

Centre for Community Child Health

Delivering more equitable preschool: Submission to the review of the Universal Access National Partnership October 2019

The Centre for Community Child Health has been at the forefront of Australian research into early childhood development and behaviour for 25 years and has a commitment to supporting communities to improve the health, development and wellbeing of all children. We welcome the opportunity to contribute to the ongoing discussion about the Universal Access National Partnership. This submission has been prepared by Rachel Robinson and Professor Sharon Goldfeld, the contribution of many colleagues is acknowledged particularly Sophie Rushton, Dr Tim Moore, Lauren Heery, Dr Carly Molloy, Dr Meredith O'Connor and A/Prof Tammy Findlay of Mount St Vincent University, Canada.

Background

The Centre for Community Child Health (the Centre) is a department of The Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne, a research group of Murdoch Children's Research Institute, and an academic centre of the University of Melbourne. We draw on the expertise of world leaders in child development and health research to deliver meaningful, cutting-edge research. We specialise in translating this knowledge, so it can be readily used by policy makers, practitioners, academics and families to improve children's health, development and wellbeing.

The Centre provides internationally recognised leadership in early childhood health and development and offers 25 years' experience working with Australian families, service providers, philanthropy and governments to improve the lives of children and families. Our multidisciplinary team has comprehensive knowledge of social policy and service systems, and is connected to extensive international and national research, policy and practice networks.

We focus on creating and embedding evidence in policy, practice and service systems by:

- developing and evaluating prevention, detection, and early intervention approaches to child health within a population health framework
- conducting high quality community child health research
- providing specialist clinical services in children's developmental and behavioural problems
- driving innovation in service systems
- translating research to inform public policy, service delivery, professional practice, and parenting.

Of particular relevance to this submission, the Centre has produced a Policy Brief Series since 2006. The full series is available at:

<https://www.rch.org.au/ccch/publications-resources/policy-brief/>.

This submission has been informed by the Centre's involvement in By Five, a place based early years project in the Wimmera and Southern Mallee regions of Victoria. The Centre undertook an extensive consultation process for this project in 2018 and continues to compile consultation information and local data specific to ECEC needs and barriers in these communities. The Wimmera Southern Mallee is home to the most geographically dispersed communities in Victoria and the area faces significant challenges ensuring children can access high quality health and education services across their life course.

This submission is further informed by the Centre's involvement supporting Access to Early Learning (AEL), an evidence-based program delivered in seven sites in Victoria since 2011. AEL provides an experienced and degree-qualified facilitator with access to a small amount of funding to work with families, educators and services to promote vulnerable children's enrolment, attendance, participation and inclusion in ECEC.

The Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) is a triennial census, consisting of 100 questions completed by teachers about children in their first year of school, it reports on the percentage of developmentally vulnerable, at risk, and on track children across five key developmental areas, giving communities and policy makers a clear snapshot of children's development as they arrive at school. The AEDC provides evidence to inform, support and evaluate national priorities and policies to improve early childhood development. AEDC data and analysis (Goldfeld et al., 2015; O'Connor, O'Connor, Gray, & Goldfeld, In press) is used in this submission to highlight both the positive impact of preschool and the need for a progressive approach to address equity gaps in access, quality and outcomes.

Under separate cover, the Centre has provided input to this submission process based on research being undertaken in the Restacking the Odds project¹, with relevant information available in Molloy, Quinn, Harrop, Perini, and Goldfeld (2019).

Summary

Children's health, development and life opportunities are powerfully influenced by social determinants – the circumstances in which they are born, live, learn and grow. Poor developmental trajectories that begin in infancy often continue into adulthood and once established can be difficult and costly to change (Goldfeld et al., 2018, p. 223). When children's outcomes are limited by their social and economic situation it represents an injustice to them, a failure of the system and a cost for all of us. We need to understand the complex pathways that give rise to social inequities that prevent children and families from thriving and adopt new ways of tackling them.

Over the last decade, Australia has responded to the evidence about the importance of the early years with a series of impressive and rapid reforms. However, we are yet to realise the full potential of these reforms and it is imperative that Australian governments continue to work together, with leadership from Federal government to embed and extend the reform process. In order to achieve improved outcomes for children, we need a system of early childhood education and care (ECEC) characterised by 4 elements:

- Progressive universal ECEC entitlement: free or very low cost provision in the year before school is guaranteed for all children and the system has the flexibility and resourcing to step up to deliver equity of inclusion, quality, quantity and intensity by ensuring financial, ability, language, cultural and geographical barriers are removed.
- Public provision: Federal government leadership and policy commitment to ongoing public funding to ensure ECEC provision and quality in the year before school provides the foundation for the education continuum.

¹ https://www.rch.org.au/ccch/research-projects/Restacking_the_odds/

- Horizontal and vertical integration of funding and policy arrangements to address the fragmented investment arrangements based on jurisdictional boundaries; traditional family and gender relations; child age; and parental participation requirements.
- A strong and seamless partnership with the school education system, inclusive of workforce alignment and removal of disparate pay and conditions in order to attract, develop and retain a high quality professional workforce.

To what extent have the UANP policy objectives, outcomes and outputs been achieved?

The objective of the UANP is to “maintain universal access to, and improve participation in, affordable, quality early childhood education programs for all children”. Specifically, the purpose is to ensure that every child in Australia has access to a minimum of 600 hours per year of preschool delivered by a qualified early childhood teacher in the year before full-time school, in a way that meets the needs of families and while ensuring that cost is not a barrier.

There is rich evidence of the benefits of quality Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) and over the last decade, the flow of ideas and activity around the importance of the early years has been profound (Mahon, Bergqvist, & Brennan, 2016, p. 166). Policy-makers are aware that a comprehensive ECEC system is associated with positive developmental outcomes for children, lifelong learning, gender equality, social and cultural inclusion, and economic growth (Akbari & McCuaig, 2014; Brennan, Blaxland, & Tannous, 2009; McCain, Mustard, & McCuaig, 2011; McDonald, Moore, & Robinson, 2014; OECD, 2006). The opportunity in Australia is for ECEC to address the equity gaps that prevent some children reaching their potential.

Australia’s record in increasing enrolments in early education programs in the year before school is impressive. The Productivity Commission report on Government Services 2018², reports 90.1 per cent of children aged in the state specific year before full time schooling were enrolled in a preschool program. However, this statistic fails to report that engaging the most vulnerable families in preschool programs is a major challenge – equity gaps in participation persist despite the universal access approach and there is evidence of the need for more intensive approaches for particular groups of families and children (O’Connor et al., In press).

Australia continues to deliver ECEC programs in environments of variable quality and where some children are more likely than others to be excluded or segregated into services of lower quality (Gilley, Tayler, Nikklas, & Cloney, 2015). The fragmented policy environment preserves a situation where the intended benefits do not flow equitably to children and families, those most likely to miss out on participation in high quality services at the intensity required are those with the most to benefit.

Particular subgroups of Australian children less likely to participate or benefit from high quality ECEC programs include children from low socioeconomic backgrounds, regional and remote communities, Indigenous backgrounds, non-English speaking backgrounds, and those with a disability or special health care needs. Conversely “children from more advantaged households were more likely to receive the benefit of kinder programs before school” (Gilley et al., 2015, p. 12).

Participation issues for regional and rural children are particularly profound and the implications can be observed in AEDC Data. The following chart shows data for Victoria

² <https://www.pc.gov.au/research/ongoing/report-on-government-services/2019/child-care-education-and-training/early-childhood-education-and-care>

illustrating the (growing) gap in vulnerability outcomes on school entry between children in urban and regional Victoria from 2012 to 2018.

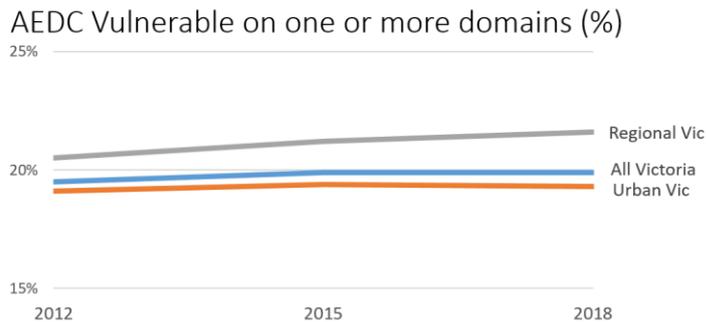


Figure 1: AEDC data retrieved from Public tables by Local Government Area (LGA) 2009-2018, available from www.aedc.gov.au

The impact of socioeconomic disadvantage is both a risk factor for attendance at ECEC services, and poorer developmental outcomes (Nicholson, Lucas, Berthelsen, & Wake, 2012). Analysis of AEDC data (Goldfeld et al., 2015) demonstrates that preschool attendance reduces developmental vulnerability across both advantaged and disadvantaged communities but despite this effect, there are still higher rates of vulnerability among children living in disadvantaged communities that attended preschool than children from advantaged communities that did not attend preschool. The highest rate of vulnerability is among children from disadvantaged communities who did not attend preschool. This analysis also found a lower proportion of children from language background other than English and ATSI backgrounds, and children from the most disadvantaged socioeconomic status (SES) communities, had attended preschool than their peers. These data are summarised in an AEDC research snapshot³.

Research examining changes in preschool participation across 3 cohorts of AEDC data suggest that the universal access arrangements, while effective in lifting overall participation, are not in fact addressing the equity gap and “provide strong evidence that the gap is in fact widening” (O'Connor et al., In press). This research suggests that of the children that did not attend preschool in 2014 (2015 AEDC data), 29.9 per cent lived in the most disadvantaged communities and 13.4 per cent lived in the least disadvantaged communities (this compares with 25.9 per cent and 15.7 per cent in 2008).

Preschool programs need to be flexible and responsive to the specific needs of children from disadvantaged communities in order to increase attendance, reduce the gap in developmental outcomes and promote better long-term outcomes. Participation rates may also increase if local service providers can more actively engage their local communities to promote the benefits of preschool and encourage children’s attendance.

In the Wimmera Southern Mallee, 2018 attendance records for one preschool setting was examined, these records demonstrated mean attendance for sessions at 80 per cent of available sessions and 75 per cent of available hours. This is well below school attendance rates for the corresponding school at 95 per cent. When families attending the ECEC setting were asked about their participation they reported that they face long travel distances and associated costs. Barriers for these regional communities relate to family vulnerability, cultural safety, transport issues, starting and finishing times, seasonal farm requirements, and illness/appointments.

³ <https://www.aedc.gov.au/resources/detail/early-childhood-education-and-care-and-the-transition-to-school>

Where there are barriers to ECEC participation, it may be necessary to provide additional resourcing beyond reducing the cost of participation. In Victoria, children referred to Access to Early Learning (AEL) experience highly complex family circumstances, with a minimum of two relevant characteristics (i.e. known to Child Protection, intellectual/physical disability, family violence, mental health issues, sexual assault, drug and alcohol abuse). High levels of vulnerability mean the provision of funding alone would be unlikely to be sufficient to sustain these children's attendance at early childhood education and care services.

A recent evaluation of the AEL program showed that children participating in AEL attended an average of 81 per cent of enrolled hours, compared to an average attendance rate of 73 per cent for vulnerable children provided with kindergarten funding alone. This pattern of attendance was sustained into kindergarten in the following year. This is a significant achievement given that without AEL, many may not have attended as much, if any, kindergarten at age three.

Success of the Access to Early Learning (AEL) program highlights the substantial support and assistance required for vulnerable children and families to access and remain engaged with quality early childhood education and care. Service providers often find it challenging to engage vulnerable children and families (McDonald, 2010) and some educators do not have necessary skills or capacity to effectively respond to and sustain their participation (Centre for Community Child Health, 2010). In addition, many vulnerable families do not have the knowledge or capacity to navigate the ECEC sector.

Important features of AEL shown to enable its success include:

- dedicated resources to identify, engage and support vulnerable children and families to access and fully participate in early childhood education
- consistent and individualised support for children that extends from kindergarten to home
- tailored support for families, including flexible funding to provide additional resources that promote kindergarten attendance and participation
- mentoring and professional learning for educators supporting vulnerable children
- trusting and respectful relationships between AEL facilitators, children, families and educators that provide the foundation for effective help and support.

In addition to the barriers faced by families, regional Victoria faces significant workforce issues, both to attract permanent staffing but also the lack of relief staff to cover absence due to illness and professional development and the professional and personal isolation faced by educators.

Universal access policy needs to incorporate flexible funding that enables regional services to lift barriers around vulnerability, transport, distance and travel costs and to develop and support local ECEC workforces.

What should the UANP target and measure, and how should data be collected and used?

A valuable framework for the UANP to target and measure progress continues to be the eight key elements of evidence based ECEC policy identified in the first OECD Starting Strong report (SSI) (OECD, 2001)

1. A universal approach to access, with particular attention to children in need of special support
2. Substantial public investment in services and infrastructure
3. A systemic and integrated approach to ECEC policy
4. A strong and equal partnership with the education system
5. Appropriate training and working conditions for staff in all forms of provision
6. A participatory approach to quality improvement and assurance
7. Systematic attention to data collection and monitoring
8. A stable framework and long-term agenda for research and evaluation

Of particular importance is to benchmark and collect meaningful data about the extent to which policy is addressing the equity gaps that characterise the existing system:

- Inequity in the quality of educational programming. For example, the E4Kids study found good evidence that Instructional Support and Classroom Organization are significantly lower in low-SES areas than high-SES areas (Cloney, Cleveland, Hattie, & Taylor, 2015). The Restacking the Odds project also found a scarcity of services meeting their benchmark for quality and that this is more pronounced for low-SES areas (Molloy et al., 2019, p. 7).
- Inequity in the availability of programs. E4Kids found the lower the socio-economic position of the community, the less ECEC space per child is available (Cloney et al., 2015).
- Inequity in participation, ensuring children from low SES communities and those in need of inclusion support experience the intensity or number of hours of quality programming known to have an impact including annual hours of participation in programs led by a qualified educator, rather than point in time enrolment data.
- That policy is addressing differential quality related to governance arrangements and geographic location.
- That there is a strengthening of partnership arrangements and breakdown of fragmentation between the pre-school and school education sectors and we are moving toward parity of qualifications, wages and conditions.

Are the current UANP arrangements efficient and effective and how could the efficiency, effectiveness and equity of UANP funding be improved?

The efficiency and effectiveness of the current arrangements could be improved if jurisdictions in Australia could redesign the system with a focus on equity and integration and without the constraints of historical funding and delivery models for ECEC.

Australian families navigate a complicated and fragmented ECEC system (Brennan et al., 2009; McDonald et al., 2014; O'Connell, Fox, Hinz, & Cole, 2016) with "no clear delineation of the roles for state and territory governments and the Australian Government" (Australian Government Productivity Commission, 2014, p. 14). This drives an uncertain policy environment with limited potential for the sector to develop the coherence, strength and flexibility to take advantage of opportunities that appear. The recent federal reforms introducing child care subsidy tackled some of the issues with the previous arrangements but prioritise workforce participation over the potential for ECEC to equalise child outcomes. This has led to policy that lacks coherence and is described as a

“mismatch between investment and opportunity in early childhood policy in Australia” (O’Connell et al., 2016, p. v).

A major concern for the ECEC sector has been uncertainty about ongoing arrangements for universal access funding and the national quality framework, a permanent, ongoing agreement is vital to provide the foundation for future improvement (Pascoe & Brennan, 2017). There is also an emphasis amongst the sector about the benefit of expanding universal entitlement to two years before school (Fox & Geddes, 2016). A high proportion of Australian 3 year olds are already enrolled in ECEC in long day care settings and there are opportunities to extend this to an entitlement model that removes labour force participation barriers for families of 3 year olds (Brennan & Adamson, 2015).

Reforms must be accompanied by targeted investment to support workforce improvement, and the incremental strengthening of minimum standards under the National Quality Framework. The skilled and professional workforce required means we need workforce policy to drive sustainability, recruitment and retention – associated with appropriate pay and conditions of early educators commensurate with the additional responsibilities resulting from the reform agenda.

The current arrangements are particularly inefficient in meeting needs in rural and regional Victoria. Universal access policy has failed to deliver the flexibility and funding needed to attract a sustainable professional workforce and accommodate the needs of regional and farming families. Some barriers to a more integrated approach to state and federal funding were addressed with the transition to Child Care Subsidy (CCS) and the ability to provide part time programs, but there is a great deal of opportunity to build a more efficient cohesive approach, especially capitalising on staffing and infrastructure in school settings.

The UANP approach needs to focus on removing barriers to the delivery of the optimum intensity and quality when it comes to rural and regional children and other children faced with barriers to participation at adequate intensity in high quality programs. An entitlement approach and more coordinated, flexible and integrated policy arrangements may be able to facilitate local solutions and sustainable local workforce arrangements. Arrangements that could assist families living in small isolated communities need to include transport and flexible models of delivery, support for partnerships with schools and shared employment models with suitable arrangements and resourcing for upskilling, support and mentoring for isolated workforces.

How does the preschool system operate across States and Territories and settings?

Victoria has a well organised system of early education in the year before full time school and this is a part of a much more complex set of formal and informal arrangements that make up the early childhood sector – consisting of informal care by family members, often unpaid grandparents, babysitting “clubs”, family day care, occasional care, long day care, preschool (called kindergarten in Victoria) and the range of public, private, community for profit and not for profit arrangements that exist to deliver the services.

Historically, Victoria’s kindergarten sector was made up of community based incorporated associations where parents employed staff and oversaw administrative arrangements. For many Victorian kindergartens, this continues to be the case but the Victorian government also supports management arrangements that bring clusters of kindergartens together under shared governance arrangements. In Victoria the historical arrangements continue to be crucial but the most significant growth in provision of universal preschool programs has been in the long day care sector.

More streamlined and joined up policy approaches would provide an opportunity to build seamless funding arrangements and avoid the cross-subsidisation issues that are created by the overlap of state and federal funding in the long day sector. While there are opportunities for greater alignment on objectives and standards, maintaining the unique characteristics of Victoria's delivery models enables the jurisdiction to build on evidence and arrangements already in place.

In Victoria, there are some cases where the relationships between schools and early education produce a seamless approach to educational programming across the two settings but this is rare. Building opportunities for more joined up approaches is fundamental for an efficient and effective future in early childhood. The involvement of schools in the governance and staffing of early years settings is an opportunity to provide more supportive and integrated approaches to a continuum of education.

Victoria addresses some barriers to ECEC participation in the year before school through the Kindergarten Fee Subsidy, where term fees are removed for families with a health care card. In the Wimmera Southern Mallee in 2016, this applied to 53.7 per cent of families (Department of Education and Training data).

Early Start Kindergarten (ESK) funding is available to include ATSI children and children known or at risk of being known to Child Protection for two years before school starting. As outlined above, Access to Early Learning funding is available to some kindergartens and this delivers resources that are targeted toward active inclusion strategies including professional development as well as flexible funding to remove barriers to participation. This approach has been found to be effective in lifting participation for families experiencing multiple barriers.

Based on your experiences, should changes be made to future national policy on preschool for children in the year before full-time school, and why? What improvements would these changes make? What works well with the current UANP arrangements?

Increasingly it is recognised that universal entitlement should be enshrined in legislation in order to achieve the potential benefits (Melhuish, 2015; O'Connell et al., 2016). Universal entitlement is best attained in combination with other evidence-based benchmarks. A principal barrier to governing ECEC through an entitlement framework is the market-based approach characteristic of regimes, such as Australia, Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom. The private nature of ECEC services in these jurisdictions makes it difficult to establish universal entitlement and to realize the possibilities of integration and the access, equity, and quality that comes with it (Adamson & Brennan, 2013; Ellis, 2016).

Universal does not mean 'compulsory', universal ECEC is voluntary for families, but entitlement means it is equitably available for all those that choose it and this means it needs to be provided free or at very low cost and with flexibility to remove barriers and encourage attendance. The definition of access needs to be expanded to mean entitlement to a minimum level of hours and quality, delivered by educators with minimum qualifications and registration requirements, and by a workforce with access to support and supervision and resources such as allied health to improve inclusion of children with special needs and remove barriers related to social, economic cultural, ability and geographic situation.

The next stage of the early childhood education and care journey requires vision and commitment. We need to move on from the historical and gendered discomfort (Findlay, 2015) about ECEC that drives a system with three tiers – childcare; early education and school education. We need a high quality system that supports children and families in a

seamless learning journey. The need for “attention to supply and demand” as well as “service infrastructure to support more inclusive integrated and responsive service delivery” in order to meet the “changing needs of children, families and communities” was acknowledged by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) in the 2009 National Early Childhood Development Strategy (COAG, 2009, p. 20). A more integrated response with certainty for the sector and the foundation for continuous quality improvement is still needed and is explored in detail in Policy Brief 25, (Cloney, Page, Tayler, & Church, 2013).

Australia has an opportunity to leverage international evidence and build on existing national commitments with a focus on equity, universal entitlement and coverage, a system of public services, and more integrated approaches embedded in professional, participatory structures, and community-based solutions.

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