

Australian Catholic University

Faculty of Education and Arts

**Submission to the Australian Government
discussion paper on developing an
Early Years Strategy**

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ACU Faculty of Education and Arts (FEA)

Submission to the Australian Government discussion paper on developing an Early Years Strategy

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Executive summary

Australian Catholic University's (ACU's) Faculty of Education and Arts (FEA) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Australian Government discussion paper on developing an Early Years Strategy (the Strategy).

Of the discussion paper's eight questions, ACU responds to question two, five, and six.

ACU argues that high quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) depends on degree qualified ECEC teachers, of which there is a shortage. This shortage of qualified staff is becoming acute and has the potential to undermine government initiatives in the area.

To rectify this situation, and enhance the ECEC profession, ACU recommends the Commonwealth

- review and consider more broadly funding programs that successfully and rapidly contribute to the supply of early childhood teachers; and,
- facilitate pay parity between ECEC teachers and other teachers across states and territories.

High quality ECEC has a profoundly positive effect on children and helps remove barriers to workforce participation for their parents, particularly their mothers. However, we need to increase the supply of qualified staff working in the sector, and value them appropriately.

Q2.

What vision should our nation have for Australia’s youngest children?

The discussion paper says this vision should extend beyond ECEC to encompass all aspects of how we want the next generation of Australians to experience their first five years of life.

Australia’s youngest children should be healthy, safe and secure, valued and respected, and also, learning.

ACU is involved in the supply of learning. We want all young children in Australia to access affordable, culturally safe, high-quality ECEC, which will have a long-term, beneficial impact on their life outcomes.

Australia’s youngest children should have the opportunity to reach their full potential and participate fully in society, and one way of doing this is investing properly in ECEC, which should be reflected in the Early Years Strategy.

Q5.

What could the Commonwealth do to improve outcomes for children—particularly those who are born or raised in more vulnerable and/or disadvantaged circumstances?

Federal parliament has passed the “Cheaper Child Care Bill” which, from July 2023, will increase the childcare subsidy rate for all families unless their total income is \$530,000 or more, with families earning up to \$80,000 refunded 90 per cent of their first child's fees. This \$4.7 billion legislation will ease parents’ (particularly mothers’) return to work but will also increase demand for ECEC places at a time when the ECEC workforce is under pressure.

From 2016-21, the ECEC workforce increased 11 per cent, from 194,994 in to 216,619,¹ but by 2025, Australia will need 16,000 new early childhood educators to address shortages and meet increased demand.² The Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) believes the sector is facing an acute workforce shortage:

“In the context of declining enrolments in approved educator and teacher qualifications, increasing demand for early childhood teachers and a growing shortage of primary school teachers, the children’s education and care sector continues to face significant and increasingly urgent workforce challenges.”³

¹ The Social Research Centre, *2021 Early Childhood Education and Care National Workforce Census*, Report prepared for Australian Government Department of Education, August 2022.

² The National Skills Commission’s five-year employment projections show growth in ECEC will continue to increase over the five years to November 2025, with employment expected to increase by around 16,000 (qtd in ACECQA, “Shaping Our Future”, September 2021). See also Goodstart Early Learning qtd in AAP, “Australia needs 16,000 new educators to fill shortfall in childcare sector, inquiry told,” *The Guardian*, 31 October 2022.

³ Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA), “*Shaping Our Future*” A ten-year strategy to ensure a sustainable, high-quality children’s education and care workforce 2022–2031, September 2021.

Low pay, burnout and lack of professional recognition are driving a mass exodus of qualified ECEC staff.

More ECEC workers are needed, but especially more degree qualified ECEC teachers.

There is a significant and positive correlation between teacher qualification and quality with respect to the learning environment for all young children in ECEC settings, including infants and toddlers.⁴

It is also a legislative requirement, with every preschool program requiring a qualified teacher, and NSW and Victoria rapidly expanding their preschool offerings (i.e., the two years prior to formal schooling).

While nearly 12 per cent of the ECEC workforce hold a bachelor's degree or above,⁵ this proportion must increase to improve quality and deliver on policies.

This will be difficult because qualified early childhood teachers earn less than teachers in primary schools, which are already in short supply. The minimum starting salary for both 'graduate' and 'proficient' primary school teachers is higher than the starting salary for a four-year university-trained early childhood teacher with the same qualifications, and this pay gap widens over time through greater career development opportunities for the former.⁶

Last year, the Jobs and Skills Summit Issues Paper said that one barrier to full participation in the labour force was that "parents, particularly women, can face financial disincentives, such as out-of-pocket childcare costs, when returning to work."⁷

These barriers could remain despite the Federal government's "Cheaper Child Care Bill" due to a lack of qualified ECEC staff.

As demand for ECEC places is boosted by government subsidies, and supply is crimped because of a shortage of staff, the price of ECEC may increase, placing further pressure on families to access affordable education and care.

ACU therefore recommends the Commonwealth increase the supply of degree qualified ECEC teachers to improve outcomes for children and reduce barriers to workforce participation for their parents.

In particular, ACU recommends that the Commonwealth review and consider more broadly funding programs that successfully and rapidly contribute to the supply of early childhood teachers.

ACU has recently partnered with the Victorian government, Department of Education and Training tender, to deliver a Bachelor of Early Childhood Education (Birth to Five Years) accelerated course over an 18-month period. The accelerated course is approved by ACECQA, and graduates of the Bachelor of Early Childhood Education (Birth to Five Years) course are eligible for early childhood teacher registration through the Victorian Institute of Teaching (VIT). The entry requirement is a completed Diploma in Early Childhood Education and Care or a relevant Diploma qualification.

⁴ Manning M, Garvis S, Fleming C, Wong T. W. G. *The relationship between teacher qualification and the quality of the early childhood care and learning environment*. Campbell Systematic Reviews 2017:1

⁵ The Social Research Centre, *2021 Early Childhood Education and Care National Workforce Census*, Report prepared for the Australian Government Department of Education, August 2022.

⁶ AITSL, "Celebrating Early Childhood Teachers," October 2021.

⁷ Australian Government Treasury, *Jobs + Skills Summit, Issues Paper*, 17 August 2022.

The program is unique in that it provides an accelerated curriculum, innovative use of technology and includes significant scaffolding and support to enable greater student success. This includes academic mentoring, financial support as well as partnering with employers to support placements and provide leadership opportunities. The program is currently in its early years but a key strategy is to attract and retain a greater proportion of students from equity groups.

The program has attracted strong interest, enrolments and positive feedback from students. In order to truly meet national workforce shortages and ensure better outcomes for children and families ACU considers that this level of commitment/funding is required at a commonwealth level.

ACU recommendation 1:

That the Commonwealth review and consider more broadly funding programs that successfully and rapidly contribute to the supply of early childhood teachers.

Q6.**What areas do you think the Commonwealth could focus on to improve coordination and collaboration in developing policies for children and families?**

All ECEC teachers in Australia must be registered with their state or territory teacher registration board and meet the qualification requirements set by ACECQA; however, specific requirements for registration, such as ongoing professional development requirements, may differ between states and territories.

Similarly, while ACECQA sets national standards for the accreditation of early childhood teaching courses in Australia, the accreditation of these courses can differ between states and territories. While the accreditation requirements are broadly similar, there is variation in specific requirements and processes across states and territories.

The Commonwealth could better align the policies and registration of ECEC teachers, but of more urgency is the need to achieve pay parity between ECEC and other teachers. Ensuring pay parity between ECEC teachers and school teachers, and using consistent terms such as 'education and care', will raise the status of the ECEC profession and help attract more people into the early childhood teaching profession.

Parity has been achieved in registration; now parity is required on remuneration between ECEC teachers and other teachers.

ACU recommendation 2:

The Commonwealth to focus on facilitating pay parity between ECEC teachers and other teachers across states and territories.

Attachment A: Australian Catholic University Profile

Australian Catholic University (ACU) is a publicly funded Catholic university, open to people of all faiths and of none and with teaching, learning and research inspired by 2,000 years of Catholic intellectual tradition.

ACU operates as a multi-jurisdictional university with seven campuses across three states and one territory. Campuses are located in North Sydney, Strathfield, Blacktown, Canberra, Melbourne, Ballarat, and Brisbane. ACU also has a campus in Rome, Italy.

ACU is the largest Catholic university in the English-speaking world, with over 33,000 students and 2,300 staff.

ACU graduates demonstrate high standards of professional excellence and are also socially responsible, highly employable and committed to active and responsive learning. ACU is the number one university in the country when it comes to graduate employment outcomes three years after graduation, with a 95.5 per cent employment rate.⁸

ACU has built its reputation in the areas of Health and Education, educating the largest number of undergraduate nursing and teaching students in Australia⁹ and serving a significant workforce need in these areas. Under the demand driven system, ACU sought to focus and build on these strengths.

ACU has four faculties: Health Services; Education and Arts; Law and Business; and Theology and Philosophy.

As part of its commitment to educational excellence, ACU is committed to targeted and quality research. ACU's strategic plan focuses on research areas that align with ACU's mission and reflect most of its learning and teaching: Education; Health and Wellbeing; Theology and Philosophy; and Social Justice and the Common Good. To underpin its plan for research intensification, ACU has appointed high profile leaders to assume the directorships, and work with high calibre members, in six research institutes.¹⁰

In recent years, the public standing of ACU's research has improved dramatically. The last Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) assessment (in 2018) awarded ACU particularly high ratings in the fields of research identified as strategic priorities and in which investment has been especially concentrated. For example, ACU more than doubled the total number of top scores of 5 (well above world standard) in the 2018 ERA. In health sciences, ACU did not receive a single score below 5 while in education, ACU is one of only four universities in Australia to achieve a top score of 5 in the 4-digit fields of research. ACU's rapidly growing reputation in research is in line with its steady expansion.

⁸ QILT (August 2020), 2020 Graduate Outcomes Survey – Longitudinal (GOS-L).

⁹ Department of Education and Training, 2019 Higher Education Data Collection – Students, Special Courses.

¹⁰ Australian Catholic University, ACU Research, acu.edu.au/research.