget staffing (salaries and professional development). This research is reported in Waniganayake, M., Cheeseman, S., Fenech, M., Hadley, F. & Shepherd, W. (2017). *Leadership in early childhood: Contexts and complexities* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.

[10] https://www.acecqa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-09/Guide-to-the-NQF-September-2020.pdf

2d. Conduct a cost-benefit analysis of pay parity and conditions commensurate with teachers employed in schools with early childhood teacher attrition.

Even more than primary and secondary teachers, early childhood teachers employed in early childhood non-school services have long experienced low status. There remains in the community and concerningly, in policy contexts, the perceptions that: working with young children is akin to babysitting; learning starts with formal schooling; and 'real' teachers are employed in schools. The exclusion of early childhood teachers employed in early childhood non-school services from the purview of this Discussion Paper and the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers' limited relevance to the practice of these early childhood teachers, are two examples of their ongoing marginalisation. For teaching in early childhood non-school services to be attractive to high-calibre candidates, professional status needs to be addressed.

Recommendation 3: Implement the recommendation of the AITSL One Teaching Profession: National Review of Teacher Registration, that is, a unified national system of teacher registration that is inclusive of and relevant to early childhood teachers who choose to teach in non-school settings, and:

- *Is overseen by AITSL and the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority*
- *Adopts inclusive professional teaching standards that are relevant to the practice of early childhood teachers who work with children in the birth-5 years age group in non-school settings*
- *Provides early childhood teachers employed in early childhood non-school settings with funding to access quality professional development and mentors to support their transition from Provisional to Proficient, and from Proficient to Highly Accomplished and Lead*
- *Values ongoing professional development, not just attendance at one-off training sessions*
- *Aligns with more robust regulatory requirements that put a greater onus on providers to pay for professional development and enables early childhood teachers to complete professional development in work time*
- *Establishes local government area mentoring hubs and advisory networks for early childhood teachers, prioritising those in stand-alone services, rural/remote areas, and in centres where they are the sole early childhood teacher*
- *Supports and values professional decision-making and autonomy*

Recommendation 4: Promote the value of early childhood teachers in policy by:

4a. Utilising early learning/early education discourse and professional terminology

4b. Distinguishing degree-qualified early childhood teachers from diploma and certificate-qualified educators

4c. Redressing aspects of the National Quality Framework[11] that diminish the value of early childhood teachers such that the value-added benefits of these teachers for quality early education and care and children's early learning and development are made visible. For example,

- *Educational leaders must hold an early childhood teacher qualification.*
- *Additional staffing requirements for services licensed for 60 or more children be confined to a second early childhood teacher and not another suitably qualified person.*
- *Only early childhood teachers who have completed their initial teacher education program, and are qualified and registered to teach, should be employed to work as early childhood teachers in non-school settings. Ten years on, the transitional arrangement that allows a service to employ a preservice early childhood teacher who is actively working towards their qualification should end.*
- *Early childhood teachers lead the planning, documenting, and evaluating of children's learning.*

Recommendation 5: Conduct strengths-based campaigns that:
- *promote the value of all teachers (early childhood, primary, secondary) and the importance of education and learning for all children from the early years (teaching prepares children for life).*
- *highlight the complexity of the work early childhood teachers do.*
- *target school and other career advisors, school teachers, parents, policy makers and the general public.*

Unlike teachers in schools, teachers working in early childhood non-school settings can be the only teacher employed at a service, quickly move into formal leadership positions, and have limited access to mentoring and quality professional development[12]. Further, in addition to ongoing curriculum planning, implementation, documentation and evaluation, the role of an early childhood teacher in these settings involves working closely with families, meeting multiple regulatory requirements, teaching multiple and different configurations of children

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[11] https://www.acecqa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-09/Guide-to-the-NQF-September-2020.pdf

[12] Education Services Australia. (2018). *One teaching profession: Teacher registration in Australia*. https://www.aitsl.edu.au/docs/default-source/national-review-of-teacher-registration/report/one-teaching-profession---teacher-registration-in-australia.pdf.

each week, and working in (if not leading) teams with diverse certificate and diploma-qualified educators. We would argue that these challenges and responsibilities, in the context of poor pay and low professional status, mean that retaining qualified and experienced early childhood teachers in non-school settings is even more difficult than retaining teachers in schools. We note that preservice early childhood teachers become acutely aware of these issues through casual employment as early childhood educators and/or through their professional experience. Awareness of these issues during their candidature contributes to the low ITE completion rates noted in the Discussion Paper[13]. In addition to the mentoring and professional development strategies proposed in Recommendation 3, we believe that a strengthening of the regulations and industrial awards under which early childhood teachers are employed is critical to improving teacher wellbeing and retention.

Recommendation 6: Improve the conditions under which early childhood teachers employed in non-school settings are employed:

6a. Implement evidence-based educator:child ratios in the Education and Care Services National Regulations[14] that support high-quality early childhood education programs[15].

6b. Embed into the The Educational Services (Teachers) Award[16] non-contact paid programming time commensurate with teachers employed in schools.

Research is needed to explore the influence of ATAR scores/academic performance at school on course completion and graduate quality of early childhood teachers, those employed in schools and those in early childhood non-school settings. There is some evidence to suggest that motivation to teach, personal qualities and dispositions may contribute to teaching effectiveness and retention within the early childhood teaching profession, but again, further research in this area is also needed. Indeed, what constitutes "the best candidates into (early childhood) teaching" (p. 8) is a focus of a developing early childhood teacher workforce study[17]. In the early childhood non-school sector, diploma-qualified educators upskilling to an early childhood teaching qualification supports the supply of early childhood teachers.

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[13] Fenech et al. (2021)

[14] Education and Care Services National Regulations (2011 SI 653).

https://legislation.nsw.gov.au/view/html/inforce/current/sl-2011-0653

[15] Early Childhood Australia. (2013). Evidence Brief on Staff to Child Ratios and Educator Qualification Requirements of the National Quality Framework. http://www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Evidence-Brief-on-NQF-Ratios-and-Qualifications-February-2013.pdf

[16] https://awardviewer.fwo.gov.au/award/show/MA000077#P374_36246

[17] Fenech, M., Wong, S., Gibson, M. Boyd, W. & Garvis, S. (in progress). *Teachers in early education: A longitudinal study of attracting, retaining, and sustaining a quality early childhood teacher workforce in Australia*. To be submitted as an Australian Research Council Discovery application in February 2022.

Recommendation 7: Support flexible pathways for diploma-qualified educators to attain an early childhood teaching degree, without compromising graduate quality.

3. Preparing ITE students to be effective teachers

We support requirements of the National Quality Framework for more early childhood teachers to support the learning and development of children aged birth – five years. We have strong concerns, however, about policy shifts that are potentially compromising how well-prepared early childhood teacher graduates are to work with children of this age group. Specific concerns are:

i. A policy focus that has prioritised increasing the supply of early childhood teacher graduates potentially at the expense of quality. This policy approach has manifested most obviously in the accreditation of abridged ITE programs, including one-year postgraduate degrees, three-year undergraduate degrees, and one-year undergraduate degrees for diploma-qualified educators. The accreditation of these programs is contrary to the national approach described in the Discussion Paper – "that all postgraduate programs be two years in duration" (p. 6) – and has been made without an evidence base of demonstrated quality and graduate preparedness. Of further concern is, in the context of declining government investment in higher education, the potential for more higher education institutions seeking to increase enrolment rates through these perceived competitive-edge programs that fast-track degree completions.

ii. The offering of dual birth – 12 years early childhood/primary ITE programs can be problematic for a number of reasons: limited/inadequate coverage of early education specific to birth-five years; limited professional experience and internships with the birth-five age group; and the offering of a pathway away from early childhood non-school settings (birth-five) into schools. Research has shown that employers of early childhood teachers in NSW (where only birth-five and birth-12 ITE programs are offered) consider graduates of birth-five programs to be the best prepared to work with children of this age group[18]. We acknowledge that internationally, early childhood education spans birth – eight years, recognising the contribution that specialist early childhood teachers make to early learning in non-school settings, the

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[18] Boyd, W., Wong, S., Fenech, M., Warren, J., Mahony, L., Lee, I-F., & Cheeseman, S. (2020). Employers' perspectives of how well prepared early childhood teacher graduates are to work in early childhood education and care services, *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood.45*(3), 215-227 DOI: 10.1177/1836939120935997

early phase of school, and the transition between these settings. We also acknowledge the variability of attention to the early years in birth-12 programs across jurisdictions, and the importance of these broader programs, particularly in universities situated in rural and remote areas where flexibility is needed across early childhood school and non-school settings.

iii.   Variable awarding of credit for previous study by higher education institutions to bachelor candidates with relevant diploma qualifications. Such credit ranges from two units to two years of study.

iv.   Teaching in early childhood undergraduate and postgraduate programs being undertaken by academics with no qualifications or expertise specific to birth – five years and teaching in non-school settings.

v.   The observed enrolment of international students who lack English language proficiency and/or whose motivation to enrol in an early childhood teaching degree is to study in Australia and/or to gain permanent residency, not to practise as a teacher.

A strong body of research demonstrates the significant contribution early childhood teachers make to high-quality ECEC[19], in the early phase of school and in birth-five non-school settings. That this research is not unequivocal, however, may be attributable to the aforementioned issues.

Recommendation 8: Review the efficacy of birth – 12 ITE programs.

Recommendation 9: Review professional experience requirements in all early childhood degree programs with a view to ensuring robust minimum placement days with children aged birth – two and three – five years.

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[19] Examples include: Degotardi, S. (2010). High-quality interactions with infants: Relationships with early childhood practitioners' interpretations and qualification levels in play and routine contexts. *International Journal of Early Years Education,* 18(1), 27–41; Manning, M., Wong, G. T. W., Fleming, C. M., & Garvis, S. (2019). Is teacher qualification associated with the quality of the early childhood education and care environment? A meta-analytic review. *Review of Educational Research, 89*(3), 370-415. doi:10.3102/0034654319837540; Sylva, K., Melhuish, E., Sammons, P., Siraj-Blatchford, I., & Taggart, B. (2004). *The effective provision of pre-school education (EPPE) project: Findings from pre-school to end of key stage*. Retrieved 17 January, 2018 from https://ro.uow.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://www.google.com/&httpsredir=1&article=3155&context=sspapers; Tayler, C. (2016). *The E4Kids study: Assessing the effectiveness of Australian early childhood education and care programs*. Retrieved 15 February, 2019 from: https://education.unimelb.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0006/2929452/E4Kids-Report-3.0_WEB.pdf.

Recommendation 10: Pause further accrediting of abridged early childhood degree programs until a review of their efficacy and capacity to produce fit for purpose early childhood teachers is established.

Recommendation 11: Explore robust entry requirements for international students into early childhood ITE programs (IELTS requirements and how these are applied in practice).

Recommendation 12: Explore partnerships between VET and HEIs for improved articulation pathways.

Recommendation 13: Introduce a nationally consistent approach to the approving of credits for diploma qualifications following a quality assurance review of RTOs and determine credit limits that support quality teacher graduates.

Recommendation 14: Introduce/strengthen requirements in higher education that requires early childhood teacher programs to be taught by qualified early childhood academics

TPAs are used to assess the preparedness of graduates whose ITE program enable them to teach in a school setting. However, AECTEN is aware of variability in how these are used to assess preparedness to teach in programs that also enable graduates to teach in non-school early childhood settings (i.e., birth-eight years, birth-12 year programs). While some programs enable the TPA to be undertaken in a non-school setting, many require this to be undertaken in a school setting. Currently, TPAs are not used to assess the quality of preservice teachers enrolled in a birth-five teaching degree. Notwithstanding revisions needed to the APST so as to better reflect the practice of early childhood teachers who work with children birth – five years in non-school settings, AECTEN members generally report that TPAs can be effectively used with children of all ages in the birth – eight range. AECTEN is scoping the use of TPAs for graduate teachers working with children aged birth – two, three – five, and the early years of school, to inform the design and use of TPAs going forward. We see a national application of TPAs in all early childhood programs, irrespective of age focus, as a strategy to promote the professional standing of all early childhood teachers.

Recommendation 15: Liaise with AECTEN to collaboratively review and develop a national application of TPAs in all early childhood ITE programs, ensuring flexibility and specificity to teaching in school and non-school settings and with children of prior to school and school age.

Thank you for considering this submission.

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Australian Early Childhood Teacher Education Network

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