

Early childhood education

- 3.1 Early childhood education in Australia can take a variety of forms, including child care services, which provide education and care services to children between 0-12 years of age, and preschool services, which involve a structured, play-based learning program delivered by a qualified teacher to children in the year or two before they start full time schooling.¹
- 3.2 Whereas the importance of early childhood education to overall educational and health outcomes is well documented,² barriers to access in regional, rural and remote communities have resulted in lower participation in these areas.³ The previous chapter examined a range of barriers to education that are external to education systems and impact on outcomes across a child's education journey, including in the early years.
- 3.3 This chapter examines the importance of early childhood education in rural, regional and remote communities and steps that can be taken to improve quality and participation. Current issues with the provision of early childhood education in regional, rural and remote communities include cost, difficulties with access including the unavailability of services and staff, variable quality and funding.

1 Australian Government Productivity Commission, *Report on Government Services 2020*, 4 February 2020, <<https://www.pc.gov.au/research/ongoing/report-on-government-services/2020/child-care-education-and-training/early-childhood-education-and-care/rogs-2020-partb-section3.pdf>>, accessed 23 June 2020.

2 Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC), *Submission 1*, p. 12; Western Australian Government, *Submission 6*, p. 4; Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia Inc. (ICPA Australia), *Submission 7*, p. 3; Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA), *Submission 12*, p. 3; Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC), *Submission 15*, p. 2; Community Connections Solutions Australia (CCSA), *Submission 24*, p. 3; Early Childhood Australia (ECA), *Submission 27*, p. 2; Australian Education Union (AEU), *Submission 43*, p. 5.

3 ECA, *Submission 27*, p. 2; ACECQA, *Submission 12*, p. 7; AEU, *Submission 43*, p. 6.

Importance

3.4 A large number of children participate in some form of early childhood education. In 2018, 533,889 children were enrolled in a preschool program and in 2019, around 31.5 per cent of children between 0-12 years of age attended government approved child care centres.⁴

3.5 Research indicates that early childhood education can improve long term education and health outcomes for its participants. As noted by the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA):

There is a large body of research that shows high quality early childhood education and care leads to better health, employment and education outcomes later in life. Brain architecture and function develops rapidly during early childhood, making it a vital time for establishing competencies which will support children's medium and long term outcomes.⁵

3.6 The Australian Education Union (AEU) also emphasised the importance of early childhood education to health, education and employment outcomes:

This position is informed by a strong body of national and international evidence on the importance of quality programs in the early childhood years to a child's social and educational development, with flow-on benefits to better health, education and employment outcomes later in life.⁶

3.7 Similarly, Community Connections Solutions Australia (CCSA) stated:

Child development research indicates the importance of engaging young children in the formative years from birth through to starting formal school: language and problem-solving, self-regulation, creativity and collaboration with others are all skills that develop throughout the early years.⁷

3.8 The Nomads Charitable and Educational Foundation (NCEF) noted that the provision of pre-formal schooling opportunities is particularly essential for young children from disadvantaged communities. It said that these services are vital 'in nurturing the emotional, physical, and

4 Australian Government Productivity Commission, *Report on Government Services 2020*, 4 February 2020, <<https://www.pc.gov.au/research/ongoing/report-on-government-services/2020/child-care-education-and-training/early-childhood-education-and-care/rogs-2020-partb-section3.pdf>>, accessed 23 June 2020.

5 ACECQA, *Submission 12*, p. 3.

6 AEU, *Submission 43*, p. 5.

7 CCSA, *Submission 24*, p. 2.

intellectual development of the young children of the community, ensuring smoother transitions into schooling'.⁸

Quality

3.9 ACECQA reported that improved outcomes are dependent to some extent on the quality of the programs delivered, and noted the findings of an Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) study:

The ABS analysed the links between developmental vulnerabilities of children when they started fulltime school, their experiences of approved education and care programs in the previous two years, and their teachers' perceptions of their home learning experiences. The project found a moderate relationship between service quality as measured by performance against the NQS [National Quality Standard] and lower developmental vulnerability in the language and cognitive domain.⁹

3.10 The quality of services is an issue for many regional, rural and remote communities. All National Quality Framework (NQF) approved early childhood education services are given a public quality rating. As noted by ACECQA, education and care services in remote and very remote areas are less likely than other services to be rated as meeting or exceeding quality standards.¹⁰

Access and equity

3.11 While the benefits of early childhood education are reportedly greater for children from low income families and those living in isolated areas,¹¹ there is a 'range of barriers [that] may hinder access, including cost, lack of transport, staffing issues, lack of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff and a lower availability of high quality education and care in low income and disadvantaged areas.'¹²

3.12 These barriers have resulted in lower participation among vulnerable groups, such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. For example, World Vision reported that there is a range of 'key structural barriers that need addressing if First Nations children in many remote

8 Nomads Charitable and Educational Foundation (NCEF), *Submission 66*, p. 13.

9 ACECQA, *Submission 12*, p. 4.

10 ACECQA, *Submission 12*, p. 5.

11 CCSA, *Submission 24*, p. 3.

12 ACECQA, *Submission 12*, p. 7.

communities are to make successful transitions to formal education', including a lack of physical infrastructure to support families and a lack of well-developed, holistic transition programs for children commencing formal schooling.¹³

- 3.13 The AEU raised concerns that in 2018 only 86.4 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander four-year-old children were enrolled in early childhood education, compared with a 91.3 per cent enrolment rate for other children.¹⁴
- 3.14 The Central Land Council (CLC) reported that just 43 per cent of students enrolled in early childhood education in very remote areas of the Northern Territory attended for the recommended 600 hours per year.¹⁵
- 3.15 According to Goodstart Early Learning, 'Indigenous children and children likely to be vulnerable or experiencing disadvantage are not participating at the same rates as their peers, with the lowest attendance rates in very remote areas.'¹⁶
- 3.16 Attendance at preschool was noted to be one of the factors affecting school attendance in later years, with children who had attended more than 30 days of preschool also attending 18 more days at school per year.¹⁷
- 3.17 The AEU suggested that there could be a return on an investment in quality early childhood education, as 'there are long-term cost benefits associated with investment in the provision of universal access to quality ECE which will pay significant national dividends in the future.'¹⁸
- 3.18 The provision of universal access to early childhood education was also recommended by the Report of the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools through Early Childhood Interventions ('Lifting Our Game', 2017), which stated:

Quality early childhood education and care is best considered as an investment, not a cost. Investment in early childhood education provides a strong return, with a variety of studies indicating benefits of 2-4 times the costs. Significant fiscal benefits flow to both the Commonwealth and state and territory governments. These benefits are greater – often substantially so – for programs targeted at vulnerable or disadvantaged children.¹⁹

13 World Vision, *Submission 51*, p. 6.

14 AEU, *Submission 43*, p. 6.

15 Central Land Council (CLC), *Submission 9*, p. 7.

16 Goodstart Early Learning, *Submission 26*, p. 1.

17 Goodstart Early Learning, *Submission 26*, p. 1.

18 AEU, *Submission 43*, p. 5.

19 Pascoe, S & Brennan, D, *Lifting our Game: Report of the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in*

Breaking down the barriers

- 3.19 To reduce some of the barriers to early childhood education access, the AEU recommended the Commonwealth:
- Guarantee permanent, adequate funding for Universal Access to 600 hours per year of quality early childhood education program in the year before school
 - Promote and support full participation by three- and four-year-olds in quality early childhood education programs, in particular to maximise participation by vulnerable or disadvantaged children
 - Agree to a new national early childhood education and care workforce strategy to support the recruitment, retention, sustainability and enhanced professionalisation of the workforce, thereby improving service quality and children's outcomes
 - Give priority attention to achieving the Closing the Gap target of 95 per cent Indigenous enrolment in preschool education across all regions of Australia
 - Give priority attention to the advocacy and implementation of best practice ECE measures shown to be effective in maximising enrolments and outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children.²⁰
- 3.20 State and territory initiatives have attempted to address access barriers, with initiatives such as:
- Families as First Teachers (NT): A dual generational early learning program that works with families and children in remote Indigenous communities prior to school entry, and
 - eKindy Pods (QLD): Kindergarten (preschool) experiences for groups of 2-4 children, delivered in community venues or state schools in rural and remote communities.²¹
- 3.21 The Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC) highlighted the role of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled services, including Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Services (MACS) and Aboriginal Child and Family Centres, in reducing 'service-level barriers and facilitating access to early childhood education and care, as well as other forms of child and family support.'²²
- 3.22 At the roundtable hearing on 2 September 2020, Early Childhood Australia (ECA) said that 'services in small communities need to be

Australian Schools through Early Childhood Interventions, 2017, p. 6.

20 AEU, *Submission 43*, p. 9.

21 ECA, *Submission 27*, p. 9.

22 SNAICC, *Submission 15*, p. 4.

multifaceted, integrated child and family supports as well as early childhood education.’²³ ECA commented:

Currently, the funding models don’t allow for that to happen very easily and we’re relying on organisations piecing together a patchwork of funding from different sources and different levels of government. We would like a more integrated approach to that.²⁴

3.23 ECA reported that the biggest barrier for providing integrated service models such as MACS is:

the lack of a coordinated approach to funding parenting and family support programs, early childhood education, maternal child health and allied health services in one location and being able to pool funding across different sources of that. From the perspective of the childcare subsidy system, we would need to be able to cash out the childcare subsidy for a particular community and provide that as a grant to be combined with other grants.²⁵

3.24 ECA argued that a national approach is needed and recommended the development of a national early learning strategy for regional, rural and remote Australia. ECA noted that a national program of work will require coordination across jurisdictions, and advocated for the Education Council of the Council of Australian Governments to take on this role.²⁶

Child Care Subsidy

3.25 There is evidence that financial support can significantly improve participation in early childhood education. For example, when New South Wales implemented the Preschool Funding Model, which provided funding for two years of preschool for disadvantaged and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, the enrolled number of children in the lowest socio-economic group increased by 27 per cent and the number of Indigenous children enrolled increased by 52 per cent.²⁷

3.26 As reported by the Department of Education, Skills and Employment (DESE), the government provided \$8.6 billion to families through the

23 Ms Samantha Page, Chief Executive Officer, ECA, *Committee Hansard*, 2 September 2020, Canberra, p. 2.

24 Ms Samantha Page, Chief Executive Officer, ECA, *Committee Hansard*, 2 September 2020, Canberra, p. 2.

25 Ms Samantha Page, Chief Executive Officer, ECA, *Committee Hansard*, 2 September 2020, Canberra, p. 2.

26 ECA, *Submission 27*, p. 9.

27 Pascoe, S & Brennan, D, *Lifting our Game: Report of the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools through Early Childhood Interventions*, 2017, p. 33.

Child Care Package in 2019-20, with this investment to increase over the next few years to approximately \$10 billion a year. This package included the Child Care Subsidy (CCS) and the Additional Child Care Subsidy for families and children suffering disadvantage.²⁸

- 3.27 The Isolated Children's Parents' Association of Australia Inc. (ICPA Australia) noted that while all jurisdictions offer early learning programs delivered by distance education, families accessing the programs bear 'the entire cost associated with administering, resourcing and teaching the lessons.'²⁹ ICPA Australia noted that no support is available for early learning programs through the Assistance for Isolated Children (AIC) distance education allowance, and that CCS payments are unavailable because these children are still in their parents' care. As a result of this, 'less than 200 children access recognised 4-year-old programs in their homes through distance education'.³⁰
- 3.28 CCSA expressed concern that Budget Based Funding (BBF) early education services are being encouraged to transition to a CCS funding model, which 'will require close monitoring to ensure that this doesn't result in a further reduction in the availability of services in remote areas.'³¹
- 3.29 CCSA also reported:
- Many Aboriginal owned and operated early childhood services are anxious about their future due to funding uncertainty – either because they are concerned about the transition to mainstream subsidy arrangements or because of they have experienced a reduction in Commonwealth funding for Aboriginal Child and Family Centres or have concerns about short term funding they are receiving under the Indigenous Advancement Strategy.
- 3.30 World Vision was 'distressed by the lack of community-based early childhood programs in the communities in which we work', including those in the West Kimberley.³² It reported that with 'the introduction of a user pays child care system, these services lost their operational funding over time and, with the loss of secure operational funding, the State government stopped investing in the upkeep and maintenance of the buildings which are now unusable in many cases.'³³

28 DESE, *Submission 49*, p. 8.

29 ICPA, *Submission 7*, p. 3.

30 ICPA, *Submission 7*, p. 3.

31 CCSA, *Submission 24*, p. 4.

32 World Vision, *Submission 51*, p. 10.

33 World Vision, *Submission 51*, p. 10.

- 3.31 SNAICC was concerned that the 'Activity Test introduced by the Child Care Package in 2018 halved the minimum number of subsidised hours of child care available to families that do not meet specified work and study requirements from 24 to 12.'³⁴
- 3.32 SNAICC contrasted this with evidence supporting 'a minimum of 30 hours per week in age-appropriate early education and care programs for children experiencing disadvantage, with the potential for flexibility based on an individual child's needs', noting that this is 'far more than what current government subsidies allow.'³⁵
- 3.33 According to SNAICC, the changes to the Child Care Package have resulted in 'a significant number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families dropping out of early education and care services altogether.'³⁶
- 3.34 SNAICC called for the government to 'amend the Activity Test within the Child Care Subsidy to provide up to 30 hours per week of subsidised early education and care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, without parents having to meet any work or study requirements.'³⁷

Mobile services

- 3.35 The National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) noted that early childhood attendance rates decrease with remoteness, with only 79 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in very remote areas attending pre-school, compared with 88 per cent of children in remote areas and 95 per cent of children in major cities. The NIAA noted many of these communities are 'some distance from the nearest provider', citing the example of Maningrida in the Northern Territory, where the nearest early childhood services are up to 170 kilometres away.³⁸
- 3.36 There are several mobile services that deliver early childhood education in remote areas of Australia, such as the Katharine Isolated Children's Service (KICS). KICS operates a mobile supported playgroup service, involving teams travelling to remote families and setting up outdoor playgroups.³⁹

34 SNAICC, *Submission 15*, p. 6.

35 SNAICC, *Submission 15*, p. 7.

36 SNAICC, *Submission 15*, p. 7.

37 SNAICC, *Submission 15*, p. 13.

38 National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA), *Submission 63*, p. 6.

39 Katharine Isolated Children's Service (KICS), *Submission 31*, p. 4.

- 3.37 KICS reported that the provision of mobile services in remote areas is particularly challenging. Operators face the usual transport challenges applicable to remote areas, such as high transport costs and navigation of dirt roads, as well as more specific funding issues. KICS also reported that the funding is not tailored to their particular needs, citing as an example their inability to obtain funding for a new vehicle.⁴⁰
- 3.38 ECA noted that some early learning services, such as mobile services, are not eligible for operational grants and fee subsidies because they work within the Early Years Learning Framework, rather than the National Quality Framework. ECA suggested that 'in order to support early learning in remote areas, the Australian government must be prepared to look beyond a one-size-fits-all approach to business support.'⁴¹
- 3.39 ICPA Australia expressed concern that funding for mobile playgroups is provided on a temporary basis, and that there is no funding available for KICS to expand into surrounding areas. ICPA Australia called for 'flexibility and surety of funding for these services'.⁴²

Workforce issues

- 3.40 The availability of appropriately qualified early childhood educators was raised as a significant challenge for the sector. As noted by ACECQA, 'there are persistent and increasingly pressing issues relating to the attraction, supply and retention of educators and early childhood teachers, particularly for providers in remote, regional and low socio-economic status areas.'⁴³
- 3.41 The relatively low wages of early childhood educators reportedly add to the already significant retention issues faced by services in remote areas. This issue is particularly challenging for small businesses.
- 3.42 KICS advised that it is unable to provide its staff with the same pay and conditions as the NT government's Families and First Teachers educators, who work alongside KICS staff at mobile playgroup venues.⁴⁴
- 3.43 The Town of Port Hedland reported that both small businesses and not-for-profit organisations in the area had high operational costs, noting that

40 KICS, *Submission 31*, p. 6.

41 ECA, *Submission 27*, p. 13.

42 ICPA Australia, *Submission 7*, p. 3.

43 ACECQA, *Submission 12*, p. 10.

44 KICS, *Submission 31*, p. 1.

the resource sector dominates the region's economy and provides high wages and subsidised housing to its employees.⁴⁵

- 3.44 According to the Town of Port Hedland, staff recruitment and retention for businesses that offer lower paid categories of employment such as childcare, 'struggle to navigate these challenges which are exacerbated during boom periods when wages and other costs escalate.'⁴⁶
- 3.45 Regulatory requirements, particularly around education and training for staff, were also raised as an issue for remote services. For example the Isolated Children's Parents' Association Queensland (ICPA Qld) were concerned that recent changes to child care qualification requirements 'have seen a shortage of suitably qualified educators to be employed as governesses on remote properties.'⁴⁷
- 3.46 Similarly, the Town of Port Hedland noted that educator-child quotas and qualifications 'are key to achieving child learning and safety outcomes', but reported that 'the capacity to meet recruitment and training needs in the context of low childcare wages and a high cost scenario is challenging.'⁴⁸
- 3.47 To address these workforce issues, the Town of Port Hedland advocated for:
- Co-contributions for infrastructure where private sector investment in early learning and care centres cannot be effectively secured to meet demand
 - Reasonable average rates of pay for childcare workers as an incentive for attraction to the profession
 - Mechanisms for staff attraction and retention (i.e. regional incentives/subsidies)
 - Funding for remote childcare training packages.⁴⁹
- 3.48 SNAICC called for the government to 'deliver an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early education and care workforce development strategy to expand and build capacity of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce and strengthen the cultural competence of the mainstream workforce.'⁵⁰

45 Town of Port Headland, *Submission 58*, p. 4.

46 Town of Port Headland, *Submission 58*, p. 5.

47 Isolated Children's Parents' Association Queensland (ICPA QLD), *Submission 4*, p. 2.

48 Town of Port Headland, *Submission 58*, p. 5.

49 Port Headland, *Submission 58*, p. 6.

50 SNAICC, *Submission 15*, p. 13.

- 3.49 ACECQA provided a number of examples of state and territory initiatives to overcome workforce issues in remote communities, but noted that these issues are 'systemic and require high level (national or multi-jurisdictional) solutions to make a meaningful impact on quality.'⁵¹ ACECQA also noted that Education Ministers recently endorsed the development of a new children's education and care national workforce strategy (December 2019).⁵²

Summary and discussion

- 3.50 Key issues examined in this chapter are:
- The provision of adequate, quality early childhood education is critical to ensuring all children receive the best start to their education journey
 - The benefits of adequate, quality early childhood education are greater for disadvantaged and developmentally vulnerable children
 - As with other stages of education, improved outcomes in early childhood education are dependent on the quality of the services delivered. The quality of early childhood education is lower in regional, rural and remote locations compared to metropolitan areas
 - Barriers to access to early childhood education in regional, rural and remote communities are consistent with those examined in chapter 2, and include cost, a lack of availability and choice in providers within a reasonable distance, lack of transport, staffing issues (including the lack of trained Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff), and concerns about quality
 - Financial support such as the CCS can significantly improve participation in early childhood education. Concerns were raised that changes to the Activity Test in the CCS in 2018 reduced the minimum number of subsidised hours of child care available to families that do not meet specified work and study requirements
 - Early childhood attendance decreases with remoteness. Options to deliver early childhood education in very remote locations include mobile services and delivery via distance education:
 - ⇒ It was reported that mobile services have high transport costs and require greater flexibility and surety in their funding, for example to enable the purchase of vehicles; and, are not eligible for operational

51 ACECQA, *Submission 12*, p. 10.

52 ACECQA, *Submission 12*, p. 10.

grants and fee subsidies because they work within the Early Years Learning Framework, rather than the National Quality Framework, and

⇒ It was reported that very few families access recognised early childhood programs in their homes through distance education. It was suggested this is because there is no support available for early learning programs through the AIC distance education allowance, and that the CCS is unavailable because these children are still in their parents' care.

■ A range of workforce issues were raised, including:

⇒ Concerns about the recruitment and retention of early childhood educators in regional, rural and remote communities and in low socio-economic status areas. Low wages were cited as a factor limiting recruitment and retention

⇒ Concerns about the capacity of child care providers to meet the high costs of recruitment and training needs, and

⇒ Concerns about the cultural competency of staff working in Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander communities.

■ To address these challenges, there was support for:

⇒ Universal access to early childhood education in the year before school

⇒ Amending the Activity Test in the CCS to provide up to 30 hours per week of subsidised early education and care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, without parents having to meet any work or study requirements

⇒ The development of a national early learning strategy for regional, rural and remote Australia to improve coordination across jurisdictions

⇒ Improving the training of early childhood educators

⇒ Improving the cultural competency of non-Indigenous early childhood educators in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and

⇒ The provision of early childhood education as part of holistic family support services, particularly in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. There is support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisations to play a greater role in delivering these services to their communities.

3.51 The committee is aware that the COVID-19 pandemic has caused an unprecedented disruption to Australia's early childhood sector and has

challenged the viability of many providers. The government has made a range of significant changes to respond to these challenges,⁵³ and the major shutdown of the Victorian economy in August 2020 suggests that further changes may be required.

Relevant Closing the Gap target

- 3.52 In relation to early childhood education, the Closing the Gap agreement includes the target to increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children enrolled in Year Before Fulltime Schooling (YBFS) early childhood education to 95 per cent by 2025.⁵⁴

Conclusion

- 3.53 Access to quality early childhood education gives children the best chance to thrive when they reach school and sets them up for success later in life.
- 3.54 While quality early childhood education is important for all children, it is particularly vital for children who are experiencing disadvantage or are developmentally vulnerable.
- 3.55 The committee is concerned that children in regional, rural and remote communities are more likely to experience disadvantage and developmental vulnerability than those in cities; are less likely to access early childhood education; that the quality of early childhood education is lower than in metropolitan areas; and, that early childhood education providers in regional, rural and remote locations struggle to recruit and retain quality staff.
- 3.56 Under the current system, services choose their employees' wages and the minimum wage is determined by the independent body, the Fair Work Commission. The Government does not set wages and services are not limited to the minimum wage.
- 3.57 The committee is aware that all Australian education Ministers have endorsed the development of a new children's education and care national

53 The Hon Dan Tehan MP, Minister for Education, 'COVID-19: Early Childhood Education and Care Relief Package - from Monday 6 April additional support for Early Childhood Education and Child Care Services and their families', *Media release*, 2 April 2020; The Hon Dan Tehan MP, Minister for Education, 'Additional funding for Early Childhood Education and Care Relief Package', *Media release*, 22 May 2020; The Hon Dan Tehan MP, Minister for Education, 'Transition arrangements for the end of the Early Childhood and Care Relief Package', *Media release*, 8 June 2020.

54 Commonwealth of Australia, *National Agreement on Closing the Gap*, July 2020, <<https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/sites/default/files/files/national-agreement-ctg.pdf?q=0720>> viewed 30 July 2020, pp. 19-20.

workforce strategy to support the recruitment, retention, sustainability and quality of the early childhood services workforce.⁵⁵It is the committee's view that the children's education and care national workforce strategy should outline how Australian governments will improve access to early childhood education and care in regional, rural and remote communities.

- 3.58 All governments, state and federal, along with service providers, should work together to develop workforce training, recruiting and retention strategies.
- 3.59 Measures that improve the cultural competency of staff working in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and support the development and professionalisation of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early childhood education and care workforce are supported by the committee.

Recommendation 4

- 3.60 **The committee recommends the Minister for Education develop proposals to be incorporated in the new children's education and care national workforce strategy in 2021 that:**
- **address barriers to access to quality early childhood education and care in regional, rural and remote communities, including cost**
 - **improve the cultural competency of staff working in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and**
 - **support the development and professionalisation of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early childhood education and care workforce.**
- 3.61 There are clear benefits associated with the provision of wrap-around models of early intervention, family support, early childhood education and health care in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, such as Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Services. The provision of integrated family services in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities could be enhanced by providing greater flexibility and surety in funding for these important services.

55 Education Council, *Communiqué*, 12 December 2019, Alice Springs, p. 5.

Recommendation 5

- 3.62 **The committee recommends that, as part of its 2021 policy commitments to Closing the Gap, the Commonwealth provide greater flexibility and surety in funding for wrap-around models of early intervention, family support, early childhood education and health care in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.**
- 3.63 The provision of universal access in Australia to early childhood education in the year before schooling has many potential benefits. The committee recognises this potential, but notes that such a policy would come at a significant financial cost that would need to be balanced by the government against other considerations as Australia emerges from recession. The current child care policy settings already provide financial support to families who need it. Under the child care safety net, eligible families are able to receive up to a 120 per cent subsidy, which in most cases is free child care. Furthermore, families transitioning to work can already receive a 95 per cent subsidy and for all families, the child care subsidy rate is set at rate that was deemed affordable by the productivity commission, ensuring more support is given to those that need it. In addition programs such as the Inclusion Support Program and the Community Child Care Fund also support services to deliver care. Finally, regarding preschool, the year before school, the cost to parents is a jurisdiction matter of each state and territory.
- 3.64 The quality standards of the early childhood education and care sector in Australia are held in high esteem globally. In preschool, the year before school, a universal access national partnership is already in place with all jurisdictions and the jurisdictions are responsible for the quality of preschool. Furthermore, regarding child care, the Government is committed to providing financial support to families to have access to affordable and high quality care. ACECQA is the Commonwealth quality agency, of which all states and territories are active board members. ACECQA provides the national quality standards and the states are responsible for the delivery of quality in the child care sector.
- 3.65 The government has made a number of announcements about early childhood education in response to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the committee expects that further updates are likely in the coming months.
- 3.66 The committee notes that the government has introduced an Additional Child Care Subsidy that supplements fee assistance to support vulnerable

or disadvantaged families and children. Assistance is also available for families that have been impacted by COVID-19.

- 3.67 The committee notes that, nationally, the activity test has been eased until 4 April 2021 for Australian families whose employment has been affected by COVID-19.⁵⁶
- 3.68 The committee recognises that in many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, opportunities for work and study can be limited, and therefore the application of the activity test requirement risks penalising children for circumstances that may be outside of their families' control.
- 3.69 As part of the government's commitment to increase the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children enrolled in YBFS early childhood education to 95 per cent by 2025, the committee supports the activity test in the CCS being amended to provide up to 30 hours per week of subsidised early education and care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

Recommendation 6

- 3.70 **The committee recommends that, as part of its 2021 policy commitments to Closing the Gap, the Commonwealth provide up to 30 hours per week of subsidised early education and care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.**
- 3.71 The committee recognises that, due to geographic isolation, many families cannot access early childhood education in the usual way. These families rely on mobile services and early learning programs provided by distance education.
- 3.72 The committee is concerned that mobile early childhood education services are not eligible for operational grants and fee subsidies because they work within the Early Years Learning Framework, rather than the National Quality Framework.

Recommendation 7

- 3.73 **The committee recommends that the Commonwealth modify funding arrangements for mobile early childhood education to provide flexibility and surety of funding for these services in the 2021 Budget.**

56 DESE, *COVID-19 information for the early childhood education and care sector*, 20 September 2020, <<https://www.dese.gov.au/covid-19/childcare>>, accessed 24 September 2020.

- 3.74 The committee is concerned by evidence suggesting fewer than 200 children access recognised 4-year-old programs in their homes through distance education.

Recommendation 8

- 3.75 **The committee recommends that the Commonwealth support early learning programs through the Assistance for Isolated Children Scheme Distance Education Allowance in the 2021 Budget.**