

ASU Submission to the Productivity Commission Inquiry into Early Childhood Educators and Early Childhood Learning

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About the Australian Services Union

The Australian Municipal, Administrative, Clerical and Services Union, trading as the Australian Services Union (ASU) is one of Australia's largest Unions, and represents approximately 120,000 employees. The ASU was created in 1993. It brought together three large unions – the Federated Clerks Union, the Municipal Officers Association and the Municipal Employees Union, as well as a number of smaller organisations representing social welfare, information technology...

Today, the ASU's members work in a wide variety of industries and occupations and especially in the following industries and occupations:

- Local Government (both blue and white collar employment)
- Social and community services, including employment services
- Transport, including passenger air and rail transport, road, rail and air freight transport
- Clerical and administrative employees in commerce and industry generally
- Call centres
- Electricity generation, transmission and distribution
- Water industry
- Higher education (Queensland and South Australia).

The ASU is the largest Local Government union in Australia, and represents Early Childhood Educators employed in Local Government Child Care centres, including Long Day Care (LDC) Pre-schools, Out of School Hours Care (OOSHC), and facilitation of Family Day Care (FDC). The ASU has members in every State and Territory of Australia, as well as in most regional centres. We are a community-based organisation and take a strong view about the success of Local Government. Our members tend to live in the communities where they work:

In both urban and regional areas, the local council is often the largest single employer; therefore, uncertainty has significant economic impacts locally. The economic interests of Australian urban, rural and remote communities need a resolution¹.

Therefore, ASU advocacy extends beyond negotiated industrial outcomes for members. The ASU has a true commitment to the Local Government industry with a proud history; since 1871, of representing employees and that has a far-reaching effect on the sustainability of all communities. The ASU is a significant advocate and our issues are representative of all Australians.

¹ Joint Select Committee on Constitutional Recognition of Local Government (2013), *Final report on the majority finding of the Expert Panel on Constitutional Recognition of Local Government: the case for financial recognition, the likelihood of success and lessons from the history of constitutional referenda*, The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, p. vi, http://www.aph.gov.au/parliamentary_business/committees/house_of_representatives_committees?url=jsc/localgovt/finalreport/fullreport.pdf [Accessed: 26 Nov 2013]

Local government manages large non-user pay sections of infrastructure, is a community governance and provides a wide range of equitably accessible services for which there is no other adequate provider in a market approach. Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) and the facilities in which care is housed are a significant development opportunity and service to communities provided by Local Government; which can be complemented by Local Government co-ordination of other community health services and so on. Local Government investment alone for infrastructure that supports Child Care is of significant importance to communities and without limits to outcomes, most Local Government infrastructure supports robust communities.

Introduction

The ASU welcomes the opportunity to participate in the Productivity Commission's Inquiry into Early Childhood Educators and Early Childhood Learning.

The ASU supports the Commission's commitment to establish a sustainable future for a more flexible, affordable and accessible ECEC industry. The ASU has always represented the concerns of working families and taken the opportunity to raise community issues in consultation with government and on important public inquiries. The following issues have been raised in the past²:

1. The loss of public monies invested in infrastructure via Child Care payment to private operations. E.g. monies lost from the collapse ABC Learning (2007).
2. Child Care centres are often operated as a not-for-profit business. ECEC functions as a service that facilitates ability of parents to gain paid work. The economy benefits from increasing productivity of all working parents: productivity contributions and the outcomes of employment and all income earned by parents are re-spent stimulating the Australian economy.
3. Children that receive ECEC do better at school and employment and in their contributions to society.
4. ECEC must be both educational and supportive to families.
5. ECEC is a necessity to make investment in parental leave worthwhile.
6. Early Childhood Educators contribute to the economy in a similar/same way as teachers and provide essential education and development to young Australians. Children are better prepared for school and achieve better outcomes from their ongoing education.
7. What other similar OECD countries do is relevant to the ECEC industry.
8. Programmes that developing countries in our region have running need to be better understood.

² Asu.asn.au, Public Submissions, <http://www.asu.asn.au/resources/submissions> [Accessed: 3 Feb 2014].

In this submission we intend to address 4 issues that are relevant to the ASU and our members:

1. The contribution of Early Childhood Educators to workforce participation and to child development; and
2. Changing work patterns; and
3. Early learning needs; and
4. Government assistance.

The contribution of Early Childhood Educators to workforce participation and to child development

The contribution that is made both directly and indirectly by the provision of Early Childhood Educators to the workforce, to allow parents to return to work, is a critical and important issue.

ECEC is a core component of successfully making a return to work following parental leave. It is well known that creating the best circumstances that facilitate a return to work for working parents after taking parental leave; allowing a return to skills and the utilisation of training, as already provided by society, is a critical issue. The ASU has long since established with our members that a return to work is not possible unless quality ECEC is available. The availability of ECEC may be a full-time arrangement; secondly, it may be a part-time arrangement that supports parents returning to work full-time or part-time.

One component could be circumstances such as a child may attend Child Care formally for two or three days a week and then one of the partners rearing the children may remain at home for another or be able to access working from home opportunities and/or flexible work hours that assist.

The involvement of flexible work hours is an important issue in the return to work mix, so the carriage of the work undertaken and the utilisation of skills.

There are many examples of this within professional and paraprofessional areas as well as general certificate levels as well as degree levels across our society.

These examples include society investing substantial amounts of money to train nurses to undertake high level functions in our hospitals, but yet we need to ensure that nurses can access parental leave and then have an option to return to work with children in care.

This is an important area due to the above example where significant monies have been invested in training and skills. In addition to this return to work is seen as an ideal

opportunity for the parents involved to continue their careers, develop their options and achieve mental stimulation by participating in the workforce.

ECEC forms an important part of this opportunity to return to work and without, it is unlikely that many parents would be able to take advantage of returning to their careers and career paths; thereby, contributing substantially to society; participating in the outcomes that have been achieved by significant investment in their career paths as well as opportunities to further develop their career paths; encourage transfer of skills and also provide beneficial outcomes to society using the skills for which they have been trained.

The provision of ECEC services by Local Government is also a unique component in the development and provision of services for parents returning to work. The ASU has a strong record advocating the role of Local Government in providing ECEC services to the extent that our industrial achievements have invoked a benchmark for others to aspire to and; which, provide a higher level of recognition of employee participation in the workforce. We know from internal research with Local Government Early Childhood Educators, Local Government ECEC employment opportunities are sought after simply as a result of the higher quality service provision and resourcing available compared with the private sector provision of for-profit services, as well as explicit conditions of employment.

Child development

The development of children that participate in ECEC services is well known. It is seen as an ideal opportunity to develop communication with other children, learn respect for each other from an early age and allow mental development as well as physical development for children. ECEC services are no longer seen as an optional care arrangement; in fact, parents expect quality ECEC to prepare children for school participation. Education is an important area as it both encourages pride in the children, respect across the children and also a level of education that should be considered as part of this improvement. One area that could be considered further is the opportunity for Early Childhood Educators to be able to work with parents to assist in the development of study programs and/or simple activities that would encourage a stronger mental development and stronger participation and tolerance in areas, as necessary.

The ASU sees these early childhood development as an important educational step that should be well resourced by government and should be the subject of expert participation by All stakeholders.

Success or failure to meet current and future needs of ECEC in Australia, particularly given changes to work patterns and early learning needs, will be dependent upon ECEC affordability and government assistance. The current arrangements for ECEC services have been developed over many years; however, in fact, it is relatively in the short

term. ECEC services have been developed across Australia by way of substantial roll out of Child Care services during the 1970s, under both Whitlam and Fraser federal governments.

Historically, Child Care services have been available throughout Australian communities dating back to the Local Government era in the mid-1930s when Child Care was provided by Councils to assist parents obtain a break, allowing parents to seek work and also provide activities for children that may not normally have been affordable for parents; especially during the era of the Great Depression. In particular, services were well provided by councils in the inner city areas of Sydney where housing was relatively basic. Historical Child Care services have been provided continuously by Local Government as assistance to the community over many years. In the post-war era and for parents that could afford to send children to kindergarten, more formal and sophisticated Child Care services were rolled-out and other subsidised fee for services began to be run by Local Governments. However, the support was not always possible equitably and children of lower income areas came to be not as well prepared for the formal opportunities at primary school.

Changing work patterns

Changing work patterns are critical as Australia grapples with the global economy and the ECEC needs to be relevant to the way that people work. The issue of work pattern is particularly relevant to shift workers or other workers whose hours are unpredictable. In particular, ambulance officers, police officers, fire brigade workers and others that simply can't pack up and go home when the time clock chimes 5:00 p.m. There are other areas in our society where people can and do leave on time and that should be seen as part of that offset.

The issue of flexibility at work is an important one and one receiving more interest. The ASU recently worked with the Local Government Managers Association and the Australian Centre of Excellence in promoting specific areas such as workplace flexibility for parents to be able to exercise as part of an encouragement to retain and encourage longer term workplace participation by Local Government workforce. The research was undertaken for a number of reasons; to maintain the quality of the industry, ensure that workers continue to utilise their skills and thus the prerequisite training for them to undertake their tasks becomes cheaper the longer that they remain the job. (E.g. An office worker that may take 3 years to train up to a particular skills level, if they can be kept in the workforce for 20 years as opposed to ten years, it becomes cheaper to have trained that particular worker in the first place.)

Early learning needs

Children in ECEC require assistance to notice any early learning needs that may be required and what can be provided by special needs programs.

The ASU has concerns with alterations to Literacy, Numeracy and Special Learning Needs (LNSLN) programs – special needs programs – being centralised under particular areas and zones as opposed to being operated by individual councils and other ECEC organisations; which provide a close to the ground fit for parents’ Early Childhood Educators and ECEC providers, to be able to access efficiently. We see the need to preserve an existing role being played by Local Government where private operators do not; also, a greater role in co-ordination of services. The for-profit motive in the provision of LNSLN educational services leads to a short-fall and drop of in community accessibility.

ECEC affordability and government assistance is an important issue for consideration. At this stage, we have parents that would, have their children attend school and school receive full-time supervision during school hours; however, a child a few months younger than that or a year younger does not receive the same sort of support from society by way of formal education.

One way that this could be thought about clearly is to provide a specific educational component to children above the age of three, either as part of the current formal early learning centres (Pre-school/kindergarten arrangements) or use ECEC services specifically designed to prepare children for school; also, to provide that higher level of education that is required. Steps by the previous government to create early learning centres was an important assistance and an important issue; however, the ASU believes there is a widespread need for discussion and involvement with a larger group of players to deal with the issue of rolling out specific educational level initiatives. This may well be best served at a department level as opposed to a political level and bringing those issues forward.

Government assistance

Government assistance in the provision of Early Childhood Educators services should be seen not just in the above context of allowing parents to return to work, but must also be seen as being part of a provision in preparing children for development in society and further steps in education. We note that a number of developing nations in our region already provide educational services to children in their society, no matter their income bracket or standard of living or socioeconomic background, from the age of 3 onwards. The areas in countries such as Cambodia and others have been looking at

these steps and there needs to be greater consideration given in Australia to extending the ECEC framework to below the current age of 5 and down to 3 years and provide both a combination of respite for parents as well as government assistance by way of ECEC.

Government assistance should not be seen as an opportunity to place money in the hands of ECEC providers, but should be seen as a measured tool against outcomes of early childhood education, development and ensuring that high quality services are provided as opposed to a simple child-minding service.

The ECEC industry and framework needs the capacity to ensure satisfactory transitions to school, particularly for vulnerable and children at risk.

This is an important area to ensure that children receive the best education and the best learning they can prior to their transition to school. Transition to school based upon assistance in education and having all children apply or be up to a particular level prior to their attendance at primary school is an important area that would allow teachers to have a ready start for their children in primary and early years at primary school if they were aware that all children had complied to a particular educational level and had particular basic standards already in their grasp. This would ensure that teachers can spend quality time taking the entire group forward in a kindergarten or early primary school level, rather than spending time trying to bring some children to another standard and others getting a little bit bored. Linking the primary school to early education in not necessarily the physical sense of co-establishment, but ensuring a standard of compliance and education and acceptance that all children would receive a particular level education would be seen as a particularly attractive issue in preparing children for school and helping them prepare for long term educational paths. This is particularly of importance for children at risk or children that have missed out on some issues due to socioeconomic, domestic or other areas that have created difficulties for their family background. The opportunity to ensure that children receive education up to a particular level and are primary school ready is important and; whilst it may result in the necessity for government to invest in the future of this educational component, it should be seen as an overall outcome measured against a better society – a society that may have less people in prison, a society that would have more people achieving higher educational outcomes and performing at a higher level.

I think it is realised that seeing ECEC qualification is a stepping stone to teacher qualification, so a turnover of Early Childhood Educators holding certificate level three and diploma exists. Should we not be able to look at being able to give Early Childhood Educators assistance to enter formal teacher training and/or other areas such as early childhood nursing and such that require particular skills, we will continue to see attrition in the ECEC industry. We may be best off to set aside a substantial amount of positions in teaching degrees Early Childhood Learning for existing educators that have worked in the ECEC industry for a number of years. Whilst Early Childhood Educators rates of pay do need to be substantially improved, if we encouraged school leavers to go and pick up a certificate/diploma and work in the industry for 2 or 3 years at a

substantial discount off the time and monies required to become a teacher. A condensed pathway from vocational to university qualification may provide an attractive retention offer.

An investigation into the curriculum and training components that may require some additional training for Early Childhood Educators and some discounting of unnecessary components to become a teacher would be a first step. In other words, we need to encourage it to be looked at as doing an Early Childhood Educators certificate and/or Early Childhood Educators diploma and then, some years working in the industry and then to be able to complete a teachers' degree in a substantially reduced time. That may, in fact, be something they can do while studying and working as an Early Childhood Educator in block release, weekend schools and seminars and with 6 month placements in schools and/or other arrangements that would allow them to be financially well off in working in this industry. Some examples could be setting aside an arrangement for Early Childhood Educators to be able to tax free place money in the bank that they could then use to pay their way through university.

A report from the Economist Intelligence Unit³

Shows Australia overall positing on child care to be at 28, out of 48 – the report at page 6 states:

Despite wealth being a major factor, it is certainly not the only determinant. Many high-income countries, including Japan (21st), the US and UAE (joint 24th), Canada (26th) and Australia (28th), do relatively poorly. Some, such as Australia, are in the midst of major policy reforms that will probably see them climb in future rankings. But others highlight how a lack of policy attention can hinder progress: Japan has a high quality preschool programme, but does not back this up with a legal right to such education, for example (see next chapter for a further discussion on a legal right). In some federally managed countries, such as Australia or the US, where there are stronger roles for individual states, their poor overall rankings mask the fact that both host world-leading preschools. However, the availability and affordability of these vary widely, and quality is not consistent.

And with respect to 'balancing quality, availability and affordability' (p. 12):

Indeed, between the highest and lowest ranked countries, there are some surprising outcomes. Despite having a lower per capita GDP, Greece out performs both Australia and Singapore, thanks in part to significant efforts over the past decade to bolster educational requirements for preschool teachers. Chile outranks both Canada and the US, thanks to significant efforts to ensure relatively high levels of affordable preschool provision. But Chile struggles with the quality of its provision. Despite having clear eligibility criteria in place, there are limited curriculum guidelines and low average wages for teachers, for example.

³ Starting well: Benchmarking early education across the world (2012), *A report from the Economist Intelligence Unit*, The Economist Intelligence Unit Limited 2012, [lienfoundation.org](http://www.lienfoundation.org), http://www.lienfoundation.org/pdf/publications/sw_report.pdf [Accessed: 3 Feb 2014]

Conclusion

We note that in the development of the global economy for Australia to continue to make its mark and maintain its standard of living for all members of our society, we need to ensure that the ECEC industry is recognised as the foundation for education and allows our society to become more, achieve greater outcomes and have greater skills. If we are to maintain ourselves as a country that wishes to undertake higher level activities and development of skills training, new resources for our society and high educational outcomes, we must start at the basic level of Early Childhood Learning and preparing children for growth so that the educational regime is not just seen as 5 through to 18 years and on to university.

The first-steps to an educational program lie within the use of ECEC services in our society. It is important that all children, no matter their socioeconomic background, receive a good standard of education and be assisted and invest in children that are; otherwise, at risk before they get to primary school.

Alternative care models including overseas could be considered for trials in Australia.

This, I think, lies in areas that are currently being undertaken in countries that are our socioeconomic peers, such as OECD and G20 countries, as well as countries that are developing their societies, such as Cambodia, Singapore, Malaysia and China. Options worth looking at that could work within existing funding parameters for improving accessibility, flexibility, and affordability of ECEC for families with diverse circumstances.

The existing funding arrangements, no matter what we consider must be increased to keep pace and both expand the needs of our educational facilities in ECEC. The industry must not be seen as an opportunity simply for the provision of child-minding. It must be considered and must be acknowledged by government that it is part of an educational obligation and; therefore, requires substantial investment by government. This is an important issue for us to have consideration of and we need to embark upon breaking this particular link. Once society acknowledges the value of Early Childhood Educators in the work that they undertake and; secondly, what that means to Australia in the long term, the more society will accept its involvement to invest in ECEC services across the country. ECEC has an important role to play in future investment and encouraging a strong debate and arguing for quality services and advocating for parents who know it is part of an education foundation. In respect of the existing funding parameters for accessibility, affordability in ECEC for diverse family circumstances; whilst there could be some work done on this, it is relatively tinkering around the edges unless we want to go forward with improved investment.

There is no doubt that the past decade has seen a stronger education for ECEC services. However, there is much more that needs to be undertaken and the results need to be considered over a considerable period of time and acknowledge that the National Qualification Framework is a critical issue for staff that work within the

industry; also, for those that enjoy the benefit of quality services. Should the productivity commission not be willing to consider better investment in ECEC as part of the education sector, there would only be a case of seeking to reduce costs and for us to go backwards and creating inequities within our society. Investment is critical. The acknowledgement of Early Childhood Educators is also critical and the best way to undertake this is by way of recognition of their framework for education, encouraging study, financial support and other activities. The ASU sees that the national qualification for Early Childhood Educators is an ongoing component and professional development should be necessary to services as well as recognition. A competency based system that provides encourages Early Childhood Educators to undertake greater skills and build on the knowledge that they currently have.

We also see an important part in the National Qualification Framework for vocationally trained Early Childhood Educators to continue on to university or to go on to study at a substantially discounted level for those that have been in the industry for some time. Therefore, we need to look at Early Childhood Educators as an educational step in the school teachers' ladder of success so that a teacher would be attracted to go and receive Early Childhood Educators qualifications and work in the Early Childhood Educators centre at certificate level 3 or 4 and then transition to university or transition to a position where they could become a teacher in far less time than they currently have.