



Teacher Workforce Working Group

Australian Government Department of Education



24 November 2022

RE: Draft Teacher Workforce Action Plan Public Consultation

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the Draft Teacher Workforce Action Plan Public Consultation.

Early childhood education is an integral part of the Australian education system and sets the foundations for lifelong learning and development. Just as in the school sector, quality developmental and educational outcomes for children depend upon a highly skilled, well supported and professionally recognised workforce. However, the early learning sector can often be overlooked in the context of broader education policy and reform.

In August 2022, Education Ministers endorsed the publication of the *National Children's Education and Care Workforce Strategy Implementation and Evaluation Plan* developed through a collaborative co-design process between governments, service providers, education and training providers, peak associations, regulatory bodies, and educators and teachers and their representative bodies. The plan details how 21 nationally agreed workforce actions to support a sustainable, high quality children's education and care workforce will be progressed, including 13 short-term actions to be progressed by the end of 2024.

The development of the Teacher Workforce Action Plan presents an opportunity for governments to consider how the implementation of both the *Teacher Workforce Action Plan* and the *National Children's Education and Care Workforce Strategy* can be coordinated, demonstrating a commitment to collaboration and shared decision-making for the education community, as well as significant economies of scale for government investment.

The children's education and care sector

The children's education and care sector is large and diverse, with more than 7,000 education and care service providers approved to operate more than 17,000 services under the National Quality Framework (NQF). This includes more than 8,000 long day care services and more than 3,000 preschools/kindergartens. Around 1.5 million children attend education and care services across Australia, with individual children attending anywhere from a few irregular hours to more than 50 hours every week.

The NQF has been in place since 1 January 2012 and is the national system for regulating education and care services, setting standards for quality and safety that benefit all children attending services.

A fundamental feature of the NQF was the introduction of mandatory minimum qualifications for educators and early childhood teachers to build a highly skilled workforce, ensuring educators are equipped to facilitate children's learning and development.

The NQF requires all long day care services and preschools/kindergartens to employ, engage or have access to at least one degree-qualified early childhood teacher, and at least half of all educators working directly with children need to hold at least an approved diploma level education and care qualification.

Early childhood teachers

Over 25,000 early childhood teachers are registered by teacher regulatory authorities across four states – South Australia (Teachers Registration Board of South Australia), Western Australia (Teacher Registration Board of Western Australia), Victoria (Victorian Institute of Teaching) and New South Wales (NSW Education Standards Authority, with registration called 'accreditation' in NSW). Given that more than three-quarters of children's education and care services are in these four states, most of Australia's early childhood teachers are required to be registered, aligning expectations for practice and ongoing professional development with the school-based teaching profession.

The National Skills Commission forecasts that the education and care sector will require approximately 21,800 additional staff, including 10,600 additional early childhood teachers, by November 2026. This represents an 11 per cent increase for the workforce over five years.

Priority Area 1: Elevating the profession

There is growing recognition of children's education and care as an essential service, supporting children's learning, development and wellbeing, as well as enabling parents and carers to continue working during natural disasters and national emergencies. Despite this, there is a prevailing perception that early childhood teachers are less qualified than their school counterparts.

Almost two-thirds of NQF-approved early childhood teaching programs qualify graduates to teach in both early childhood and primary school settings. Of these early career teachers who commence work in early childhood services upon graduation, the majority continue to seek employment in schools where pay, conditions and professional recognition are more favourable. The attrition of high-quality early childhood teachers is further exacerbated by the growing teacher shortages in the school sector.

However, the children's education and care sector offers diverse opportunities for high-performing early childhood teachers to take on pedagogical and administrative leadership roles. Early childhood teachers often work independently and can be responsible for curriculum planning across multiple age groups within a single service. The same leadership and management opportunities are less likely to be available to early career teachers within the school system. This level of autonomy and responsibility may well appeal to mid- and late-career professionals who have transferrable management and leadership skills.

The proposed Action 1. 'A targeted national campaign to raise the status and value the role of teachers' should ensure it highlights the diversity of teaching career pathways available to prospective teachers, including those in non-school settings. There is opportunity to align this work with the *National Children's Education and Care Workforce Strategy* which similarly commits to a

national communications campaign promoting careers in the children's education and care sector (Action FA1-4).

Early childhood teachers who are required to be registered must maintain their registration and progress their teaching career with reference to the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (APST). However, the APST are not fully contextualised for early childhood teachers and their distinct role in non-school settings. In some jurisdictions, this is a barrier to early childhood teachers maintaining their registration and progressing through the higher 'career stages'.

The National Review of Teacher Registration, conducted in 2018, recommended that the APST be amended to ensure their relevance and applicability to early childhood teachers. We note that actions relating to the review of the APST have not been addressed as part of the *Draft Teacher Workforce Action Plan* and reiterate our support for this work progressing as a priority, as it impacts the professional recognition and standing of early childhood teachers across Australia.

Priority Area 2: Improving teacher supply

Despite evidence for the importance of a nationally consistent teacher regulatory system, inclusive of all teachers, current jurisdictional arrangements for the registration of early childhood teachers can be variable and inconsistent. The different approaches can act as a barrier to workforce mobility and undermines the professional status of early childhood teachers, exacerbating existing workforce challenges.

The landscape becomes even more complex for overseas trained early childhood teachers seeking to work in Australia. These individuals may well be required to undergo multiple assessment and approval processes before they are able to work.

There remains a clear opportunity for governments to review and streamline the application and approval processes for overseas trained educators and teachers, in line with 'Action 9. Prioritise visa processing for qualified teachers and prioritise teachers from State and Territory nominated visa allocations', and in alignment with the *National Children's Education and Care Workforce Strategy* (Actions FA2-2 and FA1-2).

In addition, we strongly support a nationally consistent, efficient and effective approach to teacher registration. While acknowledging the different roles and responsibilities of state and territory teacher regulatory authorities, it is important for a nationally-consistent, high quality teacher workforce to pursue opportunities to streamline and align approval processes. Benefits include increased opportunities for early childhood teachers to work across the country, improved cooperation between state and territory teacher regulatory authorities, and certainty for teachers moving between jurisdictions and for employers operating services in multiple jurisdictions and cross-border areas.

Priority Area 3: Strengthening initial teacher education

Given that the majority of NQF-approved early childhood teaching programs qualify graduates to teach in both early childhood and primary school settings, it is important to ensure that reforms to initial teacher education do not create unintended consequences for the children's education and care sector.

Previous initial teacher education policy initiatives, such as those implemented from the Teacher Education Ministerial Advisory Group in late 2014, have impacted the children's education and care sector. While many of the changes should not have necessarily impacted a program's early childhood components, some higher education providers report increasing pressure to negotiate less early childhood content to satisfy the additional requirements and broader fiscal and resourcing constraints.

One notable requirement – that primary school teachers must graduate with a subject specialisation – means initial teacher education courses must include relatively high volumes of school age content and professional experience courses. This can result in the early childhood content and experience being displaced or overshadowed, particularly as higher education providers and governments continue to invest in accelerated programs. It may also reinforce perceptions that teaching in a non-school setting is an inferior career pathway within the teaching profession, particularly when viewed in the context of the order and status of supervised professional experience opportunities offered as part of teaching programs – a student's final and longest placement is often at a local primary school.

Consideration should be given to reviewing the initial teacher education *Accreditation Standards and Procedures* to improve the integration of the specialised practice and pedagogical knowledge required to be an early childhood teacher and their ongoing viability. This would complement work to be undertaken by ACECQA as part of the *National Children's Education and Care Workforce Strategy* (Action FA5-2).

Priority Area 5: Better understanding future teacher workforce needs

A significant challenge and barrier to decision making is the disparate and incomplete workforce data at a national level. This is further exacerbated by varied methods of data collection and analysis. As a result, accurate and contemporary data about the children's education and care workforce is rarely available to influence decision making and investment in workforce initiatives. For example, conservative estimates of workforce growth are currently used for skilled migration and immigration purposes and understanding of the effectiveness and impact of specific workforce supports is often limited.

Contemporary and reliable data has the potential to inform discussion about the career paths and progression of teachers in prior to school and school settings and could underpin targeted investigation of factors that influence recruitment, retention and career progression. ACECQA supports the Australian Teacher Workforce Data Strategy implemented by AITSL in partnership with the Australian Government, states and territories, teacher regulatory authorities, and the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. However, there are limitations to the collection's ability to provide insights into the career movements of the teaching workforce, such as why teachers leave the profession and what careers they move into.

There is also a need to review how workforce data can be better collected, stored and shared across all stakeholders in order to maximise the benefits of a robust, comprehensive evidence base, as well as the value and need for multiple workforce data collections to be undertaken by governments, with the associated burden and duplication this can create, and the overall benefits and savings that could be gained by pooling resources and streamlining efforts.

Priority Area 6: Better career pathways to support and retain teachers in the profession

Workforce diversity is important, particularly to deliver quality outcomes for all children. Targeted strategies are required to overcome barriers for certain groups of potential educators and teachers, particularly in regional and remote areas, however it is important that these strategies are evidence-based and tailored to the needs of the target students and their communities.

Completion rates for initial teacher education qualifications are systemically low. According to data provided by the Department of Education, Skills and Employment Analysis and Data Division, less than half (41 per cent) of commencing students complete their initial teacher education degree within four years. This is markedly lower than the average completion rate for all higher education qualifications (56 per cent). Completion rates for early childhood initial teacher education degrees are even lower, at just under one-third (30 per cent) of commencing students graduating within four years.

To date, there is limited information about the uptake of previous workforce related initiatives, as well as their relative effectiveness and impact on workforce supply. The *National Children's Education and Care Workforce Strategy* commits to reviewing previous and current programs to develop and implement targeted programs that support studies and placements for specified groups of potential educators and teachers, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, individuals located in regional and remote areas, and individuals from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (Action FA2-1).

Support is also required for early career teachers. More than 80 per cent of all providers under the NQF are approved to operate a single service and may only employ one or two early childhood teachers. The mentoring and support structures that are typically embedded and routine within schools are often not available or possible for these single service providers. This, combined with ongoing teacher shortages, can create high expectations for newly graduated early childhood teachers to 'hit the ground running', in contrast to the far more structured and supported program of induction and mentoring often available in the school sector. Newly graduated early childhood teachers can find themselves in senior positions within a long day care service, planning and developing curriculum for large numbers of children, and dealing with families around complex service management issues, sometimes without sufficient support.

The *National Children's Education and Care National Workforce Strategy* commits to exploring the options for early career teacher mentoring and induction supports, and professional practice networks (Actions FA1-3 and FA3-3).

If you would like to discuss our response, or would like further information on opportunities to coordinate the implementation of both workforce plans, please contact me ([REDACTED]) or Michael Petrie, General Manager, Workforce, Engagement and Research ([REDACTED]).

Yours sincerely



Gabrielle Sinclair
Chief Executive Officer