



**AEU SUBMISSION TO THE
INDEPENDENT INQUIRY INTO THE
PROVISION OF UNIVERSAL ACCESS TO
HIGH QUALITY PRESCHOOL
EDUCATION**

2004

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We are all increasingly aware of the important impact that the early years of learning have on the ongoing education and life opportunities of young children, yet today we still have no adequate national perspective, co-ordination or funding for preschool education. The information collected within this paper demonstrates that a child's access to preschool education, the cost of that education and the policy framework within which it is delivered differs markedly across the country. Further it is apparent that whilst the majority of four year olds are accessing preschool a significant number of children are missing out on this opportunity.

Foreword to Towards a National Plan for Preschool Education (Kronemann 1998)

Even taking the more favourable figures, it is clear that approximately 10 per cent of children in most States and Territories are still not attending preschool, a matter of concern to the Committee. The seriousness of this concern is underlined by the Commonwealth's stated intention in the 1970s to provide preschool education for all.

Senate Employment, Education and Training References Committee, 1996, *childhood matters, The report on the inquiry into early childhood education.*

1. Introduction

Since those reports were written, early childhood education has received significantly more attention at the national level. But in practice, far too little has changed, and the comments made six to eight years ago are still relevant today.

Australia's obligation is to work to ensure the wellbeing of all children in Australia; that their rights are respected; they are physically and emotionally healthy; safe and secure; socially engaged; and not living in poverty. There is now almost universal recognition of the fact that investment in quality public education during the early childhood years reaps significant long term benefits for children, their families and the community.

The Independent Inquiry is underpinned by a commitment to equity and the belief that all children in Australia should have access to a high quality free public preschool education. The AEU initiated the Inquiry because of our concern about the children who continue to miss out on such access.

The value of early childhood education is not just in setting the foundations for cognitive, physical, emotional, social and language development. It is often essential in terms of the detection of impediments to learning, which if not attended to could affect a child's learning potential for the rest of their life.

It is AEU policy that all children in Australia should have equitable access to free, public, high quality preschool education for *at least* one year prior to attending school. This is recognised to be a minimum entitlement, in the context of trends reported by the OECD (OECD 2001).

Discrimination and barriers to children's participation in education and other social and cultural structures must be identified and addressed. A commitment to equity requires a national policy framework which ensures that no Australian child is disadvantaged because of the state or territory or location in which they live, or because of their family circumstances.

All education systems should have as their objective the achievement of participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in early childhood education and have an obligation to provide for the intellectual, cultural, social and emotional development of young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, recognising that central to learning for Aboriginal children is a focus on identity and self-determination.

Preschool is a vital component of the education continuum and specific strategies are required to ensure that the links between preschool and school education are strong and supported. It must be an integral part of the early childhood education offered by a high quality, properly resourced system of public education.

Quality early childhood education is characterised by appropriate child-teacher ratios and group sizes, appropriately qualified and trained teachers and education workers, and enriching, well equipped, caring and secure environments in approved and accredited locations, all of which should be defined and enforced by regulation. It should be coordinated and delivered by qualified early childhood teachers in developmentally appropriate, educationally sound, and culturally inclusive learning environments.

Quality preschool education actively engages parents in the expanding development of their children, in acknowledgement of their critical role, rights and needs in caring for and educating their children.

A quality preschool education reflects a belief in the uniqueness of childhood by respecting children as they are now and who they are right now.

2. Term of Reference 1:

The degree to which Australia is successful in ensuring that all children in Australia have equitable access to a high quality free preschool education.

Australia still has no national commitment to ensuring that all children have equitable access to high quality preschool education, irrespective of their backgrounds and where they live.

Across Australia, there are innumerable examples of wonderful preschool education programs and often extraordinary efforts to ensure that children are provided with equitable access to high quality education. As the Inquiry itself will have seen, across the country there are dedicated, highly professional teachers and educators who are in many cases finding creative ways to try and overcome the barriers and resource deficiencies which serve as obstacles to their efforts.

As the recent OECD report on Australia noted:

The review team was impressed with the level of expertise across the spectrum...and particularly amongst the teachers and other adults who work with children. There was considerable reflection on, and commitment to, quality services in the settings selected for the review team visits. In every setting, the eloquence and self awareness was notable, with staff with all levels of training, explaining what they do, why they do it and reflecting on what needed to be done. At the same time, staff 'at the front line' working with children and families are often working under pressure to deliver a quality programme for children. (OECD 2001a)

Most states and territories have a commitment to ensuring that all children have access to preschool education, at least in the year prior to entering school. However, different government policies mean that access to a high quality public preschool education is not equitable and is currently determined by location and all too often, by family circumstances.

Determining who is missing out is problematic given the inconsistency and unreliability of available national data.

Across Australia, around 83.5% of children attended preschool in the year prior to school in 2002-03. It is worth noting that participation rates have been increasing, as have actual enrolments since 1999, despite a fall in the number of 4 year olds in Australia. (SCRCSSP 2004, Kronemann 2004).

On this data, it is clear that more than 40,000 children did not access preschool education in the year prior to school.

Definitions of preschool education differ from state to state, and participation rates are calculated on the basis of the 4 year old population, notwithstanding the fact that children may be aged 3 or 5 in their preschool year.

This is likely to mean that the participation rate is overestimated.

When 2002-03 preschool enrolments are compared with 2003 enrolments in the preparatory or reception year of school (year 1 and the prep trial in Queensland), the participation rate would be 79.2%. (SCRCSSP 2004, ABS 2004)

This would suggest that more than 55,000 children missed out on a preschool education in the year before school.

Participation rates vary considerably across the states and territories, from 61.9% in NSW to 101% in Queensland. (Kronemann 2004)

About 17% of younger children (3 year olds) also attended preschool in 2002-03. In NSW, Queensland and South Australia younger children are funded to attend preschool

education. In the ACT and Northern Territory some younger children are eligible to enrol, including Indigenous children. Some may also enrol in limited circumstances in Tasmania and there is a small early entry program for Indigenous students in Western Australia. No younger children are funded in Victoria.

The participation data informs us that children are more or less likely to be enrolled in preschool education in the year before school on the basis of where they live. In addition, location determines whether 3 year olds will be funded to attend, or not.

With no real certainty about the number of children missing out on a preschool education, the data is even less reliable in relation to who is missing out.

Some things are, however, fairly clear.

Commonwealth policies in relation to Indigenous Education recognise that the participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in preschool education is a critical objective. Some Commonwealth IESIP funding is provided but there is a general view that the participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children needs to be increased. The participation rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children remains significantly lower than that of other Australian children. In most but not all systems, 3 year old Indigenous children are entitled to enrol in preschool education. If all 3 and 4 year old Indigenous children were entitled to participate, then on the basis of the SCRCSSP data, some 12,300 children missed out on this opportunity in 2003-03. The National report to Parliament on Indigenous Education and Training indicates that some 13,160 children are missing out on preschool education. (Kronemann 2004)

The reasons for this lower participation rate are complex. They include the impact of poverty in affording access; lack of transport; lack of integrated services; lack of Indigenous staff; and also a perception that some services are not culturally sensitive and/or are providing culturally inappropriate programs.

The data available in the Report on Government Services also indicates that children from non-English speaking backgrounds are substantially under-represented in preschool education, relative to their representation in the community, across all jurisdictions for which there is data. (SCRCSSP 2004)

Children with disabilities are reported to be under-represented in every preschool system for which data is available with the exception of NSW and South Australia. (SCRCSSP 2004).

Children in rural and remote communities are also missing out, at least in Queensland and the Northern Territory. (SCRCSSP 2004) The Northern Territory Department of Education, for example, has estimated that some 2400 children in the Northern Territory are missing out on preschool education, notwithstanding efforts by the current Government to extend services, eg through the mobile preschool program.

No data is maintained on the socio-economic background of children who miss out on preschool education. There is however a considerable body of research that suggests that children from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to miss out. (Kronemann 1998)

Access to preschool education cannot be described as equitable when participation varies across systems and when, across Australia, it is clear that some groups of children within our community are more likely to be missing out.

Children who do attend a preschool setting are not necessarily provided with equitable access to high quality provision. In discussions with teachers, parents and early childhood organisations across Australia, the most frequently mentioned element of a quality preschool education was access to a qualified early childhood teacher. Not all programs described as preschool programs include a qualified teacher.

In NSW, all 4 year old children attending childcare are the basis for determining the preschool participation rate. Both child care and preschool settings are required to have a qualified teacher but only if there are at least 30 children enrolled. This means that many children are accessing programs that are not planned and delivered by qualified teachers. In other systems too, early childhood teaching qualifications are desirable rather than mandatory, and while children will be taught by teachers, they will not necessarily have early childhood qualifications.

There are other barriers to quality provision, many of which relate to inadequate resources. Group sizes, for example, are often too large to ensure that quality education can be guaranteed. Children with special needs are often not catered for adequately, and in some cases are able to attend for only the half the time that other children do, because of a lack of support.

Pre-service teacher training does not necessarily include Aboriginal Studies and Torres Strait Islander Studies, and existing staff often lack sufficient access to appropriate professional development.

Such barriers to quality will be addressed further in the next section.

3. Term of Reference 2: The current barriers that prevent all children from accessing high quality preschool education and challenges that need to be addressed.

Lack of national commitment

Australia has no national commitment to universal access to high quality preschool education, despite the recommendation of the 1996 Senate Inquiry, that there should be 'universal provision, across the range of early childhood settings, for the year before a child enters school'. (Senate Employment, Education and Training References Committee, 1996)

The current Federal Government has argued that preschool education is the responsibility of the states and territories. Unlike schools or all other sectors of education, the Government has shown little apparent or at least active interest in preschool education. The recent consultations around the development of a National Agenda for Early Childhood were predicated on not altering the responsibilities of the Commonwealth and state/territory governments. The outcomes to date have provided little of relevance to preschool education.

Despite the renewed interest in early childhood, in reality preschool education at the national level is all too often invisible, seeming to fall between childcare and other services on the one hand and the beginning of compulsory schooling on the other.

Lack of national funding commitment

Preschool education is badly under-resourced in Australia, relative to the commitment made by other countries. Compared to the OECD average expenditure of 0.4% of GDP, Australia spends 0.1%. As a relatively wealthy country, Australia is one of the four lowest spending of 36 countries on preschool education for children aged 3 years and older. (OECD 2003)

Moreover, the OECD average expenditure from public sources is 82.7%, with 17.3% from private sources (the latter including subsidies paid to educational institutions from public sources). In Australia, by contrast, only 60.7% of expenditure came from public sources.

This national under-resourcing of preschool education underpins many of the barriers that currently prevent universal access to high quality preschool education. Within it, different systems are providing different levels of commitment to preschool education, leading to inequities in the cost to parents and the level of support and resources provided to services.

The Commonwealth Government ceased funding in 1985 and now provides no funding for preschool education, outside some support for Indigenous Education. The failure to make a resource commitment links to the lack of policy leadership at a national level.

Lack of national structures

However good provision may be in particular states and territories, from a national perspective, current provision of preschool education is inconsistent, fragmented and uncoordinated. There is no national policy, no national infrastructure to provide the basis for planning and no coherent strategies to ensure that all children in Australia can exercise their right to a free, public, high quality preschool education. Nor are there minimum standards for preschool provision.

As already indicated, there is not even an adequate national research base to be able to determine how many children are missing out and why. The current structures lack either the capacity or the will to ensure that both problems and solutions can be systematically shared. Good programs at best transfer from system to system on an ad hoc basis.

There are no structures to bring stakeholders, including governments, parents, teacher unions and relevant community groups together, to assist in national planning.

Structural inconsistencies

In six of Australia's eight systems, preschool education is clearly recognised as part of the public education continuum. It is administered, staffed and funded by the Education Department and preschool education is usually part of the school or staffed by Education Department teachers and there are increasingly moves towards co-location where this has not been the case. Teachers can move between education levels and particularly in co-located settings, are able to share information, experiences and resources across preschool and the early years of primary schooling. Children too are able to share activities, resources and equipment. This includes 'buddy' systems and other educational experiences with older children as well as access to specialist teachers and resources. In a number of systems, notably Tasmania, the ACT and the Northern Territory, the moves to greater structural integration have included the co-location or even integration of community childcare facilities with schools, or on school sites. Whilst as yet generally less fully developed in many settings, this too has created new opportunities for social and educational cooperation. For parents of younger children, it has created an opportunity to become part of the school community and to enable the needs of differently aged children in the family to be brought more easily together.

In addition, many co-located settings are increasingly moving to encourage other early childhood services onto school sites; health screening services, play groups, Parents as Tutors and the like. Resource and structural barriers do however pose challenges for the development of schools as community hubs.

Victoria and NSW are the exceptions, in different ways. In NSW, there have been some moves to increase public preschool provision, and by the end of the year there will be 100 public preschools that are linked to government schools. However the vast bulk of preschool provision in NSW falls under the Community Services Department, regulated by the same mechanisms which regulate childcare, requiring a qualified teacher only in larger settings and with limited links to schools. Community preschools in NSW have faced substantial resource pressures, with their funding effectively frozen for some years.

In Victoria too, preschool education is still the responsibility of Human Services and again, outside some particular programs, there are few links to schools. Programs offered through child care settings are less generously funded by the Victorian Government than those in stand alone preschools. Victorian regulations do require funded preschool programs to have a qualified teacher. However, the lack of salary parity with teachers in Victorian schools has ensured a growing pressure on preschool teacher supply.

In both systems, teachers in standalone preschools face enormous workload pressures arising from administration and accountability requirements. For many, these include both the workload and insecurity that come from being employed by a committee of management which turns over each year.

The move in Queensland to introduce a full time preparation for school year, with a play –based curriculum, has been cautiously welcomed by the Queensland Teachers Union as one that could benefit children in Queensland who have until now been offered one year less schooling than is provided in all other states and territories. Major issues identified in the current trial include teacher aide time, class room space and class sizes. This fulltime year will however replace the current sessional /part time preschool education offered in Queensland state schools. Current provision for younger children, through Creche and Kindergarten settings, allows for only limited numbers of children and attracts a fee for parents. There is considerable concern that, together with the proposed change of entry age, many children in Queensland could miss out on a preschool education experience prior to their preparatory year (ie up to the age of 5 ½ years) unless additional resourcing is provided to enable new arrangements to be made for preschool access.

In three systems - Tasmania, ACT and South Australia – other early childhood services, such as child care, have been moved into the same Department as education, in an effort to reduce the barriers. Local feedback indicates that this has been of considerable assistance, even where the creation of different sub-units has made the connections more difficult than they need be.

Fragmented educational programs

The issue of transitions for young children is recognised as being of considerable significance in ensuring their educational success and wellbeing.

As the authors of *100 Children Go to School* argued:

The historical divide between preschool and school demands bridging so that early education is reconceptualised as a period of time spanning 3-8 years. (Hill et al, 1998)

Increasingly, curriculum frameworks are being developed which try to develop a more seamless educational approach, such as the Tasmanian Essential Learnings framework for birth to 16 years, in which Essential Connections provides the focus for the birth to 5 years. The intention remains to provide a play-based curriculum and not to impose the perceived greater ‘formality’ of primary schooling; if anything, there is a desire to ‘push up’ rather than to ‘push down’. However these efforts in various systems are being made with no national framework and are not consistent across even those systems which do have structural links between preschool and primary education.

In states which have continued to make Community/Health departments responsible for preschool education, there is little evidence of any serious focus on the issues around developing a more seamless educational program or indeed, a concern about the barriers that transition can create for young children. To the extent that transition programs, or networks of early childhood educators, exist in those systems, they are largely dependant on the goodwill and efforts of individual staff and settings. Some limited programs have been developed.

Differences in age of entry, program objectives and even the names of particular year levels have long been recognised to create disjunctions and confusion for families

moving interstate, and often with considerable detriment to children's educational progress. Consultations with parents around the country have indicated that this is an issue of considerable concern to many families. The AEU supports the Senate Inquiry's recommendation to move to greater consistency (Senate Employment, Education and Training References Committee, 1996). It is recognised, however, that moves to greater consistency of nomenclature and starting ages are highly complex and would take considerable additional resources and time to achieve. The difficulties of having a half cohort as a result of change to the entry age, for example, will be felt in Western Australia for many years to come.

Cost barriers for families

Across Australia, different government funding policies mean that access to a quality public preschool education is not equitable, and is currently determined by location and, in some states, by family circumstances.

Fee structures in those two states which do not support and resource preschool as part of the education system reflect a far higher reliance on user pays, which disadvantages families with lower socio-economic backgrounds. In NSW, for example, community organisations and providers estimated that families would be paying \$30 on average for a full day session – or \$60 per week for an average length program. In Victoria, the state average was around \$145 per term, or about \$14-50 per week, but suggestions are that metropolitan rates would be closer to some \$165 per term. Even with fee concessions available to some families (eg Health Card holders) these are significant burdens for families to carry, especially for low income families.

Parents and teachers in the ACT reported that a considerable number of NSW families sought to enrol in ACT programs each year, because, we were informed, of the cost and the perception that the ACT offered high quality programs.

In other states, parental contributions are restricted to voluntary fees and fundraising. Many parents across the country indicated their awareness of the inequities that exist between systems in terms of the costs imposed on parents. There was a general perception that these differences were not fair.

However, even these relatively modest requirements can still impose too much of a burden on poor families. In the ACT, the introduction this year of a base operational grant to cover the cost of insurance and cleaning, for example, has been strongly welcomed as a measure which will help to reduce the pressure on families and to enable families to focus fundraising efforts more on the educational program rather than on meeting basic operational costs. Cost pressures for families go beyond fees however. A child may not attend, for example, because the parent is unable to supply fruit, or lacks money for excursions. Families suffering crisis, such as homelessness, illness or the impact of substance abuse, require additional supports if children's access is to be ensured.

One of the biggest barriers for families outside fees and charges is the issue of transport. Transport barriers exist in both metropolitan and rural or remote areas. Parents with no

access to transport are unable to bring their children to the centre, or are reliant on neighbours or friends when they were available to provide the transport. In a number of Indigenous centres, the provision of a bus was seen as essential by both staff and parents in ensuring children's access. Co-location with schools and/or childcare services assisted parents in making arrangements for their children of various ages.

In Tasmania, some child care services provide bussing services to a range of neighbouring schools so that children can attend preschool programs.

In the Northern Territory, transport difficulties affect not only the accessibility of preschool but also access to other early childhood services, such as screening services. For example, even where children are referred by a school nurse, they have to travel to Darwin to see eg a speech therapist.

Conversely, other parents are driving considerable distances in order to provide affordable preschool access for their children.

Preschool education should be free for all children and families, with additional supports provided where there are other barriers to access.

Access for children with special education needs

Across Australia, there are considerable concerns about the level of resourcing provided to meet children's special needs.

Children from non-English speaking backgrounds, or for whom English is a second or even fourth language, are often provided with insufficient or no support. There are too few Indigenous teachers and educators across Australia, who can where appropriate provide language support, links with communities and help to ensure that programs are appropriate in order to provide for the intellectual, cultural, social and emotional development of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

The support provided for children with disabilities is seen as seriously inadequate across Australia. Where screening and/or access to early intervention has not been provided, children suffer disadvantages as they enter their preschool education. Levels of support provided during the preschool year are generally seen to be inadequate and group sizes are not often adjusted to account for children's special educational needs which require additional support. In some cases, children are attending for half the time because support is provided only to that extent.

In order for students with additional educational needs to participate in a full educational program it is essential that appropriate, and in many cases, additional resources are made available including: access to specialised multidisciplinary services; professional support staff; trained teachers aides/assistants; professional development; and appropriate industrial support. Additional resources should be maintained at levels commensurate with the needs of the child.

**4. Term of Reference 3:
The roles that the Commonwealth and State/Territory
Governments should play in ensuring universal access to
preschool education.**

While education is primarily a responsibility of the states and territories, the Commonwealth Government 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 TAFE 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 current position in relation to the Commonwealth's failure to provide funding for preschool education is, as the AEU's 1998 discussion paper noted, a sad step backwards. Following the recommendations of the Australian Pre-Schools Committee in 1974, the Commonwealth Government proceeded to support and extend both preschool and child care services. The current funding situation arises from a decision in the May 1985 Statement of Initial Savings Measures, to terminate Commonwealth funding support for preschools in the states and territories for the end of 1985. The decision to abolish block grants to the states saved the Commonwealth some \$33m per annum at that point. The Commonwealth does continue to provide some funding for preschool services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

The failure of the Commonwealth Government to maintain a similar responsibility in relation to preschool education is inconsistent with this general pattern. Apart from the shortage of resources available to ensure universal access to preschool education, the current situation has exacerbated fragmentation and lack of coordination. The reintroduction of a shared Commonwealth commitment to the resourcing of preschool education underpins efforts to ensure equity of access, redress of disadvantage and greater national consistency.

- The Commonwealth and state and territory governments must clearly affirm a commitment and active priority to provision of universal access to at least one year public preschool education for all children in Australia.
- A national plan must be developed for preschool education by the Commonwealth Government in partnership with the states and territories, the AEU and other relevant stakeholders.
- Defined Commonwealth and State and Territory roles should be negotiated within a new funding and policy partnership aimed at delivering universal, free, public preschool education of the highest quality for all children in Australia.
- The Commonwealth Government should provide general recurrent funding to increase participation and quality via funding agreements which also require

maintenance/enhanced effort by the states and territories and incorporate agreed targeted outcomes.

In addition, the Commonwealth should fund a national targeted equity program to guarantee equitable access and to redress educational disadvantage.

A more detailed model is outlined in the AEU policy.

- The Department of Education in each state and territory should be the single agency responsible for preschool education in each system. This is currently the case in most Australian systems in whole or in part and reflects the OECD trend towards closer cooperation between preschool and compulsory education.
- The development of a national framework for preschool education should be coordinated through MCEETYA and DEST, who can carry the coordination of the whole of education into the cross-portfolio national agenda planning and structures as appropriate.
- A national infrastructure should be developed by the Commonwealth and states and territories in partnership under MCEETYA/DEST auspices, including national education advisory structures, research capacities, and national programs eg professional development for early childhood educators.

5. Term of Reference 4: Initiatives that would guarantee all children do have access to a high quality preschool education.

The previous section has outlined the way forward in two key initiatives:

- The development of a national commitment to universal and equitable access to free, high quality preschool education
- The acceptance by the Commonwealth of a shared responsibility for the funding and planning of preschool education.

The AEU Early Childhood Policy, adopted in 2003, outlines a range of initiatives and policies that would inform the development of high quality, equitable and universal preschool services, including particular targets for groups sizes and other standards.

This submission highlights only some of those proposals.

- A national plan must be developed for preschool education by the Commonwealth Government in partnership with the states and territories, the AEU and other relevant stakeholders.

Such a national plan for early childhood education would include:

- national goals and a policy framework for preschool education within an overall perspective on early childhood provision;
 - minimum national standards and targets for preschool education consistent with good educational practice;
 - strategies which enhance the quality of teaching and the status of the profession in relation to preschool/early childhood education, including qualification standards, professional development and equitable remuneration.
- Priority must be given to the achievement of participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in early childhood education for a period similar to that for all children in Australia. In remote localities specific attention should be given to the provision of early childhood education to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

Achievement of this objective requires specific strategies that include the following:

- Ensure staffing policies give priority to appropriately qualified Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are enrolled;
- Adopt measures to include and appropriately remunerate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members delivering cultural programs;
- Provide professional development activities in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural awareness and counter racism for all staff;
- Appropriate and sensitive cultural orientation to work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children is a prerequisite for all workers in all children's services;
- Adopt teaching practices which recognise, value and utilise the student's first languages; and Aboriginal English/Kriol and Torres Strait Islander Kriol;
- Provide environments in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents feel welcome and encouraged to be involved in the education program;
- Adopt practices which maximise the co-ordination of early childhood education programs with health services and nutrition education programs; and
- Ensure that the delivery of care and education must be culturally inclusive of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander pedagogies.

- Strategies must be developed to ensure that all workers in early childhood education are appropriately qualified for the roles and tasks that are performed in the settings in which early childhood education is provided.

This includes both pre-service training and access to professional development.

Immediate priorities include:

- Ensuring that pre-service teacher education programs include significant and mandatory units in the areas of Aboriginal Studies and Torres Strait Islander studies.
 - Providing professional development in the areas of Aboriginal Studies and Torres Strait Islander Studies.
 - Funding and supporting networks of early childhood educators to ensure that information, strategies, experiences and resources can be shared and educational innovations disseminated.
- While this submission has argued that priority be given to provision of universal access to *at least* one year public preschool education, in the face of the current under-resourcing of preschool education and the number of children who are missing out. However, policy should be developed to extend such access to two years, consistent with the 2001 OECD Thematic Review report's finding that the overall OECD trend is aiming to give all children at least two years of free publicly funded provision before beginning compulsory schooling. States and territories currently offering access to more than one year of preschool must at least maintain this existing provision.
 - The AEU supports the 1996 recommendation of the Senate Employment, Education and Training References Committee for the establishment of a National Centre for Research in Early Childhood Development, Education and Care and urges its establishment through the Minister for Education Science and Training. One of its urgent tasks would be to establish a consistent and reliable data base on the provision of and participation in preschool education and other early childhood services.

6. Term of Reference 5:

Strategies and arrangements that would strengthen the links between preschool education, early childhood education in schools and other early childhood services.

The Inquiry will have noted the extent to which structural changes have been occurring in a number of states and territories, which include moving more preschools into schools, moving childcare onto preschool/school sites and even increasing the number of public, school-based preschools in the two states dominated by private and community provision.

Curriculum frameworks are being developed which aim to provide a more seamless education, as the Tasmanian examples indicate. Three systems have now moved all early childhood care and education services into the Education Department, howsoever named. Shared projects between health and education departments have also been developed.

These developments have been strongly supported by teachers and parents who have experienced the benefits of integrated or co-located services for children, and for their families.

Preschool education is a vital part of the education continuum and national policy frameworks and structures should be framed within an overall perspective on early childhood education. The importance of the link between the provision of preschool and school education cannot be overstated. However, effective relationships between preschool education and other services for young children are also important in ensuring the best possible opportunities are provided for children and families.

Where the establishment of co-located or integrated models of service provision is proposed, whether they be preschool/childcare, preschool/school or a combination of both, the quality and integrity of preschool programs shall not be compromised as a result of such models. Government agencies involved in the establishment of such settings must consult with the relevant stakeholders, particularly the AEU, prior to the establishment of such settings to ensure that the requirements of high quality preschool provision and relevant industrial conditions are met.

- The Commonwealth, in partnership with the states and territories, must investigate and make available to all systems information about existing links between early childhood education and child care, and provide models for how such links should ensure that the best possible educational practice is paramount in the early childhood education sector.
- An appropriate advisory structure should be established which includes representatives from the various portfolios and the range of stakeholders, to provide advice and input in relation to cross-portfolio issues. Such structures need to be underpinned by portfolio-specific advisory bodies where these do not exist. Early childhood education, within the province of MCEETYA, is one example.
- The funding and support of local networks of early childhood education and care teachers and workers would assist in ensuring that information and strategies can be shared and new strategies for greater coordination between services can be facilitated.

The AEU will seek to work with all stakeholders to ensure that the structures of early childhood education and children's services develop in ways which value, respect and meet the needs of children, families, teachers, workers in children's services and the Australian community.

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