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Australian Early Childhood Teacher Education Network

April 26, 2023

SUBMISSION FROM THE AUSTRALIAN EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHER EDUCATION NETWORK (AECTEN)

EARLY YEARS STRATEGY

The Australian Early Childhood Teacher Education Network¹ (AECTEN) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to Australia's Early Years Strategy.

AECTEN comprises leaders of early childhood teacher education degree programs in the higher education sector across Australia. It has five branches: New South Wales/Australian Capital Territory; Victoria; Queensland; Western Australia/Northern Territory; and combined South Australia/Tasmania, representing in total, 42 higher education institutions. Established in October 2016, AECTEN advocates for the delivery of high-quality early childhood initial teacher education and seeks to inform national policy on key issues relating to early childhood education and the early childhood teacher workforce. In December 2017 AECTEN began operating as a network of the Australian Council of Deans of Education. AECTEN upholds the internationally accepted definitions of early childhood – understood to cover birth to eight years of age – and early childhood teachers as degree-qualified teachers equipped to teach children from birth and up to eight years.

AECTEN welcomes the vision of the Discussion Paper that all children have the best start in life. As highlighted in the Paper, the first five years are a critical period for a child's immediate and ongoing development and wellbeing. We applaud the approach of the Australian Government to develop a wholistic national policy platform for the early years.

1. Do you have any comments on the proposed structure of the Strategy?

1.1 The proposed linear structure of the Strategy does not seem consistent with the boldness and complexity of the Strategy's national, wholistic approach to supporting children's outcomes. We consider that a cyclical, concentric design would be more appropriate, with the vision central and thus at the centre. The interrelationship between the different parts in the concentric design could also be illustrated.

1.2 Rather than "rules and guidelines", we view the Principles as fundamental values that should underpin the operationalisation of the Vision and frame the Strategy's Outcomes. As such, the Principles would be better placed around the Vision.

1.3 Similarly, the link to evidence in the current structure could be strengthened by positioning it more explicitly as a driver of the Strategy's Vision, Principles, Outcomes and Policy Priorities. Use of the term "evaluated" in Evidence is confusing. We propose

¹ See p. 8 for a list of AECTEN members and institutions.

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embedding evaluation into Indicators, so that it is clearer that policy priorities will be subject to a cycle of evaluation that will generate achievements

1.4 It is unclear whether Indicators are essentially targets. The term “measures” is confusing.

1.5 The structure could adopt a cyclical action research design akin to early childhood education and care pedagogies that adopt cyclical processes of teaching, learning and reflection.

2. What vision should our nation have for Australia’s youngest children?

2.1 The vision we propose is that:

Australia’s youngest children all experience rich and sustainable learning and care environments— in family, community, and early education contexts— that enable them to thrive.

This vision is consistent with children and their families being at the centre of the Strategy.

2.2 The Strategy’s vision should also align with the vision of the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration, which recognises the critical role quality early childhood education plays in the meeting of its vision for “a world class education system that encourages and supports every student to be the very best they can be, no matter where they live or what kind of learning challenges they may face” (p. 3).

3. What mix of outcomes are the most important to include in the Strategy?

3.1 Equitable access to quality early childhood education and care for all children, with priority given to children and families experiencing disadvantage. Access to quality education is a right for all and ought to be accessible irrespective of income or location.

3.2 All children reach their full potential in all aspects of development including physical, social, emotional, cognitive and language domains, with optimum health status through access to the best health care and education regardless of income or geographical location.

3.3 The Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration recognises the critical role quality early childhood education plays in the meeting of its vision for “a world class education system that encourages and supports every student to be the very best they can be, no matter where they live or what kind of learning challenges they may face” (p. 3). The commitment made by all governments in this Declaration to “strengthening early childhood education” (p. 7) should also be an outcome of the Strategy, particularly through the attraction, retention, and appropriate remuneration of quality early childhood teachers and educators.

3.4 Coordinated efforts to support children and families at the point of need (especially in relation to children and families affected by trauma)

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3.5 Children's security in early learning settings hinges on a stable, qualified, and equitably remunerated workforce. Given the current early childhood education and care workforce crisis, this outcome needs to be at the forefront of the Strategy.

3.6 Effective transitions, that are community responsive, child and family-centric, and involve early education, health and welfare professionals working collaboratively.

3.7 First Nations children are able to have full access to their culture and learn in first languages and practice Aboriginal ways of knowing, being and doing. First Nations children and families are prioritised and respected as the first peoples of this country. First Nations children and families have access to an education and care system that is culturally responsive, provides education in first languages where relevant and supports in place responsive solutions to current barriers to quality education and care. First Nations children and families are empowered to guide all decision making that affects education and care. First nations' perspectives should be embedded throughout the Strategy.

3.8 Transparency is key factor in the setting and meeting of Strategy outcomes. Timeframes are essential.

4. What specific areas /policy priorities should be included in the strategy and why?

4.1 With more than one in five children starting school developmentally vulnerable, and children from disadvantaged backgrounds underrepresented in early childhood education and care services, greater investment is needed to enable access and attendance of quality ECEC services by these children and their families.

4.2 The Strategy notes the limitations of siloed approaches, yet approaches to improving initial teacher education (i.e., the Teacher Education Expert Panel [TEEP]; Review of Initial teacher Education) exclude early childhood initial teacher education. A quality, sustained early childhood teacher workforce is critical to supporting children's developmental outcomes and wellbeing, yet there is a stark lack of policy attention in the initial teacher education space.

4.3 The ECEC sector has long been criticised for its patchwork and highly complex provisioning. A nationally consistent approach to quality early childhood education and care is urgently needed, supported by public provisioning and which like the school sector, prohibits profit making from early education. For-profit provisioning is clearly associated with low quality ECEC.

4.4 We recommend that the Early Years Strategy carefully considers the SA Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care and how this can inform Australia-wide reform.

4.5 We support a Voice to parliament so that empowerment is given to First Nations peoples in decisions that affect them.

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4.6 We recommend forming clear connections from prior-to-school to school settings, aligning the commencement of the Australian Curriculum alongside the use of the Early Years Learning Framework for children up to 8-years.

5. What could the Commonwealth do to improve outcomes for children- particularly those who are born or raised in more vulnerable and or disadvantaged circumstances?

5.1 Following point 4.1, greater resourcing of ECEC services located in areas of disadvantage is urgently needed. This resourcing needs to include strengthened regulations pertaining to the employment of early childhood teachers and ratio requirements. Engaging families experiencing adversity and working with children with high support needs simply cannot be done at current regulatory standards.

5.2 Removing the Activity test. The test is complex, an administrative burden, and a barrier for families to access ECEC.

5.3 Remove cost barriers and hours caps on access to wrap around health and wellbeing services and ECEC.

5.4 Address workforce issues and shortages for ECEC workforce and allied health professionals. Appropriate remuneration is critical.

5.5 Reduce inequity of early learning and care provision through equitably-funded and operated public childcare/schooling for children from birth.

5.6 Provide services with a focus on mental health and wellbeing “under one roof” with support for those living in rural and remote communities to ensure equal access.

5.7 Raise awareness among parents regarding young children’s developmental needs and the importance of learning through play.

5.8 Empower and equip parents with knowledge to support their children’s learning and development, and to identify areas of need.

5.9 Provision of ongoing committed funding to services and programs not short project-based contingent funding that runs out and disappears leaving communities vulnerable again.

6. What areas do you think the Commonwealth should focus on to improve coordination and collaboration in developing policies for children and families?

6.1 Increased consistency in policy in ECEC services across the country with a less fragmented, cumbersome system.

6.2 Transition policies that are child-centric and place children’s wellbeing as the priority when making decisions at the employment/care nexus.

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6.3 Development of streamlined accessible hub of support for all children and their families to find the unique support they need.

6.4 Listen to First Nations people as expert informants for ALL children, not just First Nations children.

7. What principles should be included in the Strategy?

7.1 The Strategy's principles or values should drive ensuing outcomes, policy priorities, and indicators.

7.2 Principles should align with those of the National Quality Framework. In particular:

- the rights and best interests of children are paramount.
- equity, inclusion and diversity.
- Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are valued. The Strategy must be grounded in a view of Australian First Nations peoples as strong, capable and competent, rather than in terms of 'gap' and disadvantage.
- young children's parents and families are respected and supported.

7.3 Consistent with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, children's voices in decision-making should be sought.

7.4 Equitable resourcing to support the provision of quality early education, health and welfare services in areas of disadvantage.

7.5 Transdisciplinary approaches where rather than working in silos, governments, government departments, and early education, health and welfare professionals work and learn together.

7.6 Strength-based approaches that acknowledge diverse ways of knowing, doing and being.

7.7 Partnership approaches: Partnerships with families and partnerships between education, health and welfare professionals (well-coordinated and responsive integrated services).

7.8 Priorities of equity, quality, accessibility, and affordability in all decision making and establishing of priority areas.

7.9 Social and ecological justice, which could also be framed as "surviving well together" (Haraway, 2016) where "together" includes more-than-human worlds. This principle would be underpinned by an understanding that children are ecological, not just social.

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8. Are there gaps in existing frameworks or other research or evidence that need to be considered for the development of the strategy?

8.1 We note that Section 2 of the Discussion paper research for a case for an Early Years Strategy has defaulted to old literature, e.g. Heckman. As this argument may appear ‘rehashed’ and has implications that children may be commodified through ‘investment’, a more compelling argument based on contemporary literature that highlights the importance of health, secure relationships and emotional wellbeing for children as ideal preparation for early learning and school commencement would be more highly regarded as justification for why we need the Strategy is needed.

8.2 Well-prepared early childhood teachers are critical to quality ECEC, yet there lacks an evidence base that demonstrates which features of early childhood initial teacher education programs best support graduate quality and retention. This issue is of increasing significance as in the context of a shortage of early childhood teachers, governments and higher education providers are adopting different approaches to fast track graduate supply in an already diverse landscape of Birth-5, Birth-8, and Birth-12 programs. Research is urgently needed to develop understandings about this issue to inform national policy and a quality early childhood teacher workforce.

9. General comments

9.1 As the peak body for early childhood initial teacher education in Australia, we believe that it is appropriate for the Early Years Strategy Advisory Panel extended to include a professorial early childhood education academic. Given the Strategy’s wholistic approach to improving young children’s outcomes, the specialist knowledge of such an academic would add great value to the insights and expertise of current panel members.

9.2 The Discussion Paper refers to ‘ECEC services’, yet recent discussions on sector terminology refer to ‘ECE services’. As a guiding document, the terminology that is used in the Strategy will be critical in guiding the appropriate terminology across the sector.

9.3 Consistent with sector and professional terminology, ‘birth-5’ rather than ‘0-5’ is recommended.

9.4 In some sections there is a focus on birth-5 years, while other sections refer to 0-2 years (p. 9). While we recognise that the first 1000 days is highly significant and may need to be specified separately, this is not the way this reads. If there is a focus on the first 1000 days, then on the first 2000 days separately, this could be made clearer in the final document.

9.5 The transition beyond birth to five settings into the next stage of schooling should be acknowledged. Although this is not the focus, providing some linking may prevent a silo approach to early years always being very separate from the formal school stage.

9.6 The consultation process is welcome and that the voice of members of the community can contribute is appreciated. However, it did not appear there was an opportunity for children’s voice to be captured. The inclusion of child-friendly, and child-centred processes would

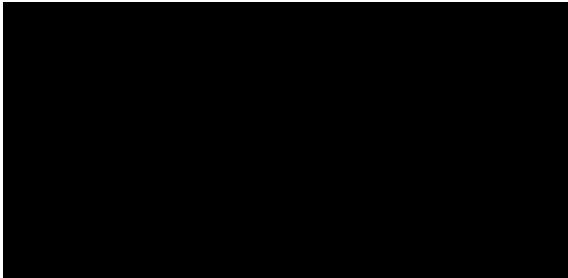
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increase the agency of children in the development of this strategy.

9.7 Public consultation is important- the sharing of the ownership has been stated, but it is not clear how this consultation will be continued. What is the plan from here in continuing the opportunity for representation across the early years?

Thank you for considering this submission.



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