May 2021

VCOSS submission to the Ten Year National Children’s Education and Care Workforce Strategy (2021-30)



The Victorian Council of Social Service (VCOSS) is the peak body for social and community services in Victoria. VCOSS supports the community services industry, represents the interests of Victorians facing disadvantage and vulnerability in policy debates, and advocates to develop a sustainable, fair and equitable society.

VCOSS welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback to the Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority’s (ACECQA) consultation into the Ten Year National Children’s Education and Care Workforce Strategy (2021-30) (the Strategy). In particular, we appreciate the opportunity to provide a free-text submission. VCOSS understands that the principal channel for stakeholder feedback to ACECQA is via a survey tool.

We take this opportunity to share with ACECQA that there is concern from VCOSS members who deliver education and care to Victorian children and their families that the survey does not allow for meaningful feedback about key issues, areas of priority, and the planning and design of the Strategy. The Victorian sector is seeking additional, rigorous consultation.

Early childhood education and care services provide vital support in building children’s cognitive, social and emotional development.

Government has a fundamental role to play in growing and supporting a skilled workforce that fosters children’s development and sets them up for success in school and life. This will need to be supported by transparency and additional investment to address significant workforce shortages, low pay and conditions, and mechanisms to improve leadership, workforce wellbeing and service quality.

There is also opportunity integrate this ten year national strategy with state and territory strategies and objectives to ensure they are aligned and complimentary.

While there are opportunities for greater collaboration between key stakeholders such as early learning providers and education and training institutions, this ten year workforce strategy is an opportunity for **government** to take a leading role in supporting a sustainable, high-quality early childhood education and care workforce.

## Professional recognition

The Commonwealth Government has a significant opportunity to improve professional recognition and support attraction and retention by improving pay and conditions.

Low wages undermine the professionalism and value of the early childhood workforce. When educators and teachers are unable to access a working wage and receive appropriate workplace and professional development support, the sector loses motivated and experienced staff to other sectors where conditions are better.

The Commonwealth’s main funding mechanism, Child Care Subsidy, is primarily a workforce participation mechanism. The Commonwealth should develop a new funding model that recognises and values a broader range of family and community needs. This should include access to a minimum benchmark of funded high quality early learning for children two years before school, regardless of parental workforce participation or meeting activity tests.

This would concurrently help drive up children’s participation in early childhood education and care **and** provide government with greater opportunity to support pay and conditions and look at funding levers to improve service quality.

In addition, there should be an intentional move away from the descriptor ‘childcare’ to education and care to reflect the important developmental role of the early learning sector in children’s lives.

VCOSS members spoke about the importance of workplace culture and the direct correlation between workplaces that actively support professional development and wellbeing of staff with increased tenure.

So, in addition to improved pay, the Commonwealth should ensure early childhood education and care providers have sufficient resources and incentive to give staff sufficient time to plan and reflect, and access to professional learning and development. Lower child-to-staff ratios can also make a positive difference. One VCOSS member also suggested a cap on the percentage of income providers can take from a service should be enforced as a government lever to improve workplace culture.

The early childhood education and care workforce will need to grow significantly for both educators and teachers. Mentoring and induction support available to teachers should be extended to educators to reflect their importance.

## Attraction and retention

A range of initiatives should be considered, in addition to improved pay and conditions discussed above, to attract and retain early childhood educators and teachers, including targeted incentives to support the return of people who have left the sector and those who have retired early, and specific incentives and strategies to target educators in outer regional and remote services.

VCOSS has piloted several programs that support targeted groups into training and employment, with higher than national average completion rates that improve workforce diversity. These models should be considered as part of this strategy.

For example, the Community Traineeship Pilot Program (CTPP) delivered by VCOSS is an example of a successful approach to growing and diversifying the workforce. The CTPP supports young people experiencing barriers to labour market participation to undertake a community services qualification, while supporting community service organisations to host traineeships and meet their future workforce needs.

The CTPP is not designed specifically for learners with disability, however, anecdotal evidence suggests that a significant proportion of trainees who have engaged in this program have a disability or mental illness.

A key feature of the program is a comprehensive, learner-focused structure of support, designed to foster collaboration between a range of key stakeholders to ensure learners don’t fall through the cracks. These key stakeholders include trainees, employers, Local Partner Organisations, youth workers, VET providers and teachers who all work together.

The model also has a strong focus on peer support, which provides further scaffolding for the trainee. For example, trainees are brought together in classes run specifically for them. A dedicated youth worker attends class with them, providing 1:1 youth work support to individual trainees, whilst assisting the whole group to build connection and mutual support. This assists trainees to build their identity as part of a learning community.

The holistic approach of the CTPP has seen positive outcomes, including a retention rate of 80 per cent for the first group of participants, with more than 50 per cent gaining further employment with their employer upon completion of their traineeship. This compares very favourably to the national rate for non-trade traineeship retention, which is approximately 55 per cent.[[1]](#footnote-2), The developmental evaluation of the CTPP has identified the flexible, high-support components of the model as a key success factor thus far.[[2]](#footnote-3)

Traineeships are one important model to boost attraction and retention by providing students with on-the-job training and services the ability to monitor quality of learning. Current Commonwealth wage subsidies for traineeships support the uptake of traineeships, but services will also need additional funding, particularly at the beginning of a traineeship, to enable trainees to be above minimum child to staff ratios while they are learning the ropes. VCOSS members also spoke about the need for wage subsidy support beyond the first 12 months to make the model sustainable.

These models should be part of the suite of targeted programs that are explored as part of the Strategy to improve workforce diversity and boost student retention and completion.

In addition, community service organisations are heavily relied on to support student placements, however, current funding models mean services are often over-stretched and have limited capacity to invest in the extra staff and supervision training it takes to provide high-quality student placement experiences. The Strategy should increase the sector’s capacity to support student placements, to help boost the workforce and support high-quality graduates.

## Leadership and capability

VCOSS members agreed additional support to understand the National Quality Framework (NQF) would be beneficial to educators and teachers but that there should be face to face learning options as well as online training packages.

Employers increasingly regard micro-credentials as an effective way to bridge skills gaps in the workforce.[[3]](#footnote-4) While micro-credentials have the potential to help workers gain the right skills and capabilities and may improve access to reskilling and upskilling, any increase in access needs to ensure they do not undermine the integrity of VET qualifications and qualified workforces. For this reason, micro-credentials should not be used as entry points into the sector - they should be ‘stackable’ and have the ability to lead to full qualifications. This approach supports the professionalism of the sector while providing an additional pathway for upskilling.

Micro-credentials should be government subsidised. In addition, funding for micro-credentials should factor in time for educators and teachers to undertake professional learning. There are obvious workforce constraints as services face staff shortages, however, without providing the existing workforce sufficient time and support to undertake and complete micro-credentials, uptake is likely to be constrained.

## Wellbeing

This submission has discussed a range of mechanisms that would improve staff wellbeing, including addressing workplace culture, providing sufficient time for staff to plan and reflect, and extending mentoring support to educators.

In addition, free mental health first aid training should be made available to all early and middle childhood educators.

## Qualifications and career pathways

While there are significant workforce challenges facing the sector, VCOSS members spoke strongly about the importance of maintaining qualification requirements to support best outcomes for children.

A qualifications review should be undertaken to understand the complexity, unique needs and skills requirements of educators and teachers in early childhood education and care settings. This should look at children aged 0 – 8 years, instead of 0 – 12 years. VCOSS members expressed concern that aspects of the qualifications system are weighted too heavily towards the needs of the school sector.

When dual qualified teachers gain training and support in the school system and not in early childhood settings, teachers can feel nervous or underprepared, contributing to higher attrition rates in early childhood education and care.

The outside school hours care sector could benefit from nationally consistent qualifications. A review of staffing and qualification requirements, in partnership with the sector, could show the concerns and/or complexity that need to be addressed to establish nationally consistent qualifications in this area.

In addition, consideration should be given to relevant jurisdictional requirements for teachers and educators to provide high-quality care. For example, VCOSS members noted that in addition to low levels of awareness of the NQF, some newly qualified staff were unaware of Victorian Child Safe Standards or compliance regulation.

VCOSS welcomes a review of the requirements for initial teacher education programs, including the consideration of the current skills and knowledge needed. This review should focus on different facets of inclusions, such as supporting children with disability and/or developmental delay and look at cultural competency and safety.

Creating a sense of belonging in early childhood education and care services is vital for boosting engagement and improving outcomes and steps should be taken to embed the skills and knowledge needed to support children with a range of needs from a range of backgrounds. For example, VCOSS members report many educators and teachers do not feel equipped to support children with additional needs, which can lead to the exclusion of children and families. These aspects should be addressed in any initial teacher education program reviews.

While the Strategy looks at these areas as potential activities and initiatives in relation to leadership and capability, linked to micro-credentials, VCOSS believes this should be part of core business for the skills that educators and teachers learn.

Consideration should also be given to qualification and training requirements for discrete parts of the workforce providing specialised support, for example, professionals that provide funded support for children with disability and/or developmental delay. This would ensure professionals have an understanding of early childhood education and care, as well as meeting the needs of children with disability and building partnerships with families.

## Data and evidence

High-quality data collection and analysis is vital to understanding and responding to key industry issues, including workforce supply and demand. Providers/employers – as well as workers, unions, service users, peak bodies and community groups – will have valuable insights that government can leverage. However, the administrative burden associated with data collection and provision should be recognised and no additional stress placed on services.

As a starting point, the Commonwealth should leverage existing data capturing mechanisms to gain workforce insights, for example through Child Care Subsidy reporting systems. Relevant data should be shared with the states and territories to promote collaboration and to explore different system levers to improve workforce outcomes. Alignment between the Commonwealth and Victorian Government workforce strategies would also support collaboration.

In addition, the Commonwealth has access to existing demographic and attendance data on for services receiving Child Care Subsidy which would be beneficial to share with states and territories.

The Commonwealth’s recent budget announcement on Guaranteeing Universal Access to Preschool, yet to be negotiated with the states and territories, will see funding tied to increased participation and school readiness. The Commonwealth should consider investing in improved IT capabilities to support states and territories increase data collection for services that do not receive Child Care Subsidy. The Commonwealth should also tread carefully in the design and implementation of any preschool outcome measures, noting the complexity of assessing school readiness, differences in child and family backgrounds, and the additional pressure or unintended consequences this may have on the early childhood education and care workforce.

This submission was prepared by Talisha Ohanessian and authorised by VCOSS CEO Emma King. For enquiries please contact Deborah Fewster at deborah.fewster@vcoss.org.au.

A fully accessible version is available online at [vcoss.org.au/policy](https://www/vcoss.org.au/policy).



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1. NCVER, *Australian vocational education and training statistics: completion and attrition rates for apprentices and trainees* 2019, July 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Victorian Council of Social Service, *TAFE: Accessible for all. VCOSS submission to the inquiry into Access to TAFE for learners with disability*, October 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. NCVER, *Focus on Micro-credentials*, December 2018, <<https://www.voced.edu.au/focus-micro-credentials>>, accessed 28 May 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)