

EVERY EDUCATOR MATTERS

Evidence for a new early
childhood workforce
strategy for Australia

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About us

The Mitchell Institute for Education and Health Policy at Victoria University is one of the country's leading education and health policy think tanks and trusted thought leaders. Our focus is on improving our education and health systems so more Australians can engage with and benefit from these services, supporting a healthier, fairer and more productive society.

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While the views expressed in this paper have been informed by suggestions put forward by participants in the Roundtable, the Mitchell Institute makes no claim that they represent the collective views of the ECEC research community, or other stakeholders in the ECEC sector.

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Principles for ECEC workforce reform

The following ten principles are proposed to guide the national ECEC workforce policy:

1. **Australia's productivity depends upon a skilled, well-supported ECEC workforce.**
All governments must recognise that ECEC not only enables parental labour market participation, but also underpins lifelong learning for the next generation of Australians.
2. **The national strategy must be underpinned by a solid base of ECEC investment,** recognising that both governments and employers have responsibilities to ensure that Australian children and families are served by a skilled, well-remunerated workforce.
3. **The national strategy must consolidate and build on existing initiatives.** States and territories have pursued a range of workforce development strategies, which can be drawn together into the national strategy to improve consistency across Australia.
4. **Vision statements must be backed by well-planned implementation strategies.** These must recognise workforce development as a shared responsibility between governments, employers, and individuals, and clarify the contributions of each party.
5. **Implementation strategies must include robust monitoring and evaluation,** using a range of data to measure their effects on outcomes for educators, children and families.
6. **The national strategy must include 'quick wins' as well as a long-term vision.** Readily implementable policy opportunities exist that would have an immediate impact on supply and quality of ECEC educators in Australia, alongside longer-term strategies.
7. **The strategy must be educator-centred, to drive child- and family-centred practice.** Rather than taking a top-down approach, the strategy must begin from what educators and communities already know and do; just as quality ECEC practice does for children.
8. **The national strategy must have equity at its core.** This includes policy initiatives to address inequalities between ECEC educators, as well as to ensure that all Australian ECEC services are equipped to respond to the diversity of children and families.
9. **The national strategy must respond to the changing world of work in Australia.** ECEC services are affected by global trends such as climate change and digitisation. The national strategy must ensure that educators are ready to meet these challenges.
10. **The national strategy can play a defining role for the ECEC sector in Australia.** While its focus must remain on action, the strategy can bridge differences in how ECEC is defined across Australia, and influence how the ECEC policy discourse is framed.

Executive summary

The early childhood education and care (ECEC)¹ workforce is essential to Australia's economic and social prosperity. The day-to-day work of early childhood educators enhances young children's learning and development, and supports the productivity and wellbeing of Australian families. In Australia, close to 200,000 early childhood educators work in preschool, long day care, family day care, and school age care – and every educator has a valuable part to play in delivering quality ECEC services. The COVID-19 pandemic has further emphasised the importance of the ECEC workforce in the lives of Australian children and their families.

In December 2019, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) Education Council agreed to develop a new national workforce strategy for ECEC. Many of Australia's state and territory governments are also implementing strategies to respond to the need for workforce reform. These efforts have been given renewed urgency by COVID-19, as it has reportedly caused many educators to consider leaving the sector, placing ongoing workforce supply at risk.

A coherent national approach to ECEC workforce development is necessary, to ensure that every Australian child and family has access to quality early learning. This paper draws on contemporary Australian research, to set out policy proposals for Australian governments to consider in developing and implementing the new national ECEC workforce strategy.

1. Choosing to enter the ECEC sector

Australia's economic and social success depends on having enough early childhood educators to deliver quality, accessible ECEC services to all Australian children and families. This is not only to enable parental workforce participation, but to support all children to thrive.

There are two key policy challenges to address in this area:

Recruiting sufficient educators to meet demand

The national workforce strategy is an ideal opportunity for Australian governments to take a more active role in planning and monitoring ECEC workforce supply. This may include:

- **A national approach to professional pay and conditions.** Governments must work with the ECEC sector to design a sustainable approach to educators' pay, including fair contributions from employers and government. Principles for this approach include:
 - **Governments must invest in the ECEC workforce to recognise their public value.**
 - **Educators at all qualification levels must have access to a decent living wage.**
 - **Educators need clarity and consistency in working conditions.**
 - **ECEC wages must be competitive relative to other comparable professions.**
 - **ECEC wages must not be dependent upon communities' ability to pay.**
 - **Wage profiles must better reflect educators' capability, not only qualifications.**
 - **Investment must be effectively targeted to meet additional needs.**

Next step: Develop a sustainable model for collaborative investment in ECEC wages.

- **A national campaign to promote careers in ECEC services.** While state and territory governments have promoted the value of ECEC work, national policy discourse does not give sufficient recognition to educators' expertise and value. The National Careers Institute may assist in promoting the value of ECEC work to potential entrants into the sector.

Next step: Run a sustained national campaign promoting the importance of ECEC work.

¹ Some Roundtable participants preferred 'Early Childhood Education', 'Children's Education and Care' or 'Early Years'.

- **Reducing barriers to entry into ECEC careers.** Several possible levers are available to government to reduce barriers and costs for new entrants into the sector:
 - **Scholarships for ECEC qualifications at all levels**, building on existing approaches.
 - **Incentives to work in hard-to-staff locations**, also building on successful initiatives.
 - **More opportunities to combine paid work and study**, to build commitment to ECEC.
 - **Streamlining pathways for migrant educators**, recognising their value to the sector.
 - **Para-professional or temporary roles**, as transition points into ECEC careers.

Next step: Evaluate previous initiatives to reduce entry barriers, to identify best practice

- **Developing and maintaining a national ECEC workforce data set**, including better monitoring of workforce supply and the factors that are driving it. This may include:
 - **Enhancement of the National ECEC Workforce Census**, including detailed data analysis through partnerships between governments and the research community.
 - **Regular collection and analysis of both qualitative and quantitative data**, to improve policy line-of-sight into how workforce issues are experienced by educators.
 - **Leveraging workforce monitoring initiatives from other professions**, including the Australian Teacher Workforce Data collection, or data initiatives from the health sector.

Next step: Develop a Blueprint for collection and analysis of ECEC workforce data.

Recruiting people with potential to be great educators

An ideal ECEC workforce contains a mix of people who can deliver high-quality, inclusive services to children and families in all of Australia's diverse communities. The national ECEC workforce strategy is an opportunity to articulate a clear position on the desirable knowledge, skills and dispositions for entry into the ECEC sector. This may include:

- **Ensuring that entry requirements for ECEC courses support workforce diversity.** Educators from diverse backgrounds bring valuable knowledge for serving similarly diverse communities, but may be deterred by some entry requirements for ECEC courses.

Next step: Analyse the effects of course entry requirements on diversity in ECEC entrants.

- **Promoting reflection and collaboration as key capabilities for ECEC work.** Promoting key capabilities for ECEC work may help potential entrants appraise their suitability for the sector, while recognising that expertise may be enacted differently in different contexts.

Next step: Promote key expertise required for ECEC work in different contexts.

- **Clarifying expectations through real-life exemplars.** Exemplary educators could share real-life stories, to promote positive but realistic expectations of what ECEC work involves.

Next step: Promote case studies of exemplary educators at all qualification levels.

2. Preparing for quality ECEC practice

Early childhood professionals with higher qualifications deliver higher-quality programs for children and families. The preparation of early childhood educators is not only the foundation of quality ECEC programs, but also the foundation of their identity as ECEC professionals.

Ensuring that ECEC courses prepare educators for quality practice

A national approach to the preparation of educators must focus on ensuring that courses leading to an ECEC qualification will prepare educators for quality practice. This may include:

- **Strengthening the quality and consistency of ECEC courses in the VET sector.** A national approach to improve the quality of ECEC VET courses may include:

- **Monitoring implementation of revised ECEC Training Packages**, including compiling and promoting best practice examples in curriculum design and assessment.
- **Targeting government scholarships and fee support to high-quality providers**, working with regulators to identify providers with high standards for quality provision.

Next step: Prioritise ECEC courses within sector-wide efforts to improve VET quality.

- **Improving the consistency of age groups covered in initial teacher education.** This involves working with teacher education providers to ensure quality ECEC content and placements in all preservice courses, including dual primary–ECEC teaching programs. University administrators may also prefer generic content over ECEC-specific courses.

Next step: Work with universities to improve ECEC content in preservice courses.

- **Understanding exactly how qualifications achieve impact on quality.** There is a need for further research on the impact of qualifications on ECEC quality. This may explore:
 - **How learning from different ECEC courses contributes to quality practice**, including the level of learning required to bring practice to national quality standards.
 - **How gains in quality from formal study compare to gains from other initiatives**, such as non-credentialed professional learning, or other workforce supports.
 - **The impact qualifications have, controlling for other factors**, such as educators' prior academic achievement, socio-economic status, or personal attributes.
 - **The impact of qualifications requirements in different ECEC service types**, especially in family day care and school age care.
 - **Effective pedagogies for delivering ECEC qualifications**, including effective pedagogical models for online course provision.

Next step: Identify a research program in relation to qualifications and quality practice.

- **Improving opportunities for professional placements and work-integrated learning.** Government support for improving work-integrated learning may include:
 - **Facilitating partnering between universities, VET providers and ECEC services**, to establish sustainable, mutually-beneficial relationships.
 - **Expanding opportunities for ECEC apprenticeships and traineeships**, potentially including higher apprenticeships at diploma or degree level.
 - **Clarifying knowledge, skills and their application for all ECEC courses**, including by defining the general capabilities that educators need to develop in all ECEC courses.

Next step: Clarify expectations for skills, knowledge and their application in ECEC courses.

Supporting successful transitions from preparation to practice

Effective preparation for an ECEC career cannot be achieved through qualifications alone. The national workforce strategy is an opportunity to draw on state and territory initiatives to support new ECEC educators, and consolidate these into a national, best-practice approach.

- **Literacy and numeracy support for new educators**, integrated (and non-stigmatised) within their learning about ECEC practice, both on-the-job and in the classroom.

Next step: Explore levers for improving within-course literacy and numeracy support.

- **Additional supports for beginning educators.** Research and policy point to several principles to guide support for new early childhood educators in their transition to work:
 - **Induction to employment begins during placement.** The final placement in ECEC courses is especially important for a successful transition in to ECEC employment.
 - **New educators need time to continue learning.** Unlike some other countries, Australia does not currently offer special time allowances for beginning educators.

- **Mentoring roles must be valued and remunerated.** Mentoring programs are effective when roles are clear, and when mentors receive time, recognition and ongoing training.
- **Educators require support when beginning a new role.** Even experienced educators may require support taking on a new role at a higher qualification level.

Next step: Evaluate past initiatives for supporting new educators, to identify best practice.

3. Thriving as an ECEC professional

High rates of staff turnover in the ECEC sector place pressure on workforce supply, and compromise continuity in relationships with children. Even educators who remain in the sector experience high rates of illness and stress, exacerbated by low wages and working conditions.

Supporting professional wellbeing

Early childhood educators' wellbeing has received increasing attention in research over recent years, due to intensifying workloads and high staff turnover. The national workforce strategy can send a strong message to all educators that their wellbeing is valued. This may include:

- **Incorporating educator wellbeing into the National Quality Standard.** A clear framework for educator wellbeing, potentially incorporated into the National Quality Standard, will help position educator wellbeing as a key component of ECEC quality.

Next step: Develop a framework for educator wellbeing and incorporate it into the NQS.

- **Supporting educators' physical wellbeing.** Illness and injury must be incorporated in any educator wellbeing framework, including adherence to health and infection guidelines.

Next step: Strengthen the emphasis on educator physical wellbeing in NQS assessments.

- **Defining a manageable workload.** Evidence indicates a mismatch between expectations for early childhood educators' work, and the time and money they have available to do it. A range of current research may help policy-makers to better understand educators' work.

Next step: Use emerging evidence to build an achievable policy vision of educators' work.

- **Prioritising practitioner autonomy.** Policy-makers can foster educators' sense of agency by taking a negotiated approach to policy and regulatory requirements, including:
 - **Utilising qualitative and quantitative indicators of the quality of ECEC services**
 - **Compiling, analysing and disseminating examples of quality ECEC practice** from diverse contexts, potentially drawing on NQS assessment and rating reports.
 - **Facilitating professional dialogue around key emerging issues in ECEC quality,** and how it is implemented in different ECEC service types and communities.

Next step: Set out a national commitment to respecting practitioner autonomy in ECEC.

Supporting professional learning and growth

To support professional learning in ECEC, policy-makers must work with the sector to develop effective approaches specific to ECEC contexts. The national workforce strategy is an opportunity to develop a cohesive approach to educators' professional development and renew Australia's commitment to continuous quality improvement in ECEC. This may include:

- **Renewing investment in professional learning for continuous sector improvement.** Renewed investment in professional learning for educators could be supported by a stronger focus on professional development opportunities in NQS assessments.

Next step: Commit to national funding for ongoing quality improvement in ECEC.

- **Promoting effective models of collegial professional learning.** Governments could promote best-practice professional learning models, based on the following principles:
 - **Critical reflection is the foundation of collegial professional learning**, and is most effective when it is undertaken collaboratively in a non-judgemental environment.
 - **A range of collegial professional learning is needed for different ECEC contexts**, including mentoring; coaching; and participating in professional learning communities.

Next step: Co-design resources to help promote effective collegial professional learning.

- **Cultivating specialisations and lifelong learning opportunities.** Governments may encourage development of courses or micro-credentials for ECEC specialisations, or opportunities for educators to refresh and reskill when required across their careers.

Next step: Explore potential to develop micro-credentials in ECEC-related specialisations.

- **Improving translation between research and practice.** The Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) is well-suited to explore how educators use research.

Next step: Support AERO to explore and promote the use of research in ECEC practice.

4. Building a rewarding ECEC career

The relatively ‘flat’ career structure in ECEC means that high-performing educators look outside the sector to build their careers. Meanwhile, inadequately-qualified and inexperienced educators are being thrust into educational leadership roles with little support or recognition.

Developing leadership capability

The requirement for all ECEC services to have an ‘educational leader’ has revealed the complexity of leadership in ECEC settings. The national workforce strategy must build on effective leadership development initiatives, and disseminate best practice. This may include:

- **Recognising and supporting the role of the educational leader.** Governments must assist ECEC services to design the educational leader role to be relevant for their context.

Next step: Strengthen support and recognition for the educational leader role.

- **Promoting best practice in leadership development.** Current research and programs can inform promotion of best practice models in ECEC leadership, potentially including:
 - **Aboriginal Educators Leadership Initiatives** in NSW
 - **Place-based, network-oriented leadership development** in Queensland
 - **Recent Australian research into early childhood leadership**, which covers a vast range of leadership challenges and strengths specific to the ECEC sector.

Next step: Identify exemplary leaders, possibly as part of an ‘ECEC Champions’ initiative.

Recognising professional expertise

While educators can progress by gaining higher qualifications, there are limited opportunities for those who hold degrees, or do not want to study. The national workforce strategy could set out a coordinated approach to recognising educators for increased expertise, including:

- **Agreeing on a national approach to qualification pathways.** While credit recognition must ultimately remain at the discretion of individual providers, there is scope for all governments to take an active role in defining more coherent VET–university pathways.

Next step: Work with tertiary education sector leaders to strengthen pathways and credit.

- **Promoting and supporting upskilling pathways.** A major recent study on educators upskilling from diploma to degree found that many educators were simply unaware of the job opportunities and higher remuneration for degree-qualified roles. The study suggested:
 - **provision of clear advice** about study options and job opportunities
 - **guaranteed jobs for ECEC teachers** upon graduation (FutureTracks, 2019).

Next step: Promote VET–university pathways, recognising each sector’s distinctive value.

- **Co-designing alternative models of recognition for high-performing educators.** This may include support for mentoring roles, or professional leave opportunities.

Next step: Work with sector leaders to explore recognition for high-performing educators.

All Australian governments must work collaboratively on ECEC reform, to sustain momentum from the National Quality Agenda. More must still be done, to address new and enduring challenges in ECEC workforce development, and embed quality across the ECEC sector. This paper aims to stimulate dialogue between policy-makers, researchers, and other ECEC stakeholders about how these challenges may best be addressed. Together, it is possible to create an ECEC sector in which all educators, children, and families can grow and thrive.

Introduction

All governments across Australia recognise the importance of early childhood education and care (ECEC). Quality early learning experiences are essential for children's development in the crucial first 1,000 days of life (Moore et al., 2017), with lasting benefits through childhood and beyond. ECEC is also a major potential contributor to Australia's economy, with every dollar spent on quality early learning returning an estimated two dollars worth of benefits through improved outcomes for children and their families (The Front Project, 2019).

The ECEC workforce is essential to delivering these benefits. In Australia, close to 200,000 early childhood educators support children's learning and development in a range of ECEC settings, including preschool, long day care, family day care, and school age care. The expertise and dedication of this workforce help Australian children to learn and thrive.

Getting ECEC workforce development right is also essential for Australia's productivity, as families depend on ECEC services to balance paid work and family life. Increasing parental workforce participation by supporting access to quality ECEC is one of the most cost-effective ways that governments can strengthen the economy (Wood, Griffiths, & Emslie, 2020).

This paper summarises the evidence base for current ECEC workforce policy in Australia.

Policy context

Australia does not have a current national strategy for ECEC workforce development. The previous *Early Years Workforce Strategy* expired in 2016 (Standing Council on School Education and Early Childhood [SCSEEC], 2012), leaving many challenges unresolved.

In December 2019, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) Education Council agreed to a new national workforce strategy for ECEC:

Ministers endorsed the development of a new children's education and care national workforce strategy to support the recruitment, retention, sustainability and quality of the early childhood services workforce. Council acknowledged the need for a national early childhood workforce strategy that acknowledges the shared goals.

Ministers noted that although there has been substantial growth in the number of qualified Early Childhood Teachers and educators since the enactment of the National Quality Framework, workforce shortfalls continue to exist across Australia.

Ministers requested that senior officials report back to Education Council in early 2020 on the scope of a new national strategy, which will be developed as a joint partnership between all governments, the early childhood services sector and other key stakeholders

Education Council Communiqué, 12 December 2019, p. 5

The need for a new national workforce strategy was raised in a major national ECEC report, *Lifting Our Game: Report on the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools Through Early Childhood Interventions* (Pascoe & Brennan, 2017). The report identified a minimum of eleven areas that a national ECEC workforce strategy should consider:

1. *service leadership capability*
2. *pre-service training quality and content*
3. *ongoing professional development of the workforce*

4. *responsiveness of pre-service training and ongoing professional development providers to the sector*
5. *consistency and applicability of registration and professional standards*
6. *workforce attraction, stability and retention, including medium and long-term career paths*
7. *the impact of remuneration and conditions on workforce stability and retention, and quality of practice*
8. *workforce diversity, including Indigenous communities*
9. *the status of the profession*
10. *responses to localised issues, including in regional and remote areas*
11. *engagement with parents.*

Pascoe & Brennan, 2017, p. 13

This list indicates the wide-ranging nature of challenges that remain in building a strong, sustainable ECEC workforce in Australia, from preservice training to long-term careers.

Some state and territory governments have also responded to the need for workforce reform:

<p>New South Wales (NSW) has an <i>Early Childhood Education Workforce Strategy 2018–2022</i>, with funding to promote ECEC careers (NSW Department of Education, 2018).</p>	<p>Victoria was one of the first jurisdictions to create an ECEC workforce strategy (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2009). Many initiatives commenced under the strategy have since been extended.</p>
<p>Queensland is developing an ECEC Workforce Action Plan and is currently consulting with ECEC stakeholders on initiatives (Early Learning: Everyone Benefits, 2019).</p>	<p>Tasmania's Early Years and School Age Care Sectors Workforce Plan 2017–2020 was developed in partnership with Early Childhood Australia (Tasmanian Government, 2017).</p>

A national ECEC workforce strategy must build on the opportunities and insights generated by jurisdictional strategies, while supporting national coherence and consistency. Its goal must be to ensure that all Australian children and families are supported by an ECEC workforce that is equipped to deliver on national ECEC policy goals. These include:

- The National Quality Standard (NQS) for ECEC, which describes quality ECEC practice. The NQS is embedded within the National Regulations for ECEC services in Australia.
- The national Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF), which sets out the learning and development outcomes that ECEC services must strive to achieve for all children.
- The 2018–2019 National Partnership on Universal Access to Early Childhood Education (UANP), one of a series of agreements to provide a preschool education program to all children for at least 15 hours per week in the year before school. The UANP has been reviewed in 2020, and Education Council is currently considering its findings.

Each of these national commitments places pressure on both the quantity and quality of early childhood educators in Australia. State and territory initiatives further intensify these pressures, such as the 2018 commitment to preschool for three-year-olds in Victoria. Alongside these policy pressures, demand for quality ECEC services continues to grow, especially in areas of high population growth and increased parental workforce participation.

In the face of these pressures, governments cannot continue to provide band-aid solutions to the challenges of ECEC workforce development. A coherent national approach is essential to grow and develop the ECEC workforce for Australia's future.

Connecting policy and research

Australian ECEC policy is built on strong connections to research. The EYLF and NQS were developed through collaboration between policy-makers, researchers, and practitioners, to ensure that contemporary ECEC theory and evidence informed national policy approaches. Australia has a thriving ECEC research community, in academic and private organisations.

Research may influence policy in a variety of ways. Sometimes, it may demonstrate the impact of a specific policy, program or intervention, and serve as a guide for government investment. In a field as complex as ECEC, however, research seldom offers direct recipes for action. Instead, research may suggest possibilities or challenges for policy action; provide descriptive insights into the ECEC field; or frame policy issues in new, constructive ways. Rather than a recipe, research offers a valuable toolkit for thinking about the complexity of ECEC policy.

This paper provides a brief overview of contemporary research on the Australian ECEC workforce, to inform the development of the national ECEC workforce strategy. The focus on Australian research is designed to illuminate challenges and opportunities specific to the Australian context, which the national strategy may aim to address. Australian ECEC policy also continues to be heavily influenced by international trends (such as the OECD's Starting Strong series). Local research can help to examine how effectively these trends have been transplanted to Australian soil, and what can be done to ensure that they flourish here.

The paper condenses current policy issues into four stages of workforce development:

- **Choosing to enter the ECEC sector**
- **Preparing for quality ECEC practice**
- **Thriving as an ECEC professional**
- **Building a rewarding ECEC career.**

It draws on recent Australian research to identify possibilities for policy action at each stage.

This paper was compiled by systematically examining the research outputs of Australian researchers whose focus is ECEC workforce development. These researchers were identified primarily through the collaborative research network established following the ECEC Workforce Research Forum hosted by Queensland University of Technology in 2018. It builds on past Australian reviews of ECEC workforce research, with a focus on options for reform.

A wealth of evidence from research and evaluation also exists within ECEC policy agencies. Evidence for internal government use, such as policy evaluations, stakeholder consultations, or economic forecasting, often is not readily available to the external research community. This evidence is nevertheless equally vital in guiding Australia's future ECEC workforce strategy – especially evidence of the impact of previous strategies. A robust evidence-based approach by governments will draw upon a wide range of internal and external sources.

Evidence in relation to ECEC workforce policy is also generated in the lived experiences of ECEC practitioners. While these experiences are increasingly well-captured in research, no evidence-based policy is complete without consultation with practitioners and service users. This paper offers a research-based perspective with which such consultation may be framed.

Evidence and practice from outside the ECEC sector can also help to broaden policy-makers' thinking about the spectrum of potential approaches to ECEC workforce development. While this is outside the scope of this paper, it remains a worthwhile area for future investigation.

All ECEC workforce issues presented in this paper require ongoing dialogue between policy-makers and researchers, as well as with practitioners, families, and children.

1. Choosing to enter the ECEC sector

Australia's economic and social success depends on having enough early childhood educators to deliver quality, accessible ECEC services to all Australian children and families. This not only enables more parents to work, but also supports all children to learn and thrive.

There are two key policy goals to address in this area:

- **Recruiting sufficient educators to meet demand**, especially in hard-to-staff services
- **Recruiting people with potential to be great educators**, from diverse backgrounds.

These two goals are equally important, to ensure that the calibre of new entrants to the sector is sustained even in the face of escalating demand for ECEC staff. Achievement of these two goals is also strongly influenced by policy in other areas of this paper, as poor preservice preparation and high staff turnover both intensify the pressures on ECEC workforce supply.

1.1 Recruiting sufficient educators to meet demand

Growth in ECEC participation, as well as pressures arising from ECEC workforce reforms, mean that ECEC is an area of high workforce demand. Government estimates predict:

- Around **36,800 job openings per year** in child care, from 2018 to 2023 (defined in Australian Government statistics as jobs for VET-qualified educators).
- Around **5,800 job openings per year** for degree-qualified early childhood teachers (Australian Government, 2018). Further reforms, such as the expansion of preschool to three-year-olds in Victoria and NSW, intensify demand for degree-qualified educators.

Staff shortages are most acute in non-metropolitan areas, with a sharp increase in regional and remote ECEC services requiring a waiver due to their inability to recruit suitably qualified staff (Early Learning: Everyone Benefits, 2019). Workforce shortages are also increasingly uneven between states, as educators move to pursue job opportunities (Roundtable, 2020). Migrant educators have historically made an important contribution to ECEC workforce supply, and must continue to be supported, but COVID-19 has dramatically decreased their numbers. A national approach is essential, to both the supply and calibre of new entrants to the sector.

Policy proposals

The national workforce strategy is an ideal opportunity for Australian governments to take a more active role in planning and monitoring ECEC workforce supply. This may include:

- **A national approach to professional pay and conditions.** Low wages are known to be a key factor affecting ECEC workforce supply, but an appropriate role for governments and employers in addressing this issue remains unclear (Early Childhood Education Directorate, 2017). Economic analysis is needed to design a sustainable model for collaborative investment in educators' pay, and to determine the conditions that contribute to productive ECEC environments. Priority issues to address in the model include:
 - **Governments must invest in the ECEC workforce to recognise their public value.** The ECEC workforce is a significant national asset that delivers productivity benefits for individuals and communities. Given the public benefits, governments must work with ECEC employers to share the costs of workforce development (Roundtable, 2020).
 - **Educators at all qualification levels must have access to a decent living wage.** Research shows that many educators are reliant on economic support from other members of their households (Irvine et al., 2016; Jackson, 2018). Better pay is expected

to substantially improve retention of ECEC educators, although small wage increases are likely to be less effective than structural reform (Thorpe et al., 2020).

- **Educators need clarity and consistency in working conditions.** Inconsistencies exist in educators' conditions, including in how early childhood teachers are treated in different states; conditions for ECEC educators and primary teachers (who may work in the same setting); and in expectations for the roles of educators with different qualifications (Roundtable, 2020). These discrepancies contribute to workforce churn, and make it harder for new educators to enter the sector with clear expectations.
- **ECEC wages must be competitive relative to other comparable professions.** Educators at all qualification levels currently earn less than other similarly-qualified women in the Australian workforce (Jackson, 2018). Educators at the lowest end of the pay scale can currently earn more in other sectors, such as retail (Roundtable, 2020).
- **ECEC wages must not be dependent upon communities' ability to pay.** The presence of more highly-qualified educators in more affluent communities suggests that families' ability to pay affects the ability of ECEC services to attract higher-qualified, higher-remunerated educators (Jackson, 2018). Any model for sustainable investment in ECEC must support skilled educators to work in communities of greatest need. This may include wage bonuses for educators working in high-poverty environments.
- **Wage profiles must better reflect educators' capability, not only qualifications.** The close relationship between educators' qualifications and their remuneration limits opportunities for mobility in ECEC careers, as many educators do not see the wages from an additional qualification as worth the investment (Jackson, 2018). Qualifications-based pay scales can also result in distortions in remuneration between inexperienced degree-qualified educators, and their capable, experienced colleagues. This relates to the need for attractive long-term ECEC career pathways, discussed later in this paper.
- **Investment must be effectively targeted to meet additional needs.** A sustainable model of collaborative investment in the ECEC workforce must take into account the need for inclusion support, either through indexed investment in a supplementary inclusion support workforce, or investment in additional training to boost educators' expertise in working with higher-needs families and communities (Roundtable, 2020).

These principles could guide the development of a range of scenarios for collaborative investment in ECEC wages, to make best possible use of federal and state contributions to funding for the ECEC sector. Scenarios may be modelled on cohesive approaches to investment in successful ECEC systems elsewhere, adapted for the Australian context.

Next step: Develop a sustainable model for collaborative investment in ECEC wages.

- **A national campaign to promote careers in ECEC services.** Alongside remuneration, lack of status and recognition is frequently identified as another key barrier to recruitment (Early Childhood Education Directorate, 2017). To counter this, NSW, Queensland and Victoria have pursued campaigns to promote interest in ECEC work: 'It makes you think', 'Inspire the future' and 'Early years, great careers' respectively. The Front Project has also promoted ECEC careers through youth media and other platforms (Roundtable, 2020). ECEC employers also contribute to recruitment efforts, such as a major provider working with government and a university to offer guaranteed jobs to graduates (Lucas, 2020).

These efforts are undermined by national policy discourse that is dismissive of educators' work, or that positions quality ECEC as an economic burden on families (Fenech & Wilkins, 2019). Promoting the value of ECEC careers is not a self-interested strategy for the sector, but essential to ensuring that Australia can maintain its economic and societal strength.

The National Careers Institute is a new resource that Australian governments may use to drive promotion of ECEC careers, alongside school-based career education programs. Individuals already working in related services (such as community development roles) may also be worthwhile targets for encouragement to move into the ECEC sector.

Next step: Run a sustained national campaign promoting the importance of ECEC work.

Roundtable discussion point: Capable children and families

World-leading ECEC systems like Sweden position children at the centre of ECEC policy, and position educators as enabling children and families to achieve their own goals. This positive, strengths-based view of children and ECEC work can help with attraction to the sector.

- **Reducing barriers to entry into ECEC careers.** Qualification requirements have increased the threshold costs for entry into ECEC careers. Several possible levers are available to government to reduce barriers and costs for new entrants into the sector:
 - **Scholarships for ECEC qualifications at all levels.** A national agreed approach to ECEC scholarships may improve consistency of support across states and territories, and enable sharing of best practice from jurisdictions with long-running ECEC scholarship programs (for example, on appropriate 'bonding' arrangements). Scholarships are most effective when they are combined with wrap-around support, including mentoring, backfill for practicum and paid study leave (Roundtable, 2020).
 - **Incentives to work in hard-to-staff locations.** Incentives are another area in which a national ECEC workforce strategy could serve as a catalyst for scaling up best practice. This could involve drawing on incentive programs from other sectors, including in health and school education. Issues for consideration may include the need to offer wraparound support to relocating educators and their families, in partnership with local communities; and to promote the non-monetary rewards associated with ECEC practice in rural, remote and disadvantaged communities. The provision of ECEC courses within hard-to-staff communities can also support the sustainability of a local workforce.
 - **More opportunities to combine paid work and study.** The need to spend time out of the workforce while gaining an ECEC qualification can deter potential entrants to ECEC. Innovative qualifications designs can better enable new entrants to combine work and study, such as higher apprenticeships (including at degree level); traineeships; or 'nested' courses, with VET qualifications embedded within an ECEC degree program.
 - **Streamlining entry pathways for migrant educators.** Educators born outside Australia are an essential group within the ECEC workforce, both in boosting the supply of ECEC educators, and in contributing valuable expertise. While these educators have been a 'conspicuous silence' in previous workforce strategies, improvements to entry process for migrant educators (such as visas) have been identified as an achievable reform strategy that would deliver significant benefits for workforce development (Roundtable, 2020). The post-COVID context will call for a coordinated policy effort to regenerate skilled migration, especially in high-demand careers such as ECEC. This may include supporting international students to transition to work in ECEC services.
 - **Para-professional or temporary roles.** Short-term or substitute educator positions may provide an opportunity for more flexible entry points into ECEC work. In Sweden, (a world-leading ECEC system), local municipalities recruit substitute educators based on their experience and short-term training, rather than formal qualifications, to ensure they maintain an adequate supply of short-term relief staff (Karlsson et al., 2018, p. 30).

Next step: Evaluate previous initiatives to reduce entry barriers, to identify best practice.

Roundtable discussion point: Positive turnover

'Positive turnover' occurs when employees move in and out of a sector in a way that refreshes and reinvigorates the workforce. As Australians change their careers more frequently, one goal of ECEC recruitment might be to attract people to the sector for a period of time, drawing on the knowledge they bring from their past role, and then enabling them to take their learning from the ECEC sector into their next job. A deliberate strategy may enable turnover to be positively managed in a way that minimises disruption to services, children and families.

- **Developing and maintaining a national ECEC workforce data set.** Regular collection and analysis of ECEC workforce data enables better monitoring of workforce supply and demand, and the factors that are driving it. Robust workforce data can also help to monitor the effects of workforce reforms, and improve their implementation. This may include:
 - **Enhancement of the National ECEC Workforce Census.** The Census is a world-leading data resource, with potential to be used more strategically to address emerging ECEC workforce issues (Jackson, 2018); including through more detailed data analysis conducted through partnerships between governments and the research community. Better inclusion of preschools in the Census would be a step forward (Roundtable, 2020), and more could be done to make Census data available for use in research.
 - **Regular collection and analysis of both qualitative and quantitative data.** Both qualitative and quantitative data are necessary to understand workforce supply and demand (Press et al., 2015). Regular collection of qualitative data may improve policy line-of-sight into how workforce issues are experienced by educators.
 - **Leveraging workforce monitoring initiatives from other professions.** The ECEC data set could be modelled on the Australian Teacher Workforce Data collection, which is informed by a research-informed Blueprint for data use (Centre for International Research on Education Systems & Mitchell Institute, 2015). The health sector provides another example of skills forecasting data being used for strategic workforce planning.

Next step: Develop a Blueprint for collection and analysis of ECEC workforce data.

Categorising early childhood educators in the ABS Census

Australian data on the demographic profile of the ECEC workforce is limited by the outdated distinctions between 'Early childhood (pre-primary) teachers' and 'Child care workers' in the Australian and New Zealand Standard Classification of Occupations (ANZSCO) and Australian and New Zealand Standard Industrial Classification (ANZSIC).

ANZSCO and ANZSIC still reflect historic distinctions between preschool and other types of ECEC services. For example, ANZSCO describes pre-primary teachers as facilitating children's development, and child care workers as 'managing' or 'entertaining' children.

To enable better monitoring of ECEC workforce demographics using public data, it is recommended that all Australian governments adopt a standardised approach to combining these occupational and industrial categories to describe the ECEC sector as a whole. This will enable more comprehensive sector-wide analysis of demographics and qualifications.

1.2 Recruiting people with potential to be great educators

An ideal ECEC workforce contains a mix of people who can deliver high-quality, inclusive services to children and families in all of Australia's diverse communities. The team-based nature of ECEC work supports a collective, rather than individualistic, approach to workforce development, to recruit people with complementary skill sets rather than individual 'stars'. The multi-tiered qualifications structure of the ECEC workforce also offers multiple points of entry for new and aspiring educators, and pathways for them to develop their expertise over time.

The diversity of the Australian ECEC workforce is part of its strength, both in responding to diverse children and families, and in enabling diverse educators to build rewarding careers. The importance of a diverse ECEC workforce is being increasingly recognised in research, including the distinctive contributions of educators from specific demographic groups:

- Culturally and linguistically diverse educators (Nuttall & Ortlipp, 2012)
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators (SkillsIQ, 2019)
- Male educators (Sullivan et al., 2020; Thorpe et al., 2018)
- Educators with experience working in high poverty contexts (Skattebol et al., 2016)
- Educators with experience of educational disadvantage (Jackson, 2018).

Embracing workforce diversity calls for diverse 'professionalisms', to recognise that educators from different backgrounds may enact quality practice in many different ways. It also involves recognising, and building on, what all educators bring with them into the ECEC profession.

Policy proposals

The national ECEC workforce strategy is an opportunity to articulate a clear position on the desirable knowledge, skills and dispositions for entry into the ECEC sector. This includes working with education and training providers and ECEC stakeholders on the following:

- **Ensuring that entry requirements for ECEC courses support workforce diversity.** The availability of multiple entry points into the ECEC sector, including entry-level VET qualifications, has proven benefits for attracting educators from diverse socio-economic, educational and cultural backgrounds; all of whom bring valuable knowledge and perspectives for serving similarly diverse communities (Jackson, 2018). These options have likely contributed to the ECEC sector achieving its current high level of diversity.

Changes to entry requirements for ECEC work may have adverse impact on diversity (Roundtable, 2020). Potential educators may be deterred by academic entry requirements, such as ATAR requirements for entry into dual ECEC and primary teaching courses, or Literacy and Numeracy Test for Initial Teacher Education (LANTITE), and must be provided with other opportunities to demonstrate their potential for learning and practice.

Next step: Analyse the effects of course entry requirements on diversity in ECEC entrants.

- **Promoting reflection and collaboration as key capabilities for ECEC work.** Recent skills needs analysis has revealed two key capabilities that employers seek in new ECEC educators: the capacity for reflection (SkillsIQ, 2019), and the ability to build strong collegial relationships with other adults (Perkins, 2017). If potential entrants to the ECEC sector are made aware of the capabilities that are most valued, they may make better decisions about their suitability for ECEC work, and hold more realistic expectations.

Advice to potential entrants to the ECEC sector must also recognise the expertise that educators must develop over the course of their careers, and the ways that the application of this expertise may differ across different ECEC contexts. Both general and context-specific advice is necessary to promote informed choices about ECEC careers.

Next step: Promote key expertise required for ECEC work in different contexts.

- **Clarifying expectations through real-life exemplars.** Promotion of the benefits of ECEC work must be balanced with realistic information about careers in the sector, to address the mismatch between expectations and reality that is a major contributor to workforce churn (Irvine et al., 2016). Real-life stories from exemplary educators may help to inspire potential educators in ways that are grounded in the realities of day-to-day practice.

Exemplary educators could be identified in collaboration with the sector, and their stories shared as part of a national campaign to promote ECEC careers. By choosing educators with different qualifications and roles, this initiative may also help to promote more inclusive role models for ECEC professionalism, recognising that certain groups of educators have been marginalised in the dominant policy discourse to date (Grieshaber & Graham, 2017).

Next step: Promote case studies of exemplary educators at all qualification levels.

Collaborative ECEC workforce planning in Tasmania

Tasmania's Early Years and School Age Care (EYSAC) Sectors Workforce Plan supports a planned approach to workforce development, involving purposeful partnering between government, sector leaders, and Registered Training Organisations (RTOs). Outside of metropolitan areas, EYSAC workforce development is connected into Regional Plans, both as a growth sector, and as a support for parental workforce participation in other sectors.

The EYSAC Workforce Plan also recognises that workforce planning for the ECEC sector is critical to improving quality. It commits to an 'innovative, agile and efficient workforce' (Tasmanian Government, 2017, p. 7), including working with ECEC providers to develop innovative staffing solutions to meet the requirements of the National Law and Regulations.

Recruiting great people to work in ECEC is an important component of the strategy. The Tasmanian Government is exploring options to work with sector leaders and RTOs to co-design screening tools for entrants into ECEC courses. Other strategies include increasing the use of Australian School-based Apprenticeships as pathways to ECEC work; and potential 'taster' options for those considering ECEC careers, to test their suitability for work in the sector (NSW is also exploring 'tasters' or internships, prior to enrolment in an ECEC course).

Implementation of the plan must balance the aspirations towards workforce agility with the need to provide continuity of skilled, committed ECEC educators in all Tasmanian services.

2. Preparing for quality ECEC practice

Early childhood professionals with higher qualifications deliver higher-quality programs for children and families. The preparation of early childhood educators is not only the foundation of quality ECEC programs, but also the foundation of their identity as ECEC professionals.

Preparing educators for quality practice involves two policy priorities:

- **Ensuring that ECEC courses prepare educators for quality practice**
- **Supporting successful transitions from preparation to practice**

Qualifications are a mainstay of ECEC policy in Australia, and continue to be a priority in state workforce strategies (Queensland's strategy is especially focused on scholarships and formal learning). The introduction of the National Regulations for ECEC in 2012 resulted in a massive increase in the proportion of early childhood educators holding an ECEC qualification: from 69.8% at the first National Workforce Census (NWC) in 2010, to 85.2% in the 2016 NWC (Early Learning: Everyone Benefits, 2019). The proportion of educators holding various qualifications differs across different types of ECEC services, as shown in Figure 1 below.

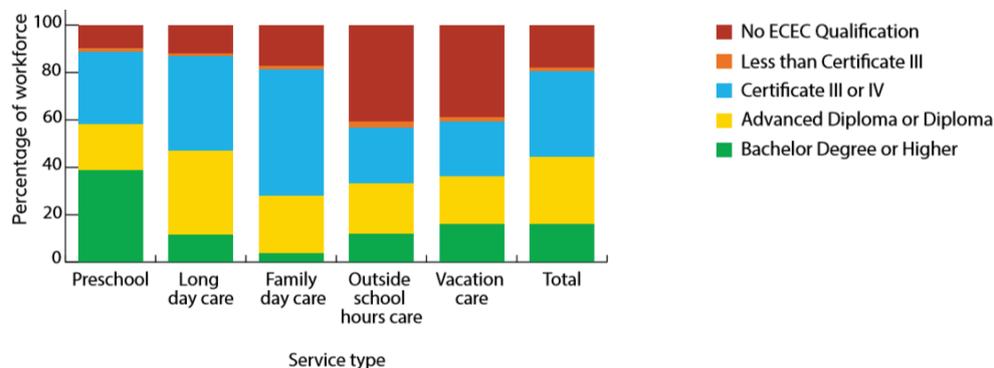


Figure 1: Proportion of educators at each qualification level, by service type

Source: Early Learning: Everyone Benefits, 2019, p. 29

The reforms to raise educators' qualifications respond to a large body of international research that associates higher qualifications with higher-quality ECEC practice, primarily focused on educators with university degrees (Manning et al., 2017). Higher proportions of degree-qualified educators have also been associated with higher-quality practice in Australia (Tayler, 2016), and with greater gains in children's learning and development (Krieg et al., 2015). Little research exists on the impact of VET qualifications on quality, although analysis of data from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children suggested that educators with diplomas and degrees may both contribute to higher-quality practice (Warren & Haisken-DeNew, 2013).

As educator qualifications are closely linked to regulatory and industrial frameworks in Australia, all policies relating to the preparation of the ECEC workforce require extensive collaboration between Education Council and other government agencies, including:

- ACECQA as national regulator for ECEC services, and accreditor of ECEC qualifications
- Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) as the national agency for the teaching profession, as well as state and territory teacher registration authorities
- Australian Skills Quality Authority (ASQA) and Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA), as well as state VET regulators in Western Australia and Victoria
- Community Services and Health Industry Skills Council (CSHISC).

As with all proposals in this paper, collaboration with peak bodies, teacher educators, VET providers, employers and educators are also essential to policy design and implementation.

2.1 Ensuring that ECEC courses prepare educators for quality practice

The current ECEC reform agenda is built on an assumption that courses leading to an ECEC qualification will prepare educators for quality practice. However, one meta-analysis of the effects of ECEC courses noted that ‘too often, highly diverse...programs are assumed to produce equivalent results’ (Whitebook et al., 2012, p. 1). Given that qualifications are likely to remain a mainstay of ECEC workforce development policy in Australia, a national approach to the preparation of educators must be focused on ensuring this assumption is realised.

Policy proposals

The national workforce strategy provides a forum for state and territory governments to cooperate on a cohesive approach to supporting the quality and effectiveness of ECEC courses, across both higher education and VET. Priority areas for collaboration may include:

- **Strengthening the quality and consistency of ECEC courses in the VET sector.** The quality of some ECEC Certificate and Diploma courses remains a cause for concern, with significant variation apparent between VET providers and jurisdictions. SkillsIQ is currently leading a review of Training Packages for VET ECEC qualifications, although the impact of changes to training packages will depend on their implementation (SkillsIQ, 2020). ASQA is also prioritising delivery of the ECEC Diploma in its regulation of VET quality (Lucas, 2019). As the Training Packages are revised and rolled out, further opportunities for a national approach to improve the quality of ECEC VET courses may include:
 - **Monitoring implementation of revised ECEC Training Packages**, including compiling and promoting best practice examples in curriculum design and assessment.
 - **Targeting government scholarships and fee support to high-quality providers**, working with regulators to identify providers with high standards for quality provision.

Next step: Prioritise ECEC courses within sector-wide efforts to improve VET quality.

Roundtable discussion point: Quality of VET courses

The quality of VET courses leading to ECEC qualifications was a concern for many participants at the Roundtable. While acknowledging that significant progress has been made in this area, issues included a focus on compliance over children’s learning; inadequate connections between course providers and ECEC services; and perverse incentives for low-cost, poor-quality provision, especially among private VET providers.

Issues with VET appear to lie in implementation as much as design, as the Roundtable acknowledged that the VET sector spans a broad quality spectrum. The efforts of regulators to improve the quality of Registered Training Organisations were also acknowledged.

Despite their concerns, Roundtable participants were generally positive about the impact of requirements for VET qualifications on the Australian ECEC sector, with some (but not all) suggesting that a Diploma may become a minimum requirement in the long-term. Moves in some states to reduce VET fees were seen as having a positive impact on ECEC.

Overall, the importance of VET in developing the ECEC sector suggests that the national workforce strategy must address VET quality, as the foundation of a skilled workforce.

- **Improving the consistency of age groups covered in initial teacher education.** While all initial teacher education courses for ECEC approved by ACECQA, there are mixed views about the adequacy of their coverage of early years age groups. A recent study found that only four out of 18 ECEC teaching courses at Masters level offered a specific unit or assessment focused on younger children (Garvis & Manning, 2015), while another

found a preference among employers for birth-to-five ECEC teaching degrees (Boyd et al., 2019). The content of teacher education courses can also impact on the willingness of graduates to enter ECEC, rather than primary teaching (Gibson et al., 2019).

Content of ECEC courses is contentious, with some arguing for birth-to-eight qualifications across Australia, to connect school and ECEC practice (Roundtable, 2020). Governments and course providers must work together to ensure that degree-qualified educators are adequately prepared to educate and care for children across the ECEC age range, including readiness to lead practice in the education and care of younger children. This requires a combination of skilled teacher educators who understand practice with young children; and fidelity between expectations for ECEC courses, and actual course delivery.

The content required in ECEC degrees must also be reflected in teaching standards. AITSL has been tasked by all Australian governments to work with the ECEC sector to strengthen early childhood teaching standards and registration processes (AITSL, 2020).

Next step: Work with teacher educators to improve ECEC content in preservice courses.

- **Understanding exactly how qualifications achieve impact on quality.** Many questions remain about the nature of the relationship between qualifications and ECEC quality (Manning et al., 2017). This has at times made policies to raise educators' qualifications vulnerable to contestation (Productivity Commission, 2014). Given the ongoing investment in ECEC qualifications, there is a need to invest in further research. This may explore:
 - **How learning from different ECEC courses contributes to quality practice**, including the level of learning required to bring practice to national quality standards.
 - **How gains in quality from formal study compare to gains from other initiatives**, such as non-credentialled professional learning, or other workforce supports.
 - **The impact qualifications have, controlling for other factors**, such as educators' prior academic achievement, socio-economic status, or personal attributes.
 - **The impact of qualifications requirements in different ECEC service types**, especially in family day care and school age care (Roundtable, 2020).
 - **Effective pedagogies for delivering ECEC qualifications**, including effective pedagogical models for online course provision (Roundtable, 2020).

Next step: Identify a research program in relation to qualifications and quality practice.

- **Improving opportunities for professional placements and work-integrated learning.** Effective professional practice depends on high-quality professional placements, built on meaningful relationships between course providers and services (Jovanovic, Fane, & Andrew, 2018). In contrast, poor placement experiences can deter preservice educators from ECEC careers, especially those with high aspirations for quality practice (Roundtable, 2020). Government support to improve work-integrated learning may include:
 - **Facilitating partnering between universities, VET providers and ECEC services**, to establish sustainable, mutually-beneficial relationships built around a shared interest in improving learning about quality practice. This may include explicit expectations about the type of work and number of placement days expected at all qualification levels. It may also include promoting promising models, such as paired placements that enable peer-to-peer learning (Bone et al., 2019). NSW's recent trial to improve the placement experience may offer further insights (NSW Department of Education, 2018).
 - **Expanding opportunities for ECEC apprenticeships and traineeships**, potentially including higher apprenticeships at diploma or degree level. These models have been suggested as part of broader reforms to improve the coherence of Australian tertiary education, to better prepare graduates for employment (Dawkins et al., 2019).

- **Clarifying knowledge, skills and application for all ECEC courses.** The 2019 *Review of the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF)* sets out a model for how skills, knowledge and application are linked through action (Figure 2). This model may help to clarify how skills, knowledge and application are combined in all types of ECEC courses; and also streamline pathways from VET to high education.

As part of this clarification, there is also scope to define a distinct set of general capabilities that educators need to develop in all ECEC courses, in both classroom-based and work-integrated learning environments.

These capabilities may include:

- Explicit skills for interactions with children, which are the foundation of quality practice (Early Childhood Education Directorate, 2017)
- Play-based learning, which currently has limited visibility in early childhood teacher education courses in Australia (McArdle et al., 2019).
- Interpersonal skills for working with colleagues, which are in high demand among ECEC employers, but minimally covered in ECEC qualifications (Perkins, 2017)
- Other general capabilities, including problem solving, communication, professional ethics, and emotional judgement (Australian Industry and Skills Committee, 2018)
- Digital literacy, and pedagogies involving new technologies (Yelland, 2018)
- Cultural sensitivity and working with diversity (Lunn Brownlee et al., 2019), as well as awareness of social justice as a foundation of ECEC work (Nolan & Lamb, 2019)
- Subject-specific pedagogies, especially in mathematics (Knaus, 2017)
- Connecting children and educators with the natural environment (Elliott et al., 2016)

Any analysis of ECEC courses must also consider alignment to the National Quality Standard (NQS), to ensure that educators are prepared to meet quality requirements.

Next step: Clarify expectations for skills, knowledge and application in all ECEC courses.

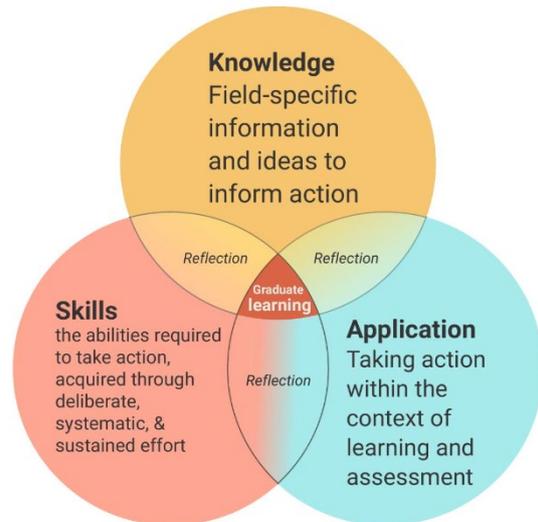


Figure 2: AQF domains linked through action

Source: Perkins, Brown, Weldon, & Wignall, 2019, p. 72

2.2 Supporting successful transitions from preparation to practice

Effective preparation for an ECEC career cannot be achieved through qualifications alone. Additional support is necessary, to ensure that future educators make successful transitions into (and throughout) their ECEC course; and then from graduation into employment.

Policy proposals

The national workforce strategy is an opportunity to draw on state and territory initiatives to support new ECEC educators, and consolidate these into a national, best-practice approach.

- **Literacy and numeracy support.** Many students enter ECEC courses with backgrounds of low academic achievement (Jackson, 2018). To build their confidence as learners and

educators, new entrants to the ECEC sector require literacy and numeracy support that is integrated (and non-stigmatised) within their learning about ECEC practice, both on-the-job and in the classroom. Additional funding for literacy and numeracy support in VET, or complementary programs (such as Learn Local in Victoria) may offer opportunities to strengthen literacy and numeracy learning during ECEC courses. Identification of such supports is part of Tasmania's EYSAC strategy (Tasmanian Government, 2017). Practising educators may also benefit from support, as a pathway into further study.

Next step: Explore levers for improving within-course literacy and numeracy support.

- **Additional supports for beginning educators.** The transition from study to work is a critical time for educators to consolidate their professional identity and practice. Research and policy point to several principles to guide support for new early childhood educators:
 - **Induction to employment begins during placement.** Placement and work-integrated learning offer opportunities for educators to forge relationships with future employers and get ready for work. The NSW Government is considering offering incentives for ECEC employers to take on trainees at completion of their qualification (NSW Department of Education, 2018). The final placement in ECEC courses is especially important for transition to employment, and any revisions to ECEC content in preservice courses (see above) should ensure that final placements occur in ECEC settings.
 - **New educators need time to continue learning.** This includes learning about their community; for example, a leading Aboriginal ECEC service provides new educators at all qualification levels with additional paid time to learn collaboratively about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues relevant to the service's local context. Australia does not currently offer special time allowances for beginning educators, although this is longstanding policy for beginning teachers in New Zealand schools and ECEC services.
 - **Mentoring roles must be valued and remunerated.** NSW is developing an induction and mentoring program for new educators (NSW Department of Education, 2018); and mentoring programs have previously been implemented successfully in Victoria (Nolan & Molla, 2018b) and Queensland. These programs are most effective when roles are clear, and when mentors are provided with time, recognition and ongoing training. A systematic, national approach to mentoring in ECEC services may be more effective than the current suite of *ad hoc* programs (Roundtable, 2020).
 - **Educators require support when beginning a new role.** Many ECEC degree graduates have already completed ECEC qualifications and may have worked in the ECEC sector for many years. 'Pathways' graduates (who complete VET qualifications before an ECEC degree) may be better prepared for practice than those who enter university directly (Boyd et al., 2019); but may still require induction into roles at higher qualification levels, especially leadership roles. Tasmania is also working with RTOs to develop courses for educators returning to the sector (Tasmanian Government, 2017).

Next step: Evaluate past initiatives for supporting new educators, to identify best practice.

3. Thriving as an ECEC professional

High rates of staff turnover in the ECEC sector place pressure on workforce supply, and compromise continuity in relationships with children. Even educators who remain in the sector experience high rates of illness and stress, exacerbated by low wages and working conditions.

Two policy priorities are suggested to support practising educators to thrive in their work:

- **Supporting professional wellbeing**, to improve retention and quality practice
- **Supporting professional learning and growth**, to enable continuous improvement

If implemented well, these two policy goals reinforce one another; but they can also undermine one another, if professional wellbeing is compromised by expectations for continuous learning. At present, tensions are evident in a policy narrative that implies that an 'ideal professional practitioner' is 'one who is consistently upskilling' (Grieshaber & Graham, 2017, p. 100). The pressure generated by this tension may contribute to high staff turnover in the ECEC sector.

In a low-wage sector, the support that educators receive at work makes a difference to retention (Thorpe et al., 2020). This section proposes policy options that may support educator wellbeing and continuous improvement, while also fostering practitioner autonomy.

3.1 Supporting professional wellbeing

Early childhood educators' wellbeing has received increasing attention in research over recent years (Cumming, 2017). A summary of recent research highlighted low pay as having a significant impact on educators' wellbeing, as well as intensified workload resulting from recent reforms (Early Learning: Everyone Benefits, 2019). Future workforce policy must also be mindful of the level of 'change-fatigue' that is evident in the ECEC sector (Tayler, 2016, p. 27), and prioritise the wellbeing of educators, alongside outcomes for children and families. The COVID-19 crisis has elevated the importance of educator wellbeing in times of extreme stress.

Emerging research is increasingly focused on positive factors that support educator wellbeing, in contrast to previous research, which has been more focused on contributors to stress (Jones et al., 2019). While service leaders and colleagues have the strongest direct impact on educator wellbeing, it is also possible for policy makers to make a positive contribution, and emerging research has generated great potential for evidence-informed policy in this area.

Policy proposals

The national workforce strategy is an ideal vehicle for governments to send a strong message to educators that their wellbeing is valued. The following initiatives could support this message:

- **Incorporating educator wellbeing into the National Quality Standard.** A major recent report suggested that educator wellbeing should be added to the suite of measures used to assess the quality of ECEC services in Australia (Early Learning: Everyone Benefits, 2019). Highlighting educator wellbeing in the National Quality Standard would impel services to prioritise educator wellbeing, and improve staff retention (Roundtable, 2020).

For this to occur, it is necessary to develop a clear framework for how educator wellbeing is defined. Factors that affect educators' wellbeing are similar to those that affect learning and development for children, including a sense of identity (McKinlay et al., 2018); and belonging (Tillett & Wong, 2018). There is therefore scope to develop a framework for educators' wellbeing similar to the EYLF outcomes for children, using an ecological framework to show how wellbeing is situated in context (Cumming & Wong, 2019). Families may also benefit from such a framework, in choosing a quality ECEC service.

Figure 3 shows a potential holistic framework for educators' professional learning and development, modelled on EYLF outcomes for children's learning and development. As for children, it positions wellbeing and identity as equally important as educators' learning.

Next step: Develop a framework for educator wellbeing and incorporate it into the NQS.

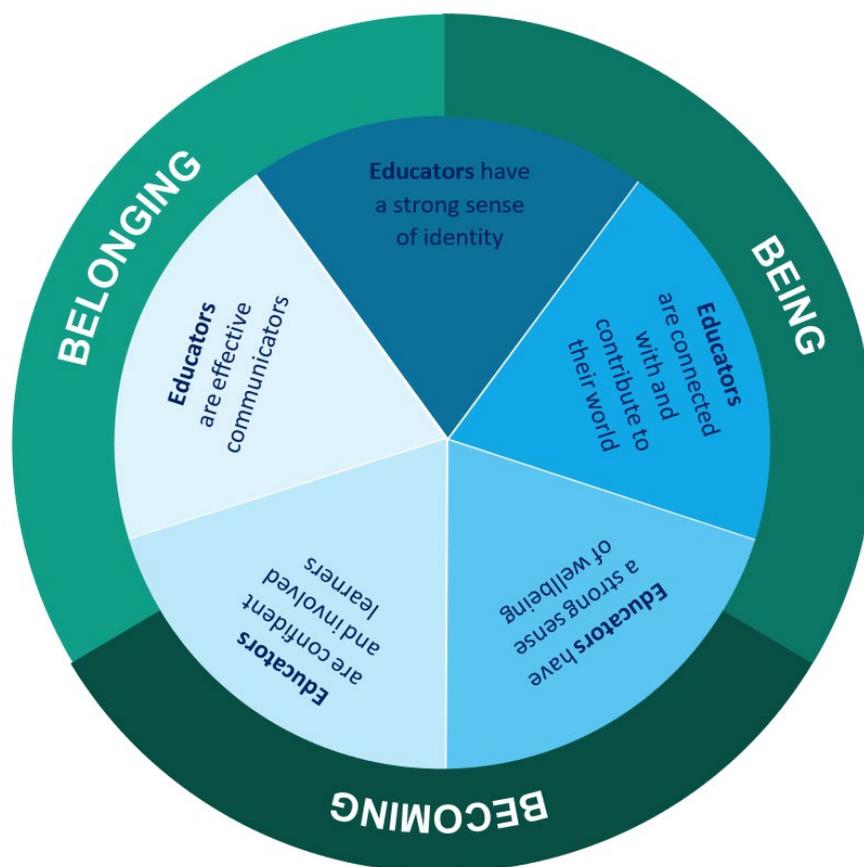


Figure 3: Proposed holistic learning and development framework for educators

- **Supporting educators' physical wellbeing.** Illness and injury must be incorporated in any educator wellbeing framework, to reduce the relatively high rates of WorkCover claims reported for ECEC services (Roundtable, 2020). Employers and governments must consider their investment in educator wellbeing against the potential efficiencies and productivity gains it can deliver. For example, engaging casual staff to cover absences is likely to incur higher costs than promoting practices to reduce illness (Roundtable, 2020).

Consistent implementation of health guidelines is one practical strategy for improving educator wellbeing, as research indicates that infection guidelines are not consistently followed (Farrant et al., 2019). Another is ensuring that educators can take time off when they are sick, potentially through increasing sick leave allowances in ECEC; or working with families to provide a broader range of options for sick children (Roundtable, 2020).

- **Defining a manageable workload.** Evidence indicates a mismatch between expectations for early childhood educators' work, and the time and money they have available to do it. Australian educators report regularly working above their contracted hours on planning and administration (Irvine et al., 2016), and family day care educators in particular often work well above a full-time workload (Jackson, 2018). Requirements for educational programming in all ECEC services have also resulted in all educators arguably 'performing the work of a qualified teacher but not being remunerated as a teacher' (Grieshaber & Graham, 2017, p. 100) – with the minimum pay for educators being only 'marginally above the national minimum wage' (Early Learning: Everyone Benefits, 2019, p. 31).

The high rate of part-time work in ECEC services (Early Learning: Everyone Benefits, 2019) can also impact on educator wellbeing in both positive and negative ways. Negative impact occurs when casual or part-time educators have little control over their schedules, or miss important information that impacts on their work. Job security and predictability for all educators are desirable features of ECEC workload design (Roundtable, 2020).

There is a clear need for better understanding of exactly what kinds of work educators do, at all qualification levels, and how it can be appropriately valued. Feeling visible and valued is a powerful contributor to educator retention (McDonald et al., 2018). Greater visibility of what educators do can also assist with attracting and preparing new entrants to the sector. While the diversity of ECEC settings mitigates against any prescriptive definition of an educator's workload, there is scope for greater clarity around what a typical day may entail.

A range of research may assist policy-makers to better understand educators' work:

- *Exemplary Early Childhood Educators at Work* is a major research project that uses time-use diaries, focus groups, and case studies to explore exactly how high-performing educators use their time (Press et al., 2018), and includes a taxonomy of educators' work (Wong et al., 2015). Results from the study so far indicate that educators spend only around 60% of their time in direct contact with children (Harrison et al., 2019).
- Other recent Australian research explores the complexity of how time is understood in ECEC, given the non-time-bound nature of care work (Nuttall & Thomas, 2015).
- The distinctive value of 'emotional work' in ECEC also requires recognition in defining ECEC professionalism and practice (Andrew, 2015, p. 316), including how educators enact 'pedagogical love' as part of their day-to-day work (O'Connor et al., 2019, p. 3).
- A recent Australian study proposed a Pedagogical Play framework for understanding the relationship between play-based learning and intentional teaching (Edwards, 2017).
- A major European Commission-funded research project examined the role of ECEC 'assistants' in 15 countries (Van Laere et al., 2012). There is scope for similar research to be replicated in Australia, across all ECEC educator and co-educator roles.
- Current research at the University of NSW is examining effective provision of ECEC in high poverty contexts, and how workforce conditions, retention strategies and skills development can respond to specific contextual challenges (Skattebol, unpublished).
- Current research at Macquarie University is exploring how much educators believe that they should get paid, as part of a study of educators' wellbeing (Jones, unpublished).

This research, along with consultation with peak ECEC agencies and practitioners, may enable policy-makers to provide more nuanced guidance about the implementation of the EYLF and NQS in Australian ECEC services, including differentiated advice for educators at different qualification levels, and working in different service and community contexts. It may also help to inform a sustainable model of investment in ECEC (see above), including by identifying contexts in which additional investment is required to meet additional needs.

Next step: Use emerging evidence to build an achievable policy vision of educators' work.

- **Prioritising practitioner autonomy.** Educators' wellbeing is undermined when they do not feel a sense of professional autonomy in their work (Roundtable, 2020). A sense of agency is essential to educators' capability (Nolan & Molla, 2019), and their ability to translate policy expectations into achievements that they value in their own professional practice (Molla & Nolan, 2019). Educators' sense of agency and wellbeing is compromised when they feel alienated or confused by unfamiliar language used in policy documents

(Kilderry et al., 2017); or when they feel that undesirable expectations (such as school-like pedagogies) are being imposed upon them (Roberts, Barblett, & Robinson, 2019).

Policy-makers can foster a sense of agency among educators by maintaining a negotiated approach to the implementation of policy and regulatory requirements. This may involve recognising that ‘quality’ in ECEC settings does not have a single fixed definition (Fenech, 2011), and may be enacted in different ways in different contexts. While Australian policy-makers struggle with accommodating diverse perspectives on quality (Logan, 2018), the NQS and EYLF do allow space for negotiation with practitioners to occur (Jackson, 2015).

Policy-makers can empower educators in defining and enacting ECEC quality by:

- **Utilising qualitative and quantitative indicators of the quality of ECEC services**, to capture nuance in how quality is enacted (Fenech, Sweller, & Harrison, 2010).
- **Compiling, analysing and disseminating examples of quality ECEC practice** from diverse contexts, potentially drawing on NQS assessment and rating reports. This may also include effective practice in applying the EYLF and NQS with babies and toddlers; currently an under-researched area (Sumsion et al., 2018).
- **Facilitating professional dialogue around key emerging issues in ECEC quality**, and how it is implemented in different ECEC service types and communities.

Next step: Set out a national commitment to respecting practitioner autonomy in ECEC.

3.2 Supporting professional learning and growth

Effective professional learning requires multiple approaches. Collaborative critical reflection and collegial professional learning may be more effective than one-off training that may not have lasting effects on educators’ knowledge and practice. The Queensland Government has described the range of sustained professional learning activities that educators may undertake, based on a Health and Community Services Workforce Council model (Figure 4).

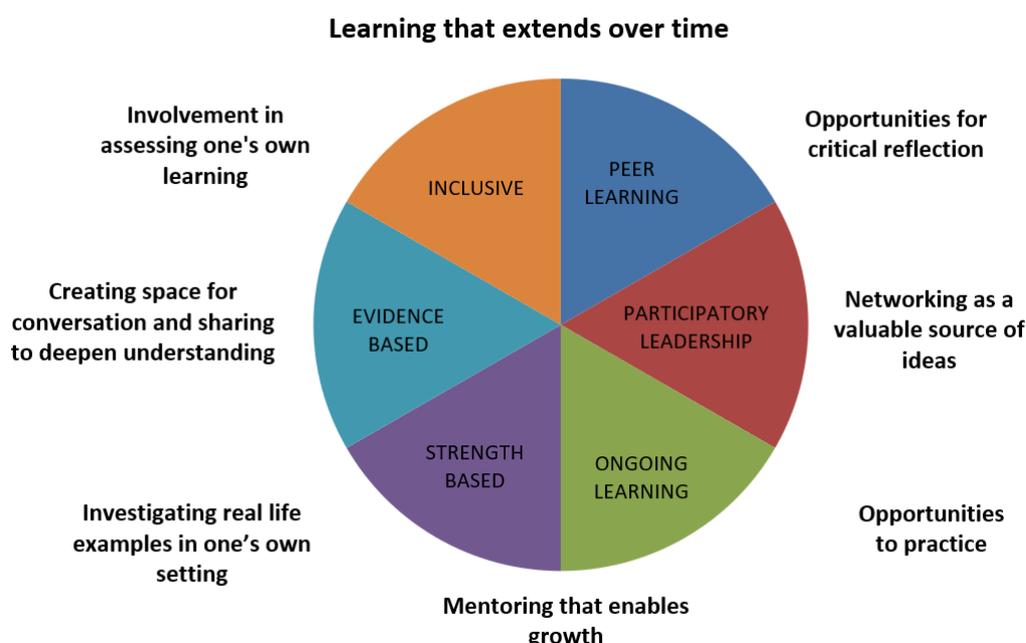


Figure 4: Factors that contribute to effective professional learning

Source: Queensland Government, 2015, p. 2.

The ECEC sector faces unique challenges in engaging with professional learning. Ratio requirements and the cost of backfilling staff make it difficult for educators to leave services for professional learning, especially in rural and remote areas. Staff turnover means that induction activities may be prioritised over continuous improvement, and essential compliance activities (such as first aid refreshers) can also crowd out deeper professional learning activities (Highfield, Wallis, & Stockman, 2017). Policies to support professional learning in ECEC must work with the sector to develop effective approaches specific to ECEC contexts.

Policy proposals

The national workforce strategy is an opportunity to develop a cohesive approach to educators' professional development, and renew Australia's commitment to continuous quality improvement in ECEC, which was initiated in the lapsed National Partnership Agreement on a National Quality Agenda for ECEC. Strategies to support professional learning include:

- **Renewing investment in professional learning for continuous sector improvement.** The success of the Early Years Learning Framework and National Quality Standard was in part due to the investment in professional learning that accompanied them (Roundtable, 2020). Renewed investment in professional learning for educators could be supported by a stronger focus on professional development opportunities in NQS assessments. This could include dedicated time for all educators to engage in professional learning, and strong links between individual professional learning and the Quality Improvement Plan.

Focusing on the relationship between professional learning and quality improvement could encourage ECEC services to invest in developing their educators (with support available through a national fund); and to monitor how well professional learning activities contribute to their service's identified goals for improvement. Recent research calls for a more 'evaluative approach' to professional learning (Brownlee et al., 2015, p. 411), including the proposal of new models for evaluating its impact (Fleet et al., 2018, p. 76).

Next step: Commit to national funding for ongoing quality improvement in ECEC.

- **Promoting collegial professional learning to create service-level change.** There is a need for better understanding about the collegial professional learning options available to ECEC services that effect lasting change at whole-of-service level (rather than off-site, one-off workshops). This must include differentiated approaches for diverse educators, rather than collectively delivered, one-size-fits-all approaches (Hadley et al., 2015).

Governments could play an active role in promoting best-practice examples of professional learning found to be most effective in research, based on the following principles:

- **Critical reflection is the foundation of collegial professional learning** (Nolan & Guo, 2019). Reflection is most effective when it is undertaken collaboratively (Nolan & Molla, 2018a), and in a safe, non-judgemental learning environment (Nolan & Molla, 2018b). Critical reflection is not only a method of learning, but a learned skill that itself takes time and practice to develop (SkillsIQ, 2019). Critical reflection includes both an evaluative and social justice orientation, through which educators question their own assumptions and perspectives (Lunn et al., 2019). 'Time to ponder' is also essential for effective critical reflection to occur (Whittington et al., 2014, p. 65).
- **A range of collegial professional learning is needed for different ECEC contexts**, including mentoring (Nolan & Molla, 2018b); coaching (Twigg et al., 2013); working with interdisciplinary professionals (Wong & Press, 2017); and participating in professional learning communities (McInnes et al., 2017). Rural and regional educators may require additional support to engage in professional learning communities (Roundtable, 2020). Inter-professional practice can also be fostered through collegial professional learning that connects educators to families, allied professionals, or members of their communities.

Movement between ECEC services can be a valuable method of collegial professional learning, especially for educators in smaller services. Communities of practice that span multiple ECEC services may enable educators to share practice across contexts, and staff turnover to occur in more positive ways. Government funding can foster innovative approaches to the formation of professional learning communities (Roundtable, 2020).

Next step: Co-design resources to help promote effective collegial professional learning.

- **Cultivating specialisations and lifelong learning opportunities.** There is scope for a richer array of lifelong learning opportunities for ECEC educators, beyond ECEC qualifications or short-term professional learning. Governments may encourage education and training providers to develop courses or micro-credentials for ECEC specialisations, such as working with specific developmental delays; working in high poverty contexts; or incorporating Aboriginal perspectives. Education for sustainability has been identified in research as another priority area that requires ‘demystification’ for early childhood educators in Australia (Elliott & Davis, 2018, p. 172). Queensland’s Early Years Connect service may provide a model for specialised professional learning, including for working with children with additional needs (Queensland Government, 2015a). Reforms in this area may include mechanisms for linking additional credentials to higher rates of remuneration.

‘Top-up’ courses may also be valuable for educators requiring refreshers or updates to their practice, and are already being delivered by some TAFEs. These courses are growing in importance due to ageing in some parts of the ECEC sector (Roundtable, 2020).

Next step: Explore potential to develop micro-credentials in ECEC-related specialisations.

- **Improving translation between research and practice.** While governments have invested considerable resources into translating evidence about practice into guidelines and resources, little is known about how these resources are used. One recent Australian study found that 83% of ECEC services did not comply with evidence-based guidelines on safe sleeping (Staton et al., 2019, p. 1193), suggesting a gap between research and practice. The Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) would be well-placed to explore how educators are currently using evidence to inform their everyday practice.

AERO also has the potential to encourage more research by ECEC educators. Practitioner research is a form of systematic inquiry into issues arising in ECEC practice. Some state governments (notably Victoria and South Australia) are supporting educators to use assessment for learning as the evidence base for improvement of their practice, as part of the cycle of planning, doing, assessing and reflecting (Roundtable, 2020).

Next step: Support AERO to explore and promote the use of research in ECEC practice.

Systemic support for professional learning in New South Wales

The NSW *Early Childhood Education Workforce Strategy 2018–2022* includes a range of support for professional learning, including under the Sector Development Program:

- A panel of pre-qualified providers, to develop resources to attract and retain educators
- Tools to strengthen peer-to-peer networking within services and local networks
- Online resources, including a system for educators to track their professional development
- Regular updates and sharing of best practice
- A trial of a formal mentoring and networking program.

4. Building a rewarding ECEC career

The relatively ‘flat’ career structure in ECEC means that high-performing educators look outside the sector to build their careers. Meanwhile, inadequately-qualified and inexperienced educators are being thrust into educational leadership roles with little support or recognition.

Developing rewarding careers in ECEC involves two key policy priorities:

- **Developing leadership capability**, at service, community and whole-of-sector level
- **Recognising professional expertise**, through career progression opportunities

A tension between these two policy imperatives arises from the desirability of having highly skilled educators working directly with children, and the need for expert educators to assume broader leadership roles in the ECEC sector. This tension contributes to the complexity of ECEC leadership in Australia, which is an emerging field of research and expertise.

This section considers some ways in which policy-makers can engage with this tension, and support the ECEC sector to offer rewarding careers for both expert practitioners and leaders.

4.1 Developing leadership capability

Leadership in ECEC services has changed significantly as a result of recent reforms. The requirement for all ECEC services to appoint an ‘educational leader’ has challenged existing leadership structures built on managerial or administrative models, and also disrupted previous non-hierarchical models of collegial relationships within ECEC teams. Unsurprisingly, ECEC leadership has generated a rich body of recent ECEC research in Australia, which may help to inform government interventions to build leadership capacity across the ECEC sector.

The development of leadership in ECEC settings is complex and multi-faceted. Figure 5 shows the multiple ways that early childhood leaders build their professional expertise.

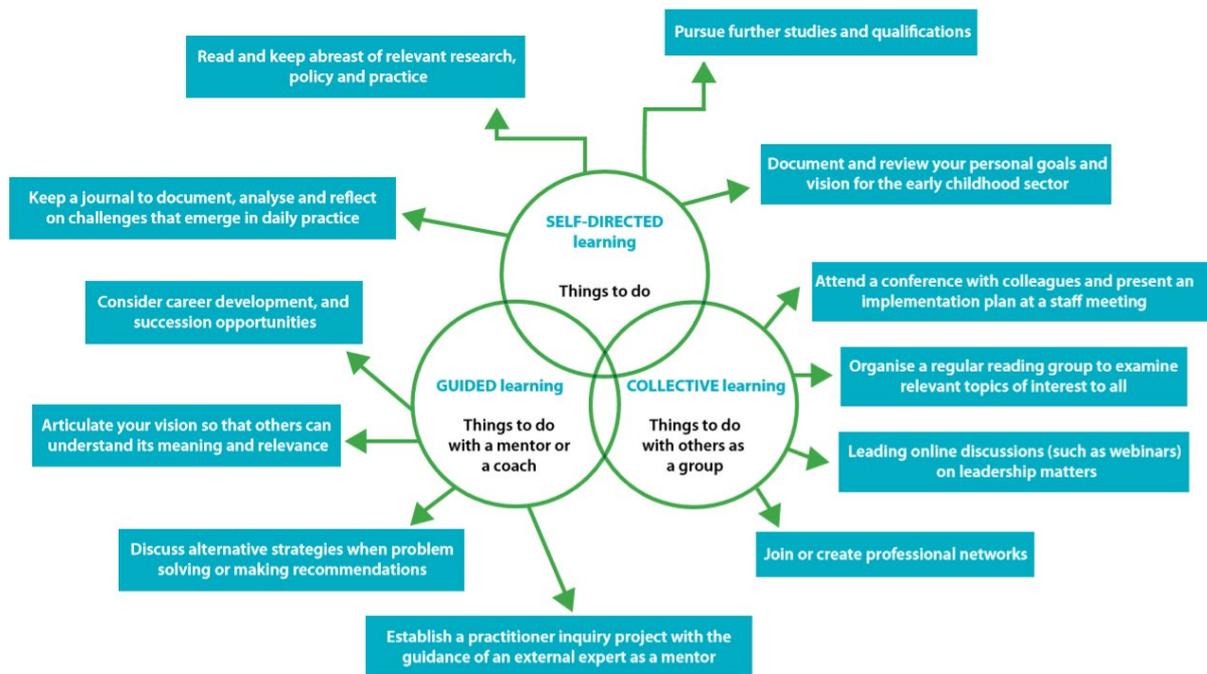


Figure 5: Ways of learning as early childhood leaders

Source: Waniganayake & Hadley, 2016, p. 5.

Policy proposals

The national workforce strategy must build on effective leadership development initiatives already underway, to share knowledge and best practice across the sector. This may include:

- **Recognising and supporting the role of the educational leader.** The educational leader is seen as a pivotal role in improving ECEC practice, but confusion remains about how the role is best defined and recognised. ACECQA has recently released a resource for educational leaders, defining the role and providing guidance (ACECQA, 2019). All governments can contribute to compiling evidence about how well this resource is serving the sector, in adapting the role to suit different services and contexts. Governments must also work with the sector on improving recognition and support for educational leaders.

Next step: Strengthen support and recognition for the educational leader role.

Roundtable discussion point: Defining the role of the educational leader

Leadership in ECEC was identified as a major challenge in the sector. The role of educational leader reportedly often falls to educators who are underprepared for the responsibilities (including young and inexperienced educators), or who are not remunerated appropriately.

Greater clarity around the role of educational leader was seen as desirable, but not at the expense of professional autonomy. Compliance-oriented descriptions of the role are seen as unhelpful, with a preference for principles that can be adapted to different ECEC contexts. Empowering practitioners to be able to describe their own leadership was also desirable.

Some Roundtable participants suggested a minimum qualification requirement for educational leaders, although there were differences in opinion about an appropriate minimum. One option was an additional micro-credential in adult learning, which educational leaders could gain to equip them to support the learning and development of other educators in their service.

Professional identity was seen as even more important to leadership than other levels of practice, with some participations noting the absence of a professional association for ECEC leaders, and absence of a sector-wide view about what a good room leader knows and does.

A potential role for government in ECEC leadership development emerged most strongly in managing leaders' workloads, to reduce the stress associated with a leadership role.

- **Promoting best practice in leadership development.** A wealth of research and programs are emerging to demonstrate effective leadership in ECEC, for example:
 - **Aboriginal Educators Leadership Initiatives** are being established in NSW, in consultation with stakeholders (NSW Department of Education, 2018).
 - **Place-based, network-oriented leadership development** is being piloted in Queensland; as well as development of an industry-endorsed team leadership skill set under the Higher Levels Skills Program (Queensland Government, 2015a). One Roundtable participant noted that such programs must involve for-profit and not-for-profit ECEC services, to promote best practice across the sector (Roundtable, 2020).
 - **Recent Australian research into early childhood leadership** has examined:
 - The centrality of relationships to ECEC leadership (Semann, 2018)
 - Major challenges in ECEC leadership, with 'managing staff' emerging as the most

difficult and time-consuming concern (Alchin et al., 2019, p. 293)

- The need to balance compliance and innovation (Gibbs et al., 2019)
- The tension between meeting external requirements for leadership, such as engaging with business owners, and working closely alongside staff to build strong professional cultures and practices (Sims et al., 2019)
- Distinctiveness of preschool leadership (Barnes et al., 2019)
- The contrast between internally-focused, individualistic models of leadership in Australia, and Scandinavian ECEC leadership models that involve more co-leadership and collaboration with other services (Halttunen et al., 2019)
- The 'dark side' of early childhood leadership (Brooker & Cumming, 2019, p. 111)
- The tension between empowering all educators as professionals, and positioning the educational leader as responsible for improving practice (Nuttall et al., 2018)
- The importance of leadership in implementing the NQS, and positioning the NQS as a focus for quality improvement (Barblett & Kirk, 2018)
- The challenges of ECEC leaders being required to mediate between the 'imagined' and 'actual' effects of policy reforms (Nuttall et al., 2014, p. 358)
- The role of action research in ECEC leadership (Henderson, 2017), which has led to a major current research project on 'learning-rich leadership'
- The dominance of masculine knowledge about leadership, and the need for feminist and postcolonial approaches (Davis, Krieg, & Smith, 2015, p. 131).

This research may help to inform identification and promotion of best practice in ECEC leadership, and stimulate dialogue between the sector and policy-makers about how a distinctive model of leadership for the ECEC sector can best be supported.

Next step: Identify exemplary leaders, possibly as part of an 'ECEC Champions' initiative.

4.2 Recognising professional expertise

The progression through higher levels of expertise for ECEC educators is primarily set out in the progression through higher levels of qualification, from certificate, to diploma, to degree (and then to postgraduate study). Industrial arrangements associate educators' progression to a higher qualification with higher levels of pay, and typically greater levels of responsibility.

This structure offers a clear 'pipeline' for career advancement (Early Learning: Everyone Benefits, 2019, p. 31), up to degree-qualified level. Yet there are significant disadvantages:

- Educators at degree-qualified level have limited opportunities for advancement, compared to school teachers (who may progress through increasing levels of proficiency). While the Educational Leader role offers a potential mechanism for career advancement, there is wide variability in how this role is defined and remunerated across Australia.
- Educators in infant and toddler rooms who choose to advance their careers by obtaining a degree are likely to be redeployed to preschool age groups.
- Educators have limited opportunities to have other increases in expertise recognised for career progression, if they do not choose to undertake a higher qualification.

To address these issues, future strategies for career advancement need to consider the qualifications 'pipeline' alongside other opportunities for educators' expertise to be recognised.

Policy proposals

The national workforce strategy could set out a coordinated national approach to pathways through different levels of ECEC qualifications, as well as other methods by which educators can gain recognition for increased professional expertise. Proposals to consider include:

- **Agreeing on a national approach to qualification pathways.** There remains considerable variability in pathways through different ECEC qualifications, including in credit transfers for articulation between VET and higher education; in recognition of prior learning; and in the delivery of ECEC certificates and diplomas as distinct or nested VET courses. While credit recognition must ultimately remain at the discretion of individual providers, there is scope for government to take a role in defining more coherent articulation pathways between higher education and VET, across all areas of learning (Dawkins et al., 2019). This may include a national repository of information about ECEC courses, including opportunities for advanced standing (Roundtable, 2020).

Local examples of qualification pathways may also provide valuable insights for policy, given the variation in approaches across states and territories. The ECEC sector may also benefit from the Australian Skills Quality Authority's current investigation of partnerships between universities and VET providers (Roundtable, 2020).

Next step: Work with tertiary education sector leaders to strengthen pathways and credit.

- **Promoting and supporting upskilling pathways.** A major recent study on educators upskilling from diploma to degree found that many educators were simply unaware of the job opportunities and higher remuneration for degree-qualified roles. The study suggested:
 - **provision of clear advice** about study options and job opportunities
 - **guaranteed jobs for ECEC teachers** upon graduation (FutureTracks, 2019).

Other studies have also identified the need to support educators articulating from diploma to degree (Hadley & Andrews, 2015), to bridge the gap between VET and university curriculum, pedagogy and assessment (Whittington et al., 2009). The clarification of what exactly VET and university ECEC courses offer (discussed above) may assist in defining an appropriate scope for such support, and appropriate role of government in providing it.

Next step: Promote VET–university pathways, recognising each sector's distinctive value.

- **Co-designing alternative models of recognition for high-performing educators.** Not all educators want to advance their careers by pursuing higher qualifications (Roundtable, 2020). There is a potential role for government in facilitating dialogue about other ways in which educators' expertise could be recognised and rewarded, including for expert degree-qualified and VET-qualified educators who do not wish to pursue university study. This would require a well-established performance review and support program, with clear expectations for how performance is recognised and assessed (Roundtable, 2020).

A range of recognition options are available for expert educators who do not want to leave their roles. In school education, professional leave opportunities have proven popular for rewarding expert teachers, without requiring further study or transition to a leadership role. In NSW, grants have been made available for going to conferences or other events, which could also provide mechanisms for rewarding expert practitioners (NSW Department of Education, 2018). More formal structures for recognition could be considered as part of a sustainable model of remuneration for ECEC, discussed in the first section of this paper.

Next step: Work with sector leaders to explore recognition for high-performing educators.

A collaborative way forward

The Australian early childhood sector has made great strides forward in the last two decades. Through a landmark suite of national reforms, all Australian governments have worked together to lift access and quality in ECEC services, to the benefit of children and families.

This progress results from collaboration between state, territory and federal governments; and between policy-makers, sector leaders, practitioners, service users and researchers. This collaboration must be sustained, if the momentum from the National Quality Agenda is to continue. More work must still be done, to embed quality across the ECEC sector, and ensure that Australia's children are served by skilled, professional educators in every ECEC setting.

This paper has identified many opportunities for governments to take a concerted national approach to the recruitment, preparation, professional development and career progression of early childhood educators in Australia. It has canvassed promising new policy directions, as well as longstanding issues that remain unaddressed. An effective national ECEC strategy will not shy away from the most challenging issues in the ECEC sector, but will recognise that all governments have a responsibility to work with other stakeholders to address them.

The paper has not attempted to specify exactly how these policy proposals may be designed and implemented in each of Australia's states and territories. Neither has it addressed the contributions that will be required from ECEC employers, families, communities and educators themselves to bring these proposals to fruition. The variability in ECEC systems across Australian states and territories means that one-size-fits-all implementation plans are unlikely to be viable, and a variety of local actors will be need to mobilised to achieve common goals.

What is clear is the need for shared commitment to tackle the enduring challenges facing the ECEC workforce collaboratively. COVID-19 put the current collective ECEC policy effort to the test, and exposed cracks in the system where responsibility is unclear or fragmented. At the same time, the crisis showed that governments, employers, families and communities all value ECEC as an 'essential service' that undergirds Australia's social and economic fabric. It also revealed the strengths of educators themselves, and their dedication to children and families.

The paper aims to provoke dialogue between policy-makers, researchers, and other ECEC stakeholders, about how these challenges may best be addressed. Together, it is possible to create an ECEC sector in which all educators, children, and families can grow and thrive.

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Appendix 1 – Roundtable participants

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Associate Professor Lennie Barblett
Dr Jo Bird
Dr Wendy Boyd
Dr Sandra Cheeseman
Dora Chin-Tan
Dr Tamara Cumming
Dr Sue Elliot
Associate Professor Marianne Fenech
Dr Stacey Fox
Dr Megan Gibson
Professor Susan Grieshaber
Associate Professor Fay Hadley
Professor Linda Harrison
Dr Kate Highfield
Professor Susan Irvine
Catherine Jones
Alexandra Jones
Associate Professor Marianne Knaus
Dr Kate Liley
Dr Helen Logan
Professor Joanne Lunn
Professor Andrea Nolan
Professor Jocelyn Nuttall
Dr Andrea Salamon
Anthony Semann
Professor Margaret Sims
Dr Jen Skattebol
Steph Waddon
Professor Manjula Waniganayake
Associate Professor Sandie Wong
Associate Professor Christine Woodrow
Professor Nicola Yelland

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Edith Cowan University
University of New England
Southern Cross University
C&K
Department of Education, Skills and Employment
Charles Sturt University
University of New England
University of Sydney
The Front Project
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La Trobe University
Macquarie University
Macquarie University
Early Childhood Australia
Queensland University of Technology
Macquarie University
NSW Department of Education
Edith Cowan University
Goodstart
Charles Sturt University
Queensland University of Technology
Deakin University
Australian Catholic University
Charles Sturt University
Semann Slattery
University of New England
University of NSW
PricewaterhouseCoopers
Macquarie University
Macquarie University
Western Sydney University
University of Melbourne