

INQUIRY INTO EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE SECTOR IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Organisation: School of Education, University of Wollongong
Date Received: 29 May 2025



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29 May 2025

The Director
Portfolio Committee No. 3 – Education
Parliament House
Macquarie Street
Sydney NSW 2000

Via email: portfoliocommittee3@parliament.nsw.gov.au

Re: Early childhood education and care sector in New South Wales

Thank you for the opportunity to submit feedback to this important inquiry about the early childhood education and care (ECEC) sector in New South Wales.

I am the Interim Head of School, School of Education, Faculty of the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities at the University of Wollongong, and am submitting the feedback below on behalf of the School of Education.

I wish to acknowledge and thank the following academic staff who contributed this feedback:

Professor Cathrine Neilsen-Hewett, Academic Director of The Early Years

Dr Jane Warren, Senior Lecturer, Early Years and Associate Head of Students

Dr Ken Cliff, Head of Teaching and Learning.

This submission may be published in full on the website including the names above.

With regards to the terms of reference, the feedback provided below focuses on three points:

- (a) the safety, health and wellbeing of children in ECEC services
- (c) the safety, pay and conditions of workers within the ECEC sector, and
- (g) the availability and affordability of quality training institutions for early childhood education qualifications.

- (a) the safety, health and wellbeing of children in ECEC services

There is a need for a stronger focus on safety and wellbeing in pre-service teacher education. While this is currently included in program accreditation requirements, it is quite limited in focus

- (c) the safety, pay and conditions of workers within the ECEC sector

Low pay is one of the biggest barriers to attracting and retaining an effective ECEC workforce. Low pay across the sector does not encourage people to want to remain in demanding positions when they are not being paid for the level of responsibility they have. Recommendation: Increased funding to the whole ECEC sector is needed so that trained teachers are employed for their skills and knowledge not just minimally to 'tick the box'. Costs for higher qualified staff should not be borne by families.

High staff turnover in ECEC services impacts the quality of relationships and the level of trust between educators and families. Poor working conditions and increased demands on educators in many services has led to educators leaving not just the service but the sector overall. Administrative demands on directors and leaders often mean they are employed in either non-teaching, or limited teaching roles, reducing the direct impacts they have with children and families.

The current shortage of trained ECTs impacts significantly on the sector. Recommendation: Provide incentives to encourage more people to train as ECTs.

NSW has fallen behind Qld and Vic in terms of scholarships and financial incentives to encourage people to complete early childhood degrees. Recommendation: These kinds of structural steps need to be taken to help ensure a highly-skilled, professional workforce.

School of Education
Faculty of the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities

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(g) the availability and affordability of quality training institutions for early childhood education qualifications

Re: availability of quality training institutions:

There are concerns about the content and delivery of ITE and the emergence of Graduate Diplomas that allow diploma-qualified educators to complete 4 subjects/units and receive ECT equivalency (concerns that these are being accredited through ACECQA). Recommendation: Support for these degrees poses a significant risk to the quality and skills of the ECEC workforce

There is a lack of rigour in program accreditation and the limited specifications required. Currently there are no clear structures or frameworks that govern the quality and rigour of in-service professional learning. Recommendations:

1. Accreditation of degrees does need to be more consistent, and at that level focus on quality, which includes length of time studying, credit given for diploma qualifications, guidelines around placements and an expectation of the number of subjects/units studied that focus specifically on birth – 5 years.
2. Consider having more detailed requirements comparable to AITSL accreditation processes.

A disconnect exists between workforce/sector support and demands of study. Recommendation: There is a need to introduce some level of workplace accountability to support upskilling of workforce (our experience through practicum shows this lack of support stems in part from current workforce shortages as well as workplaces that do not value or understand the value and benefits of having degree qualified staff).

Re: affordability of quality training institutions:

Costs of study are very real (especially for those upskilling). Recommendation: Consider waiving HECs fees for all birth to 5 programs.

High-quality placements are essential to the education and preparation of service and centre-ready Early Childhood graduates. Given the current crisis in the sector, universities are struggling to find sufficient high-quality placements, particularly given the shortage of qualified ECTs. Recommendation: Further structural support from governments to assist in providing high-quality placement experiences is essential if we are to build an expanded, well-prepared Early Childhood workforce

Our School of Education early childhood education programs are well-recognised as high quality offerings in the sector. I trust this feedback contributes to making actionable improvements in the ECEC sector.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you require any further information.

Kind regards

Professor Shirley Agostinho (she/her)

Interim Head of School

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