



Submission to the Review of the National Partnership on Universal Access to Early Childhood Education

October 2019

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Suggested citation:

Blaxland, M., Adamson, E., Skattebol, S. (2019). Submission to the Review of the National Partnership on Universal Access to Early Childhood Education. Sydney: Social Policy Research Centre, UNSW Sydney.

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1 Early childhood education research program at the Social Policy Research Centre

Researchers at the Social Policy Research Centre (SPRC), University of NSW, Sydney, are among Australia's lead experts regarding early childhood education and care (ECEC) policy. Our particular focus is the impact of policy on children and families living in high poverty contexts.

This submission response to Questions One and Five of the *Review of the Universal Access National Partnership Discussion Paper*. In doing so, we draw on multiple current and past research projects listed below.

Title:	Families at the Centre: negotiating Australia's mixed market in early education and care
Funder:	Australian Research Council Linkage Project
Researchers	Professor Deborah Brennan, Dr Jennifer Skattebol, Dr Megan Blaxland, Dr Elizabeth Adamson, Dr Trish Hill, Dr Christiane Purcal, Bridget Jenkins
Research Partners	Mission Australia, Gowrie Queensland, Brotherhood of St Laurence, Gowrie NSW, Early Childhood Australia, Gowrie South Australia
Timeframe:	2010 – 2014
Summary:	Despite a surge of policy reforms and Australian government investment in ECEC, little is known in Australia about how local ECEC markets function and how low-income families make decisions about the use or non-use of child care services. This project provided evidence for policy making and service provision that aims to encourage child care use by low income families. The direct involvement of child care providers in the research strengthened its relevance and impact. This research placed Australia at the forefront of international research on local child care markets, and resulting improvements in ECEC policy and services will generate substantial economic and social benefits.
Publications	Publications available at: https://www.sprc.unsw.edu.au/research/projects/families-at-the-centre-negotiating-australias-mixed-market-in-early-education-and-care/

Title:	The inclusion of low-income families in early childhood education
Funder:	University of Sydney: Faculty of Education and Social Work's Research Program
Researchers	Associate Professor Marianne Fenech, Dr Jennifer Skattebol,
Research Partners	N/A
Timeframe:	2017
Summary:	This research aimed to identify practices and architectures of good practice with low income families in ECEC.

Publications	Fenech, M., & Skattebol, J. (2019). Supporting the inclusion of low-income families in early childhood education: an exploration of approaches through a social justice lens. <i>International Journal of Inclusive Education</i> , 1-19.
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Title:	Equitable Access to Quality Early Childhood Education and Care
Funder:	Gonski Institute for Education, UNSW Sydney
Researchers	Dr Jennifer Skattebol, Dr Megan Blaxland, Dr Elizabeth Adamson
Research Partners	Early Childhood Australia, Early Learning and Care Council of Australia, The Front Project, KU Children's Services
Timeframe:	2019
Summary:	This research aims to learn more about how to improve the participation of children in high quality early childhood education and care (ECEC). A Delphi Study with key informants about the successful approaches to ensuring families who find services hard to use have access to high quality ECEC.

Title:	Families at the Centre: negotiating Australia's mixed market in early education and care
Funder:	Australian Research Council Linkage Project
Researchers	Dr Jennifer Skattebol, Dr Megan Blaxland and Dr BJ Newton (Social Policy Research Centre; UNSW); Professor Frances Press (Manchester Metropolitan University), Associate Professor Marianne Fenech (University of Sydney), Associate Professor Christine Woodrow (Western Sydney University), Dr Sandra Cheeseman (Creche and Kindergarten Association) and Mrs Penelope Markham (Goodstart Early Learning)
Research Partners	KU Children's Services, Goodstart Early Learning, The Creche and Kindergarten Association, Family Day Care Australia and Early Childhood Australia.
Timeframe:	2019 – 2022
Summary:	This research responds to enduring inequalities in children's participation in high quality early childhood education and care (ECEC). Contemporary families face precarious labour markets and a childcare system with stringent workforce participation requirements. This project will illuminate the affordances of everyday life for families most challenged by these emergent conditions and develop understandings of how to calibrate services accordingly. Findings will support universal ECEC access through knowledge translation about contemporary disadvantage to policy and practice forums. A strong Indigenous component contributes to researcher training and knowledge about effective practice for Indigenous children and their families.

Title:	What does preschool success look like for Aboriginal children and their families
Funder:	Cages Foundation; Gonski Institute for Education, UNSW Sydney

Researchers	Dr Megan Blaxland, Dr Jennifer Skattebol, Wendy Jopson
Timeframe:	2019-2020
Summary:	This project seeks to develop relationships with four NSW Aboriginal communities who might be interested in designing a research project regarding early education and care. The research is strengths-based and will be controlled by the Aboriginal communities who elect to take part. This relationship building phase will lead to an application for funding to conduct the research.

Note that Jennifer Skattebol, Megan Blaxland and Elizabeth Adamson are currently members of the consortium led by the Australian Institute of Family Studies that is evaluating the Child Care Package on behalf of the Department of Education and Training. The insights offered in this submission do not draw on any findings from the evaluation and nor do they reflect the views of any other member of the consortium. Instead, this submission draws solely on the research projects listed above and other sources as cited.

2 Achievements of the National Partnership for Universal Access

Response to Question 1: To what extent have the UANP policy objectives, outcomes and outputs been achieved?

Universal access to high quality ECEC is critical to ensure educational equality and improve outcomes through formal education (OECD, 2017). For this reason, the achievements of the National Partnership for Universal Access are significant. Firstly, by making a strong commitment to education in the year before school, the National Partnership emphasised the importance of early education for Australian governments, the ECEC sector and families. This placed early education and care firmly on the policy agenda and led to change in practice within service providers and in state and territory government policy.

As a result, and by setting a minimum standard for participation in early education, which has been adopted across the country, participation in preschool programs has increased to meet the national benchmark of 600 hours in the year before school. Nationally, 90.1 percent of children were enrolled in a preschool program in the year before school in early August 2018 (Productivity Commission, 2019: 3.15). Enrolment rates ranged from very high in Tasmania and Western Australia (100.0 percent and 97.8 percent respectively) to 90.1 percent in the Northern Territory and 83.3 percent in New South Wales. Nearly all children attending preschool do so for at least 15 hours per week (Productivity Commission, 2019).

The national benchmark has been exceeded in most jurisdictions. Nationally, 58.3 percent of three year olds also access early education (Productivity Commission, 2019). In NSW and ACT, over two-thirds of three year olds were enrolled in a preschool program in 2017. Over half of all three year olds attended preschool programs in all states except Tasmania, WA and Victoria. However, this is set to change with the roll-out of three-year-old kinder in Victoria in 2020.

The National Partnership for Universal Access responds to evidence that children's outcomes are improved by one year of regular engagement with high-quality ECEC programs. It is important to note that the evidence also indicates that gains are even more significant when children have engagement for two years and that gains are strongly correlated to high quality (Burchinal et al, 2016) – two elements that are not well addressed currently by policy and financing models.

3 Challenges for Universal Access

Response to Question 5: Based on your experiences, should changes should be made to future national policy on preschool for children in the year before full-time school, and why? What improvements would these changes make? What works well with the current UANP arrangements?

Despite the above achievements, the partnership faces a number of challenges regarding:

- policy complexity
- achieving universal access
- ensuring preschool programs are of a high quality

3.1 ECEC policy complexity

In our research with families and services operating in high poverty contexts, the complexity of the ECEC policy environment is a common refrain.

Multiple policies with different priorities developed by all levels of government have created a complex ECEC landscape. It is especially difficult for families to successfully navigate this policy complexity. Entitlements, subsidies and out of pocket costs are poorly understood by families – particularly those facing adversities. This impacts negatively on the clarity of the government message about the importance of early education, and of the nature and level of government support available to low-income children to participate in early education.

Our research has found that policies needs to be better calibrated to provide consistent messages to families about the importance of early education for all children. Policy reform could provide clear frameworks to ensure services understand how to organise to ensure children have a place and how this can be funded.

Australia's commitment to 'universal access' expresses an official aspiration but does not establish an entitlement for children in terms of a right to a place in early education. Children in countries across the Western world are entitled, in their own right, to a place in a service where they can participate in a high-quality early education program - including the United Kingdom and New Zealand (Watson, 2012). This is a more effective approach that encourages children in vulnerable contexts to attend (Barnett & Hustedt, 2011). In addition to increasing the number of funded hours of early childhood education, many countries now provide a legal entitlement to a place in early childhood education for children and are moving to ensure free access for children in the pre-primary year (Brennan & Adamson, 2015).

In 2015, most OECD countries provided free access to early childhood education and care to all children for at least the last year before entering primary school. In these countries, children's dosage ranges from 12-to-40-plus hours per week. Belgium, France, Ireland, Italy, Korea, Luxembourg, Mexico, New Zealand, Portugal, Slovak Republic, Slovenia and Sweden all offered free, unconditional access to 15 hours or more of pre-primary education for three and four year olds (OECD, 2017). Making education in the year before school a right to which all children are entitled, especially if it were free, would more strongly emphasise the value of preschool for families and services.

3.2 Access to ECEC

In our research, we have found that there are many reasons why families do not engage in ECEC. While the availability of sufficient places in services does affect access, access is influenced by many other factors within policy and in service architectures, as well as a variety of factors which impact on family decision making.

There will always be some children who do not participate in preschool programs because some families prefer to provide care and education exclusively at home or within their extended family (Baxter and Hand, 2015). However, sometimes this preference can mask a concern that that preschool education would not be affordable. Families struggling to afford basics like food and housing will not approach services if they perceive there are fees attached (Skattebol et al., 2014).

We have consistently found that a lack of resources can make it hard to attend ECEC (Skattebol et al., 2014). Some families do not have access to transport to make it possible to take their children to preschool or long day care. Sometimes they are unable to send their children with a change of clean clothes or a nice lunch box packed with food because they don't have the financial resources to do so, or because they don't have access to basic equipment like washing machines and kitchen facilities. Some families would rather not attend ECEC than be embarrassed by not providing appropriate food and clothing for their children. Many Australian children, 17.4 percent, live in families which are struggling for basic resources (ACOSS, 2016).

Internationally and within Australian jurisdictions there are different funding models that resource services catering to families in disadvantage (Barnett & Hustedt, 2011). Some of Australian states for example, have tiered funding for preschool and ensure that services in areas of concentrated disadvantage receive higher levels of funding per child. While this is useful, SEIFA indexes are too blunt to enable funding to be delivered to the 81 percent of economically disadvantaged Australians who do not live in areas of concentrated disadvantage (Harding et al, 2009).

We have also found that families can find services hard to use because of their own difficult past experiences with educational institutions. Preschools and long day care

centres can feel intimidating and frightening for parents who were themselves treated poorly by schools and other institutions when they were children. It can be difficult to trust an institution with your precious children in such circumstances. Similarly, we know families do not always feel welcome or culturally safe in early education services (Kellard and Paddon, 2016). In these situations, families benefit from outreach activities and soft entry points in services.

Many families move in and out of participation in ECEC because of the pressures of securing work, safe living situations and stable housing, and/or managing and maintaining complex social networks (Skattebol et al., 2014; Skattebol, Adamson and Woodrow, 2016). ECEC services often lack staff with the specialist knowledge and skills needed to be responsive to families with complex needs and strengths (Fenech and Skattebol, 2019).

Participants in our research have reported that families are sometimes told their child's disability or behaviour is difficult to accommodate in their local services, leaving the family with no formal early education options.

Sometimes rules around ECEC subsidies deter families from participating. In our research, we have been informed that, as one example, Aboriginal families participating in sorry business can be absent from preschool for more than the allowed number of days, and then lose their places in the programs.

Plus, some families, because of their particular needs due to shift work, disability, ill health etc, use forms of ECEC which do not currently offer recognised preschool programs, like family day care and In Home Care (Baxter, Hand and Sweid, 2016; Blaxland, Adamson and Cortis, 2016). Consideration could be given to how early education might be offered in home-based ECEC, for example, attendance at preschool playgroups run by a teacher-trained educator, closer supervision and support for home-based educators who are already teacher-trained to provide early education.

3.3 Access to Quality Early Education

The benefits of early education are most likely to be realised when it is of a high quality. Children demonstrate the greatest gains when they experience quality instruction in a quality learning environment (Burchinal, Zaslow and Tarullo, 2016).

Yet the latest ACECQA (2019) *Snapshot Report* shows that 20 percent of long day care services and 7 percent of preschool services do not meet National Quality Standards (NQS). It is most concerning that one out of every five long day care services do not meet National Quality Standards given they provide 59 percent of all preschool programs (Productivity Commission, 2019: 3.6). This is particularly an issue in NSW, Queensland and the ACT where long day care preschool programs are most prevalent.

Moreover, in the National Quality Standard, the most challenging aspect of quality is Quality Area 1, Education Program and Practice (ACECQA, 2019), which services struggle to meet more than any of the other Quality Areas. The landmark Australian E4Kids study found that instructional quality was too low to improve children's development in nearly all services (Gilley, 2019). It is not enough for children to attend a service that offers a preschool program, that program needs to be of high quality. This is especially important for children who need additional support to be ready for school.

The E4Kids study indicates that the outcomes for children in disadvantage are improved with ongoing and consistent high-quality early childhood education (Tayler et al., 2015). Too many children start school without having had an opportunity to learn the skills they need; 43.2 percent of Indigenous children and 31.7 percent of children in the lowest socioeconomic quintile do not meet criteria for school readiness compared to 20.9 percent of children in the general population (Lamb et al., 2015).

Children living in areas of concentrated disadvantage are more likely to have access to poorer quality services. Services not meeting the National Quality Standards are more prevalent in low socioeconomic communities (Lamb, et al., 2015). As a result, only 7 percent of children from families with low socioeconomic status attend services with the best quality 'instructional support', compared to 30 percent of children from families with high socioeconomic status (Torii, et al, 2017). This is concerning because there is evidence that low quality ECEC can have a negative effect on child development and learning (Barnett et al, 2011).

Fortunately, the National Quality Standard is a mechanism that facilitates the provision of high-quality early education. Throughout our research we have found high levels of support for the National Quality Standard in the sector. It generally reflects the sector's understandings of quality and aspirations for high quality. But too many services fail to meet National Quality Standards. At present, only those services considered to be posing a significant risk to the safety, health and wellbeing of children face potential closure as a result of poor quality. Stricter action could also address poor quality among services persistently rated as 'Working Towards' National Quality Standards. National Quality Standard is built on an ethos of continuous improvement, but at present this seems largely aspirational. Actual improvement of services not currently meeting National Quality Standards is not currently required. As a result, services can potentially repeatedly, perhaps even perpetually, remain below national standards. Additionally, funding models which provide tiered funding that is linked to quality (Barnett, et al, 2011) provide an incentive to lift quality in the sector.

Finally, there is a need for Australian Governments to agree on a new national workforce strategy for the early childhood sector, which recognises the need to continue to support the recruitment and retention of qualified educators. This should include, but not be limited to, pre-service training, investments in professional

development, and diverse pathways for educators. It is important that the strategy and investment responds to the needs of communities, including Indigenous communities (Pascoe & Brennan, 2017, p.85).

4 Summary and recommendations

The National Partnership Agreement's aspiration for universal access to early education for all children in year before school is supported by the sector and aligns with research about the importance of participation in high quality ECEC. However, there are also challenges for the National Partnership. These relate to the complexity of ECEC policies for families, the barriers to accessing ECEC, and the availability of quality early learning.

The ECEC policy landscape is complex for families due to the competing policy priorities. Families and the community need strong messages from government about the importance of early education. Establishing a legal entitlement to an ECEC place would break down the barriers that many families experience. We recommend that:

All children have a legal entitlement to free ECEC place in the year before school.

Better cohesion between the National Partnership on Universal Access to Early Education and other ECEC policies at all levels of government.

Services must be responsive to community and family needs, which may include allowing flexibility in the patterns of use that families access service. This requires developing innovative ways to deliver early education opportunities in a diverse range of settings such as through teacher-led playgroups and home-based care. We recommend that:

Funding models are responsive and flexible to the delivery of high-quality preschool programs through a wider range of service types.

Research shows us that early education must be high quality to have positive impacts for children. Data from recent Australian studies and data monitoring shows that many children are accessing poorer quality services. This is especially concerning for vulnerable children who are less likely to access high quality services. We recommend:

All services should be required to meet the National Quality Standards, with consequences for those who persistently fail to improve.

Tiered funding models that are linked to quality are required to lift quality across the sector.

Delivering preschool services to families experiencing adversities requires specialised skills and wrap around supports. There needs to be greater focus on working with disadvantage in teacher training and professional development. These

initiatives can and should be adopted in flexible and innovative ways to address the needs of different communities that experience adversity. We recommend:

Tiered funding models that are sensitive to family's socio-economic circumstances wherever they live (as well as sensitive to quality)

Increased investment in teacher training and professional development is required – with a particular focus on working with families experiencing adversity.

If the aspirations of universal access to early education are to succeed, we must ensure that services are supported to provide the highest quality education, especially to children who need it the most.

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