



Australian Education Union

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Ms Elise Williamson
Research Officer
Senate Education and Employment Committee
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Email: elise.williamson@aph.gov.au

Dear Ms Williamson,

Re: Senate Education and Employment References Committee on ‘Delivery of quality and affordable early childhood education and care services’ and ‘Immediate future of the childcare sector in Australia’ – Questions on Notice.

I write in response to your request to provide further information to the Committee with regard to evidence presented by Ms Correna Haythorpe, Deputy Federal President of the AEU and Ms Shayne Quinn, AEU National Early Childhood Education Committee representative, at the Inquiry Hearing on Wednesday 21 May.

Senator Tillem requested information from research into the provision of ECEC in other countries, particularly those in Europe, about how Australia compares, ‘who does it best’ and how they achieve those outcomes. As you would be aware, our submission to these inquiries outlines key contemporary international research into best-practice provision of ECEC.

We would draw the Senator’s attention to the July 2013 research report, ‘A Comparison of International Childcare Systems’, undertaken by the Centre for Research in Early Childhood Education (CREC, UK) for the Department of Education (cited in our submission). The report is informed by the OECD’s *Starting Strong* international comparative work on ECEC and builds on and extends a study by the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), *Starting Well: Benchmarking early years education across the world* (2012).

The EIU study provides international comparisons of preschool provision in 45 countries using a set of agreed structural and systemic indicators associated with quality, equity, availability and affordability of EC systems, including:

- staff: child ratios;
- staff training and qualifications;
- regulation and data collection;
- government strategy and investment; and
- national preschool curriculum requirements.

Australia is ranked at 28 out of 45.

Other studies, such as those referred to in the submission to the current inquiries from the Social Policy Research Centre at the University of New South Wales, show that:

*Australia does not perform well in international comparisons of the proportion of children who participate in high quality education and care programs and in the measurement of systemic features that protect children's wellbeing. While aspects of policy and provision in Australia have improved in recent years, especially with the introduction of the NQF and other COAG reforms outlined above, there is no room for complacency. (Deborah Brennan and Elizabeth Adamson, *Financing the Future: An equitable and sustainable approach to early childhood education and care*, UNSW, SPRC Report 01/14, February 2014. p7)*

The Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth 2013 report card on the wellbeing of young Australians, shows that despite a significant improvement between 2008 and 2011, the OECD ranked Australia at 30 out of 34 OECD countries (2011) in terms of access to preschool. (ARACY, *Report Card: The Wellbeing of Young Australians*, 2013. p19)

While policy frameworks differ across countries due to a range of political, economic, social and cultural factors, Australia can learn from the experience of other countries. The CREC study focuses in on 15 of the 45 countries analysed in the EIU *Starting Well* study. It shows that the highest and most consistent scores across all the key ECEC structural indicators are found in Finland, France, Belgium, Sweden, Denmark and the UK. (CREC, p17)

The most common improvement in these quality indicators is the development of a national early years strategy with significantly increased investment at government level. 12 of the 15 countries are increasing the level of investment in early education to ensure greater access, especially to socio-economically disadvantaged children, and to improve the quality of provision for all. 11 of the 15 countries have introduced greater regulation and data collection into the sector and closer monitoring of provision and access. Finland, Netherlands, Belgium, Sweden, Denmark and the UK have highly regulated early education systems, which compares favourably with countries like China, Singapore and Australia. A large majority are focussing on high quality staff training and qualifications in their early education services. (CREC, pp15-16)

The European data reveals a consistent association between the quality of preschool staff training and qualifications and later school performance (p21). Further, it highlights “a strong association between the presence and efficiency of preschool regulatory systems and data collection and later performance in PISA rankings”. (CREC, p22)

Senator McKenzie asked if there is any research evaluating the educational benefits of the shift to longer pre-school days. The benchmark of a 15 hour per week minimum level of participation in early childhood education was set by UNICEF. The setting of the benchmark was informed by a large body of international research on the importance of adequate access to high quality early childhood education in optimising children's learning and development, improving school outcomes and enhancing their ‘life chances’.

The overwhelming thrust of the research evidence, beyond the minimum number of hours required, is the fundamental importance of high quality programs. The research clearly shows the direct connection between the quality of early childhood services and long-term outcomes

for both children and society. OECD Director for Education Barbara Ischinger sums it up well:

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) can bring a wide range of benefits but the magnitude of the benefits is conditional on quality. Expanding access to services without attention to quality will not deliver good outcomes for children or the long-term productivity benefits for society. Indeed, research has shown that if quality is low, it can have long-lasting detrimental effects on child development, instead of bring positive effects. Quality costs but it is worth the investment. (OECD 2012, Education: quality standards essential to boost child learning and development, says OECD. <http://www.oecd.org/newsroom/educationqualitystandardsessential>)

Senator McKenzie also asked our views around the difficulties of attracting staff to meet the current demand, let alone any growing demand. These issues highlight the magnitude of the reforms required to bring Australia's system of ECEC into line with the international evidence on what is required for a high quality system which is accessible and equitable for all children.

Clearly there are significant challenges around meeting the demand for an appropriately qualified and remunerated stable ECEC workforce, including degree-qualified early childhood teachers, in sufficient numbers to meet mandated child to staff ratios and other requirements of a quality approach to ECEC. But the benefits are such that we remain opposed to any measures which 'trade-off' quality in the interests of saving costs, such as the weakening of educator qualifications and/or increased child to staff ratios. Such measures would have a negative impact on the quality of ECEC and the wellbeing and development of our children, as well as the long-term benefits to society and the economy.

Finally, Senator McKenzie asked if we could 'flesh out our view of sustainability' in the context of our support for an ECEC system that is sustainable.

By sustainable we are talking about a long-term approach to delivering an accessible and equitable high quality ECEC system. There have been clear benefits from a national commitment to increased investment and provision of quality ECEC. But National Partnership funding is time-limited and does not provide the long-term investment, structures and measures necessary to sustain and improve outcomes over time.

A long-term approach requires an unequivocal recognition that the social and economic benefits of quality ECEC are worth the costs; significant public investment in integrated evidence-based strategies and a public policy framework committed to funding structures and allocative mechanisms which deliver the levels of resourcing and support necessary for all children in a range of different settings to participate in high quality ECEC, including meeting the needs of those from high-needs groups.

We trust that this provides the Committee with the information it requires.

Yours sincerely



Susan Hopgood
Federal Secretary