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Review of the Universal Access National Partnership

Nous Group

Submitted via email to: uanpreviwe@nousgroup.com.au

To whom it may concern,

United Voice is a union of workers organising to win better jobs, stronger communities, a fairer society and a sustainable future. As the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) union, we represent early childhood teachers, educators and directors across Australia. We have members in every state and territory working in both large organisations and smaller centres. We are proud of the work we do – educating over one million young Australians and maximising the contribution their parents make to the economy. As professionals working in centres delivering education and care every day, including 4 year old preschool programs, under the National Partnership Agreement on Universal Access, we have unique insights into the strengths and weaknesses of current and proposed policy settings.

United Voice welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback to the Review of the Universal Access National Partnership Agreement (NPA). Our members strongly believe that long term durable funding for two years of preschool before school is integral to a world-class early learning sector. They believe that a child's life chances should be shaped by their innate abilities, not where they were born or how much their parents earn. 1 in 5 Australian children arrive at school developmentally vulnerable, already behind their peers in their acquisition of basic executive brain functions.¹ Without targeted intervention, the children that start behind stay behind; but inequality doesn't have to be set by the start of school. Early childhood education is the first big step in a child's education. The evidence is clear and everyone agrees: two years access to universal early learning is an affordable, effective and achievable reform.

Thus, our members call on the Australian Government to maintain a leadership role by funding early learning reforms and embed universal access to early childhood education as an entitlement for all children that is enshrined in a National Agreement – ideally in the two years before school. A world class and future-proof education system must encompass both early learning and schools if we want to improve school outcomes and prepare children for the jobs of the future. If funding were cut or reduced, families would have increased costs and reduced flexibility. Reduced investment would also impact quality – specifically regarding building human capital – in our most effective, evidence-based program. The evidence consistently shows that, to achieve what we want to in NAPLAN, PISA, TIMMS, and lifelong learning, we need to invest early. There is a 2:1 benefit cost ratio on investing in preschool.²

Moreover, our members witness every day that right across the country the children who would benefit the most from preschool are still the least likely to be attending. Aboriginal and Torres Strait

¹ Australian Government (2016) *Australian Early Development Census National Report 2015*, www.aedc.gov.au/resources/detail/2015-aedcnational-report

² <https://www.thefrontproject.org.au/initiatives/economic-analysis>

Islander children remain under-represented in early childhood education and care services— they start early education later and attend fewer hours compared to non-Indigenous children.

Many of our members are also concerned that some states and territories continue to direct preschool funding to certain settings instead of funding all children, so that families, in particular working families, have flexibility and choice based on their individual circumstances. UA NP funding should be passed on to all settings that deliver preschool programs. It is disappointing that the review is not reviewing the specific funding and delivery arrangements in states and territories that ensure some families and children miss out.

Our members were strong advocates for the introduction of universal access – along with the National Quality Framework and both have laid the foundations of a strong early childhood education sector but there is more to do in terms of improving quality and equitable access for all children. The Australian Government should action the recommendations of the Lifting Our Game report and note our Big Steps 10 Year Policy Vision (see attached)³. In particular, our members want to draw the Government's attention to the concrete links between quality and workforce and recommendations in both the Lifting Our Game report and our Big Steps vision on this policy area.

Quality is largely determined by the workforce and the early childhood education and care sector is facing a large shortage of qualified educators and teachers and there is no national workforce strategy. Low pay and high turnover also threaten quality and government action must be taken on these issues. Recent reports from the OECD and Mitchell Institute emphatically conclude that interactions between an educator and a child, in conditions of continuity, care and trust, are the most important determinant of quality in ECEC. There is no debate: valuing children means valuing educators.⁴ The Australian Government must show leadership and funding for a national workforce strategy that addresses the low pay and high turnover of the workforce and improves the outcomes of the NP UA and high quality early learning more generally. The Australian Government also has primary responsibility for funding VET and universities and should take action in this area. Improving qualifications, training and working conditions is an essential quality ECEC policy lever. If funding is allocated to workforce policy levers via the NP UA, there needs to be flexibility for educators and teachers to access that funding to ensure the best quality outcomes for children.

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Yours sincerely



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³ Brennan, D. & Pascoe, S. (2017) *Lifting Our Game: Report of the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools Through Early Childhood Interventions*,

https://www.education.act.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0004/1159357/Lifting-Our-Game-Final-Report.pdf

⁴ OECD (2017) *Starting Strong 2017 – Key OECD Indicators on Early Childhood Education and Care*, Paris: OECD Publishing and Fox, S. & Torii, K. (2017), *Quality is Key in Early childhood Education in Australia*, <http://www.mitchellinstitute.org.au/papers/quality-key-early-childhood-education-australia/> See also Goodfellow, J. (2007) 'Childcare provision: Whose responsibility? Who pays?' *Kids Count: Better early childhood education and care in Australia*, p. 248 and Productivity Commission (2014) *Childcare and Early Childhood Learning and Inquiry Report*, Volume 2, p.310.