

**A SUBMISSION BY THE
AUSTRALIAN EDUCATION UNION
TO THE OECD THEMATIC REVIEW OF
EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE**

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Introduction

The Australian Education Union represents teachers and other education workers in preschool education, schools, TAFE, Adult Migrant English Services and Disability Services. The AEU has 160,000 members throughout Australia, with a Branch or Associated Body in every state and territory and a federal office in Melbourne. The AEU is a member of Education International.

The AEU as a public education union has a focus on and constituency within education. The union works in the professional and industrial interests of its members but is also strongly committed to the advocacy of a high quality public education system accessible to all Australians.

AEU policy is based on a commitment to universal access to at least one year of preschool education for all Australian children, as an integral part of the early childhood education offered by a high quality, properly resourced system of public education.

The AEU has developed a discussion framework for new directions in relation to preschool education, *Towards a National Plan for Preschool Education*, which is attached to this brief overview.

Early childhood education in Australia

There has been growing recognition in Australia, as elsewhere, of the critical importance of early childhood education, which encompasses both the pre-compulsory years and years K-3 of primary school. For structural and historical reasons, from a national perspective the preschool component of early childhood education has been sadly under-resourced and neglected despite its critical importance to children's development.

The principle objective of preschools is the education of young children through developmental programs which are planned by specifically qualified teachers to meet the individual developmental needs of children and which fosters their growth and learning. Changing structures have led to a blurring of the distinctions and relationships between education and care, and this has led to a view of preschool education as basically a special form of child care.

It is the strong view of the AEU that preschool education must be seen as an integral part of the continuum of education offered by a high quality, properly resourced system of public education. It must be publicly funded, free, and accessible to all eligible children in Australia irrespective of their location or background. This is indeed the view of some states and territories, but it is not yet a matter of national consensus.

The need to develop a coherent educational vision for the early years of childhood education requires consideration both of the child centred developmental approaches of preschool education and the curriculum frameworks adopted in the early years of primary school.

Quality is characterised in AEU policy by appropriate child teacher ratios and group sizes, appropriately qualified and trained teachers and education workers, and enriching, well equipped, caring and secure environments all of which should be defined and enforced by regulation.

A national perspective

While education is primarily a responsibility of the states and territories, the Commonwealth Government of Australia has maintained a strong role in all sectors of education, from schools to higher education, as well as in child care services. The Commonwealth funding contribution to the operation of Technical and Further Education institutes and government schools is based on cooperative partnerships with the states and territories that are aimed to achieve agreed national objectives for those sectors.

The failure of the Commonwealth Government to maintain a similar responsibility in relation to preschool education/kindergarten is inconsistent with this general pattern and arises from a decision to terminate Commonwealth funding support for preschools in the states and territories from December 1985.

Apart from the shortage of resources available to preschool education, the current situation has led to diversity and fragmentation and the blurring of the distinctions between education and care. There is no consistency amongst the states and territories about whether responsibility for preschool education resides with Departments of Education or Community Services.

There is no coherent national policy on preschool education, there are no coherent strategies to ensure that all Australian children are able to exercise their right to a free, public, high quality preschool education. While considerable effort has been given over time to the development and implementation of national goals for both schooling and vocational education and training, the truth is that from a national perspective - however good it may be in particular states and territories - preschool education is inconsistent and uncoordinated.

In general it would appear that about 90% of Australian children access a preschool education. There is no clear national data, since there are inconsistencies of structure and nomenclature and inconsistent and incomplete figures at a national level. Even if only 10% of Australian children are missing out on a preschool education, that would be close to 30,000 children. The reality is that if the definition of preschool education incorporates a requirement for qualified teachers and education workers, the proportion missing out is likely to be much higher than that.

While the national data is limited, there is evidence that children from disadvantaged backgrounds are under-represented in participation in preschool education. The participation rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, for example, remains significantly lower than those of other Australian children. In the Northern Territory, children from remote and rural areas are under-represented. In Victoria, the introduction of cuts and unit cost funding under the previous conservative State Government have led to evidence that families from lower socio-economic backgrounds are likely to be missing out on preschool education.

The AEU submits that a commitment to equity requires a national policy framework which ensures that no Australian child is disadvantaged because of the state or territory in which they live, or because of their family circumstances.

Preschool education structures

While there is no consistency about which Government department is responsible for preschool education, across Australia it is most commonly the Education Department.

This is true for the ACT, Northern Territory, South Australia, Tasmania, Western Australia and Queensland (although in Queensland, community kindergartens are funded by the Education Department, operate under the umbrella of the Creche and Kindergarten Association of Queensland, and are licensed by the Department of Families, Youth and Community Care.)

In Victoria, preschool education is the responsibility of the Department of Human Services, while in NSW the Department of Education is responsible for 75 preschools, usually attached to primary schools, and the Department of Community Services is responsible for community providers.

While nationally community providers form the largest group, this is largely due to the structure of preschool education in the larger states, Victoria and NSW. If NSW and Victoria are left aside, across the rest of Australia preschool education is by and large seen as an integral part of the education system, with Education Departments as the dominant providers. In most systems, there are clear structural links to primary schools.

In the Northern Territory and Tasmania, preschool education is usually located in primary schools and part of the school. Staff are employed by the department, funding is via the school budget, resources are shared. That is the dominant model in Queensland also, with about 34,000 children in preschool programs in government schools, and about 6000 in community kindergartens that also cater for younger children. In the ACT, the most common model is a purpose built facility close to a primary school although a small number are located within schools. They are funded and staffed by the Department and administered by parent management committees. In new suburbs in the ACT preschool and childcare facilities will be co-located in the same building on primary sites.

In South Australia, there are about 100 centres located within schools but most are located in community facilities. They are nonetheless funded and staffed by the Department. New preschools will be built on school sites.

In Western Australia, preschool education has undergone a fundamental change that began with the introduction of voluntary full time pre-primary education in 1993. As a result, the Education Department is the major provider of both pre-primary and kindergarten programs. The transfer of kindergarten programs for four year olds to the Department began in 1997 and programs offered by both schools and remaining community providers have been linked to government schools, with staff provided by the Department.

Only in NSW and Victoria is the picture quite different. In NSW, the dominant community preschool providers operate under the same arrangements that apply to long day care centres., All centres with more than 30 places must employ a qualified early childhood teacher, and about 44% of preschools and 41% of childcare centres are not required to employ a teacher. It is not known however how many long day care centres actually offer a preschool education program.

In Victoria too, community providers are the largest group of providers, although the growth area in recent years has been the provision of preschool education programs within long day care centres and schools are now also able to offer preschool programs.

It would appear that the two larger states, with their lack of structural linkages between preschool education and schools, have less structured focus on the issues of education transition and on the need to build connections between the educational experiences of preschool and school. The greater reliance on user pays also create greater inequities in access and provision in this states.

The linkages and networks for teachers, particularly in those systems which have a clear focus on early childhood education that allows early childhood teachers to move across year levels, obviously assist in the development of curriculum links. The Western Australian approach, for example, is one which sees early childhood programs as an integral part of the school and values the role of early childhood teachers in whole school policy development and collaboration. Where preschools are physically located as part of a school, or co-located, there is the potential to share resources and facilities, including, as in Tasmania, access to specialist teachers or as in Queensland, provision for non-contact time with the support of other teachers.

None of this is to deny the need to ensure linkages also between child care services and preschool education. The ACT is clearly heading this way and Tasmania is also moving in this direction, with the transfer of child care to the Department of Education and with many schools developing links to child care providers, including in a few cases, co-location. There are major issues which need to be thought through in ensuring the best structural linkages across early childhood services. But the reality is that across most of Australia, systems are moving closer in their linkages to the school system. If there is to be any form of national framework developed, it is going to be a lot easier if there are at least some broad commonalities in structure, whatever precise form preschool education takes in each system.

The extent to which individual states and territories have been willing to take responsibility for funding high quality preschool education has varied between systems and over time. The lack of a national framework and the fragmentation of the existing structures has meant that the levels and quality of access to preschool education are inconsistent around Australia.

Hours of attendance

There is considerable discrepancy in the number of hours of preschool education to which children have access. With the possible exception of 4 year olds in NSW, children would receive at least ten hours of preschool education in all systems, but in some states they have access to considerably longer hours. It is the AEU's position that all children should have at least an initial ten hours per week preschool education as a minimum entitlement for at least the year prior to attending school, but that systems offering more should maintain their existing provision and that a national policy framework include consideration of the optimum weekly attendance time for each child.

Children with special needs

As indicated earlier, there is no coherent national data on which children are missing out on preschool education but there is evidence that children from disadvantaged backgrounds are under-represented. There is also no capacity to identify successful models and programs targeted at children with particular needs/circumstances which require support. The AEU has argued that there is the need to develop a national data base which gives a particular focus to the identification of barriers to access for individual children and for disadvantaged groups. This would include the development of a national picture of current programs and supports operating within individual systems with a view to identifying gaps and under-resourcing as well as exemplary models which have the potential to deliver quality education. The Commonwealth Government in partnership with the states and territories should develop and fund a Preschool Equity Program to ensure that all children have access to high quality preschool education and that their special educational needs are addressed. Within that framework, the Commonwealth Government should retain its current responsibility to provide targeted funding for preschool places and programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

Affordability

Linked to the issue of participation is the central question of affordability. Average fees paid by parents vary considerably from system to system., which create different barriers to access across Australia, based on capacity to pay. In Victoria, for example, cuts to funding and the introduction of unit funding in 1994 led to an increase in fees of 120% while per capita funding increased by 9%. Evidence from Victorian based studies indicated that children from low income families have been missing out on some or all of their preschool education because their parents could not afford the fees.. The new State Government has made some changes to this situation.

Fees are higher in those systems relying on community providers, although there is a question of cause and effect here. In both NSW and Victoria, government subsidies are lower than the rest of Australia, and thus parents are forced to make a greater contribution. In 1996-97, parents in NSW would have paid \$30 per week, in Victoria \$9.76 per week, in the ACT \$4 per week and in Tasmania and Northern Territory, would not have paid fees. In Queensland, only those children accessing community providers would have paid fees.

Funding levels must be increased to end this reliance in some systems on parent fees and fundraising in order to provide basis services. Part of the development of a national plan for preschool education should be an endeavour to reach agreement that those states and territories will reduce and eventually eliminate their reliance on parental contributions for public preschool education. Children's access to a varied and enriching program should not be dependent on the capacity of their family or community to pay for their education.

Staff-student ratios

There is now a significant body of research that shows the importance of group or class size and staff-children ratios to the outcomes of early childhood education. The Senate Employment, Education and

Training References Committee in 1996, in discussing adult child ratios applying to long day care centres, endorsed the current National Standards but noted that *they are still not consistent with those recommended by research and by the guidelines of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (...1:9 for children between 3-5)*

There are no national standards established for preschool education staff-student ratios, despite the fact that these do form a part of the regulatory requirements or staffing arrangements in each system. The existing standards around Australia are a long way from the optimum levels suggested by research, ranging from 2:20 in the Northern Territory to 2:30 in Victoria.

The ratios permitted in Victoria are a particular scandal, and in a climate of cuts, have resulted in 44% of 4 year old groups having more than 25 children. At the same time, unfunded 3 year olds groups, previously understood to have an optimum size of 15 children, have grown to the point where more than 25% have more than 20 children in the group. (AEU Victorian Branch)

Given the objectives of preschool education, there is clearly something illogical in a situation where the national standards set for child care centres are better than the staff student ratios existing in most systems for early childhood education.

In the light of research indicating the value to teaching and learning of small class sizes, it is the AEU's policy that preschools be staffed on a ratio of one trained teacher for every 10 children.

This policy is undoubtedly achievable over time. In view of the priority being suggested for the need to ensure that all children have access to preschool education, it is a position that will probably need to be phased in, at least in some systems. In the immediate, at least some national standard must be set for staff ratios in preschool education as part of the strategy of moving towards high quality and universal preschool education. A ratio of 2:20 should be achievable in the very near future.

The status of preschool education teachers

A critical characteristic of a quality, focussed preschool program is that it is planned and provided by a qualified Early Childhood Education teacher who has specialised skills in developing and providing an educational program for young children.

While all Australian systems require qualified teachers in all preschool education - apart from NSW where this is only for centres with more than 30 children - not all systems at this point require specific early childhood qualifications although it is at least deemed desirable in every system. The 1996 Senate inquiry accepted the view that early childhood education requires a specialist qualification.

In addition, regular professional development is critical to the maintenance of quality programs that are relevant and linked to the changing developmental needs of children. In some systems, such as Western Australia, both teachers and ancillary workers access five days professional development a year. In Victoria, perhaps the other extreme, responses to a 1996 Victorian Branch survey indicated that the majority of preschool teachers received up to one day of staff development, with 25% receiving no professional development in work hours at all.

Within the context of the emerging national and international teacher shortage, issues related to the professional remuneration and to the status of teachers, and preschool teachers in some states in particular, must be addressed. As a 'feminised' industry, the education sector has suffered from salaries which are low by professional standards, and there has been increased casualisation and precarious employment in at least some state and territory systems.

Although teachers in some states have recently reached agreement with their Departments on salary issues, there remain outstanding issues related to career opportunities and progression, and the initial salary offered to beginning teachers. Not all teachers have reached such agreements at this time.

The concept of salary parity for preschool teachers with teachers in schools is self evident within a framework of fairness and gender equity.

In all states and territories in which preschools are linked to Departments of Education, preschool teachers have salary parity with their colleagues in schools. Disparities between the states in relation to school teacher salaries are thus reflected in the preschool sector.

Where preschool education is not linked to the education sector, teacher salaries are generally lower. In Victoria, for example, four year trained teachers in kindergartens are paid considerably less than their colleagues in schools. On 1 July 2000, the gap between the salaries of preschool teachers in preschools and primary schools will be \$6810 at entry to teaching and \$10,971 at the top of the class room teacher (non-promotion) scale. They are employed by the funded community sector, rather than by the Department, and there are issues of the capacity of parent groups to pay without full funding, in the context of the 1994 funding restructure and cuts. There has been an increased move to part-time employment, with only 32% of Victorian teachers now working full time and there has been increased casualisation accompanied by increased workloads.(AEU Victorian Branch)

For preschool teachers working in child care centres, salaries are lower, *about \$20 a week less, four instead of ten weeks of paid leave and almost twice the number of teaching hours -37½ rather than 20 hours per week.* (Senate Employment Education and Training References Committee 1996)

The development of reasonable and equitable employment and salary conditions for preschool teachers must be a priority if there is to be ongoing recruitment into the profession.

In relation to issues to do with employment conditions, it is worth noting that parents want to be involved in their children's education, and systems should structure and nurture partnerships between parents and teachers. Exemplary models should be investigated and disseminated and, where this does not exist, employment functions should be undertaken by the appropriate central agency on behalf of all public and community providers in each state and territory. Structures which demand that parents act as employer, personnel manager, administrator and chief fund raiser are inappropriate and distract from the education of the child. Structures and programs which encourage the development of partnerships between educators and parents in democratic and inclusive decision making and in the education of young children must be encouraged and actively supported.

Funding of Australian preschool education

As indicated earlier, the Commonwealth Government makes no contribution to preschool education funding other than targeted funding for preschool services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders.

The Commonwealth Grants Commission provides the most consistent data on expenditure on preschool education by the states and territories. The move to accrual accounting by the Australian Bureau of Statistics has meant that the Commonwealth Grants Commission has had to estimate expenditure by the states and territories for the 1998-99 year, based on trends over previous years.

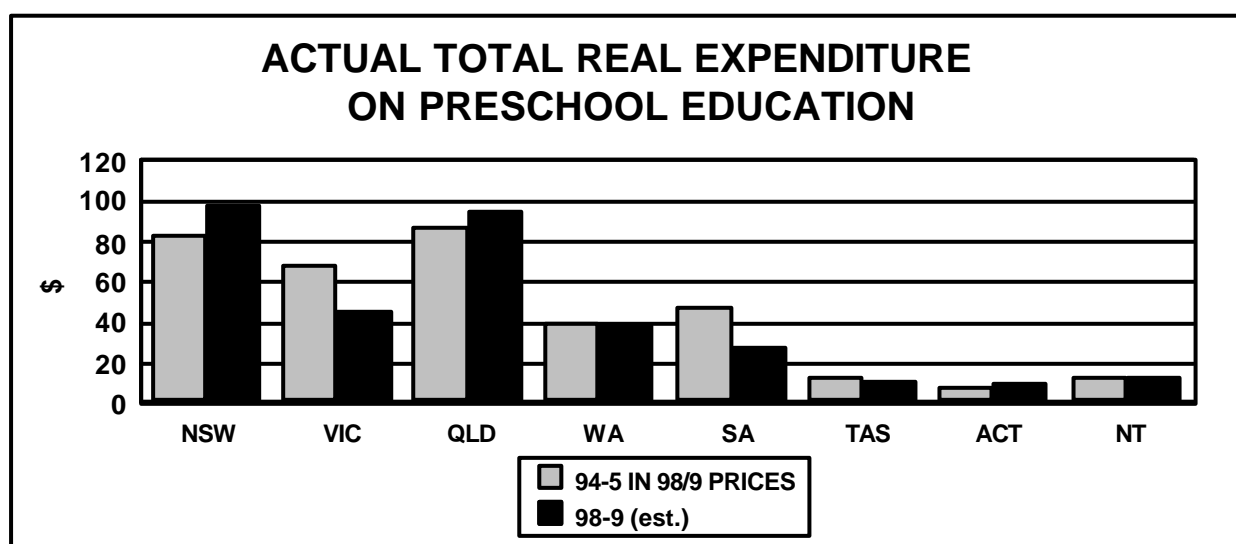
This means that the latest figures require some caution, but if they do reflect the ongoing trend then they are very disturbing.

Total expenditure on preschool education

On the basis of the estimated trends data for 1998-99, total expenditure on preschool education across Australia increased by 1.5% in money terms, from \$331.94 million to \$336.93 million, between 1994-95 and 1998-99. Within that total picture, expenditure fell in South Australia by 37%, Victoria by 26.1% and Tasmania by 12%.

These figures do not take inflation into account. When the data is considered in real price terms (ie estimated 1998-9 prices) which does factor in inflation, the picture is worse.

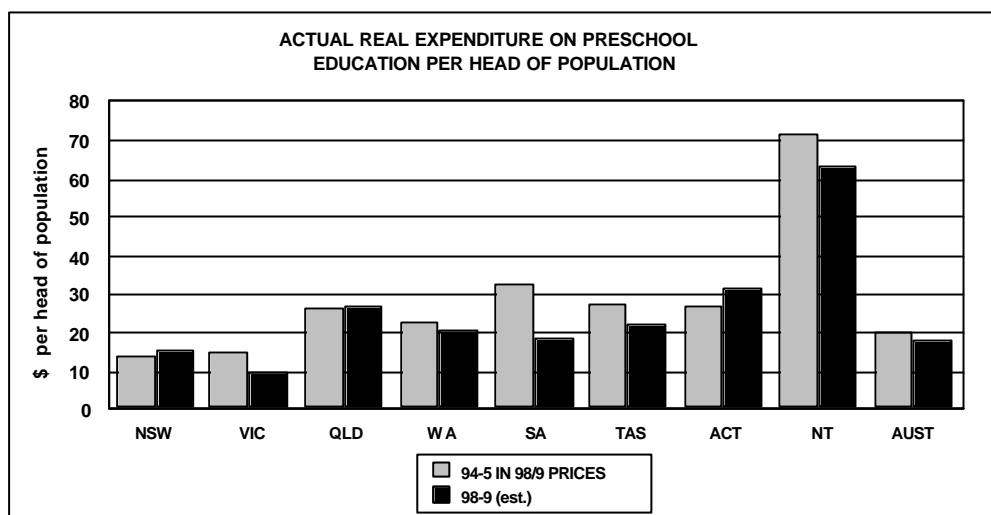
If the Grants Commission's estimates for 1998-99 are fairly accurate, total expenditure on preschool education across Australia would have fallen by an estimated 6.2% between 1994-95 and 1998-99 in real terms. These falls occurred in five of the eight systems.



Source: CGC 2000 Update ABS 1350.0

Expenditure per head of population

Trends in total expenditure do not take into account any demographic changes which may have occurred during the period.



Source: CGC 2000 Update ABS 1350.0

The Grants Commission also provides data on expenditure per head of population. This is a useful indicator because it takes population growth into account, but is not the same as expenditure per preschool student.

Between 1994-95 and 1998-99, expenditure on preschool education per head of population across Australia is estimated to have fallen in money terms by 2.7%, from \$18.37 per head to \$17.87 per head. Expenditure per head of population fell in South Australia, Victoria, Tasmania, Western Australia and the Northern Territory. These figures do not take inflation into account.

If the Grants Commission estimates for 1998-99 prove accurate, then expenditure on preschool education per head of population across Australia will have fallen by an estimated 10.1% in real terms between 1994-95 and 1998-99 in estimated 1998-99 prices. This per capita expenditure fell in five of the eight systems.

This is an extremely worrying picture, given the critical importance of preschool education to the ongoing education and life opportunities of children.

It should be noted that the Commonwealth Grants Commission data is frequently used, including by various state/territory governments, in seeking to make comments about provision of particular services including education.

The *Report on Government Services 2000* has also been released recently and some of the available data from that report is apparently at odds with the Grants Commission data. This again confirms the need, as the AEU has argued, for a strong and reliable data base to be developed nationally in relation to preschool education.

It should be noted that the latest OECD figures indicate that Australia's expenditure on pre-primary education as a percentage of GDP was 0.1% in 1997, compared to an OECD total of 0.4%. Of twenty-two countries, Australia ranked equal last.

Towards a national model of preschool education

The AEU discussion paper contains a set of wide ranging recommendations in relation to the development of a national framework for preschool education in Australia.

The most critical and first step is the achievement of a commitment from both the Commonwealth Government and the States and Territories to develop a national policy and funding framework for preschool education based on cooperation and partnership between all stakeholders. The development of national research and data bases as well as national goals and policy frameworks, and the structures to achieve them, would be part of this process.

As the AEU discussion paper argues:

That, in partnership with the states and territories, the Commonwealth Government as a matter of national urgency should assume a responsibility for preschool education to ensure that all Australian children have access to a high quality, free, public preschool education before entering school. This includes both a Commonwealth contribution to the funding of public preschool education and the development of a national framework for early childhood education.

Even to provide universal access on an unchanged policy basis would cost something in the order of \$150m. The development of a national framework that would ensure universal and equitable access to a high quality preschool education would also require additional funding for existing provision, to ensure that national standards in relation to factors such as appropriate child staff ratios, group size, support for disadvantaged students and removal of fees and fundraising requirements can be part of that framework. While a precise costing is not possible on the basis of current data, the development of such a national framework would be likely to cost an additional \$450 million or so per annum to ensure universal, high quality preschool education of at least one year prior to attending school. While this is not an insignificant sum, it is an achievable goal.

The AEU national plan concludes with the following recommendation:

That defined Commonwealth and State and Territory roles be negotiated within a new funding and policy partnership aimed at delivering universal, free, public preschool education of the highest quality for all Australian children.

That one possible framework for cooperative funding arrangements for the next triennium would be:

- C provision by the Commonwealth Government of a block grant to the states and territories, of 22% of total preschool funding, comprising:**
 - a 15 % base block grant allocated on the basis of the proportion of 4 year olds enrolled in preschool education**

- a 7% grant within the framework of a national Preschool Equity Program based on the numbers of children identified as disadvantaged or having special needs targeted both at increasing participation and at redressing disadvantage/ meeting special educational needs.
- C** a commitment by the states and territories to maintain existing funding and to increase their total funding by a minimum of 5% in each of the 3 years, with the contribution from each state/territory negotiated on the basis of the gap between their current provision and the proposed national standards /average funding levels. Of this, the states would be required to make a contribution to national projects and infrastructure.
- C** negotiated commitments to form part of the funding agreements in relation to movement towards the proposed national standards and frameworks and for the achievement of additional places and enhanced participation rates.
- C** an additional 3% of funding by the Commonwealth Government to provide for [on a cost share basis with the states/territories providing 1%]:
- a National Centre for Research in Early Childhood Development, Education and Care
 - inclusion of preschool education within the framework of early childhood education as part of the brief of a representative Education Commission
 - inclusion of preschool teachers in a re-established National Professional Development Program
 - development of Early Childhood Education networks to provide all early childhood educators with a forum for information sharing, advice, support, and innovation
 - inclusion of preschool education within the role of MCEETYA.

Conclusion

The AEU welcomes the opportunity to make this submission to the Review and would be most pleased to amplify any of the views or information contained herein.