

ERA Position Statement: Reimagining Child Care

Introduction

There has never been a more important moment for reimagining Australia's early childhood education and care (ECEC) system. The economic restrictions necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic have demonstrated both the essential nature of ECEC services to Australia's economy and health and safety, as well as the fragile nature of the current system. In the COVID-19 context, reimagining a fit for purpose ECEC system for our future is critical.

The COVID-19 crisis has resulted in many individuals and families experiencing financial hardship and poverty as a result of job losses and reduction in working hours, a disproportionate loss of jobs and working hours among women, and disruptions to the lives of children and young people where risk factors which threaten child development may be amplified, and protective factors reduced.ⁱ Reimagining child care should be considered in the context of enabling the following three outcomes:

1. The benefits of ECEC for child development
2. Gender equality and women's workforce participation
3. Australia's economic recovery and resilience

An accessible and equitable ECEC system that is appropriate to the current context of economic recession and recovery is needed. Such a system would promote gender equality, the equitable redistribution of unpaid and paid work, and universal early childhood education and care.

Priorities for recovery

Widening access and availability to child-care, especially for low income families

Quality ECEC has significant benefits for the social, emotional and cognitive development of Australian children, and research shows the early years to be critical in setting children up for life. Economic analysis shows the benefits from access to quality ECEC have positive flow on impacts for the economy. Prior to COVID-19, the cost of late intervention services for children and young people experiencing serious issues was \$15.2 billion per year.ⁱⁱ Universal early childhood education (ECE), or preschool, produces a 1:2 return on investment in Australia, with \$4.75 billion worth of benefits to children, their communities, government and business,ⁱⁱⁱ however there is a need for greater funding certainty than the short-term nature of the National Partnership allows.^{iv} Further, there have been positive child development outcomes arising from increased access to services as a result of the provision of free ECEC under the government relief package, with a reported increase in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children enrolled in ECEC.^v

In the short term, access can be widened by maintaining the relaxation of the activity test for the Child Care Subsidy (CCS), and of the eligibility criteria for the Additional Child Care Subsidy (ACCS). Such measures support families, particularly those experiencing marginalization as a result of the economic recession, to continue to access the benefits of ECEC for their child, with economic savings for Australia as a whole.

Moreover, the continuation of additional support measures for the sector is needed until the economy is more stable and a review of ECEC is possible. Early indications suggest that the withdrawal of JobKeeper payment and shift to transition support measures may return the sector to the brink of collapse.^{vi} The early withdrawal of support indicates a failure in recognising the value of care work, and in particular the lifeline it provides to working families as a frontline service during the nationwide lockdown restrictions.

In the medium term, there is a need to consider measures to ECEC to accommodate permanent changes to work patterns. The first evaluation report of the 2018 Child Care Package found that services providing Centre Based Day Care tend to charge by the day, rather than the number of actual hours of ECEC used. Given that the median length of a Centre Based Day Care session was 11 hours, charging only for full days uses up the available subsidized hours for those families needing shorter sessions.^{vii} In light of the reinstatement of mutual obligations for every worker to take all work available, including part-time and casual work, consideration of mechanisms to increase flexibility for families around the length of care sessions while maintaining the capacity of services to meet staffing costs is a worthwhile line of inquiry.

COVID-19 poses health risks in traditional workplaces, and the events of 2020 have resulted in significant behavior change including work from home arrangements. Considering that consumer expectations and needs may have likewise shifted from these changes, there may be benefit in investigating what COVID-19 fit-for-purpose ECEC may look like, including care in the home and wrap-around service models.

Recommendations:

Short term – August 2020 – December 2020 (or when economic stability is achieved)

- 1. Provide a wage guarantee to ECEC and transition support until medium term;**
- 2. Maintain relaxation of activity test for CCS until and during transition period;**
- 3. Maintain relaxation of eligibility for the ACCS until and during transition period, and prioritise processing.**

Medium term – December 2020 (or when economic stability is achieved) – 2022

4. Transition period based on the existing CCS system, including support for providers to remain viable through the evolving COVID-19 context;
5. Review the early education and child care (ECEC) system, with consideration given to:
 - **Shorter or part-time care sessions to enable greater flexibility** in access to care for parents;
 - **Investigation of forms of ECEC most appropriate to the ongoing challenges raised by the COVID-19** and changes in work behaviour (for example, care in the home and wrap-around service models).
 - **Expansion of universal preschool to the two years before full-time school**, and investigation of funding model which provides greater certainty and integration with the CCS for a single system of ECEC funding for children 0-5 years.

Recognise and enable early childhood education and care as a driver of economic recovery

Women's economic participation is crucial to the economic recovery. Women's contribution to the economy is estimated to have added 22% to GDP in 35 years since 1974.^{viii} Addressing the risk to women's employment from COVID-19 is therefore crucial to both gender equality and economic recovery. ECEC must be recognised and enabled as a driver of economic recovery and women's workforce participation.

Currently, the cost of ECEC can be a significant barrier to the ability of women and secondary earners to take on additional work.^{ix} Recent research has identified that the interaction of ECEC costs with Australia's tax and benefit systems commonly results in Workforce Disincentive Rates (WDR) of 75-120%, where a WDR of 100% means there is no economic benefit gained from working additional days. Even among low income earners, there is a WDR of more than 100% for a fifth work day.^x In a context in which the Prime Minister has stressed that: "if there is a job to be taken and a job that is being offered, then it is an obligation... to take those jobs where they're on offer"^{xi} to rebuild the economy, there is a clear economic case for reducing disincentives arising from the cost of ECEC. One option put forward for addressing the

WDR is a combination of increasing the percentage of the Child Care Subsidy available to all families, and replace the Child Care Subsidy cliffs with a taper.^{xii} The Grattan Institute has estimated that increasing the CCS to 95% with a gradual taper, would cost \$5 billion and deliver a boost to GDP of \$11 billion a year.^{xiii}

Recommendations:

Medium term – December 2020 (or when economic stability is achieved) – 2022

5. Review the early education and child care (ECEC) system, with consideration given to
 - **Options for increasing the CCS rate and replacing CCS cliffs with a taper** to decrease the impact of the Workforce Disincentive Rate on women's workforce participation and Australia's economic recovery.

Investing in service and sector quality

COVID-19 has demonstrated the essential nature of care work and services including early childhood education, aged care, healthcare and others. Yet there remains concern that the early end of support measures for the ECEC sector, such as JobKeeper, are indicative of ongoing devaluing of care work. Child Care Services is one of the lowest-paid sectors in the workforce,^{xiv1} is women-dominated and employs a significant number of migrant women and women on temporary visas who experience intersecting marginalization (including exclusion from eligibility for JobKeeper and JobSeeker payments). Experts and educators have noted that the feminised ECEC sector was singled out for an early end to JobKeeper, while the construction industry, with a predominantly masculine workforce (81.7% of employees are men),^{xv} received further support through the HomeBuilder and now JobTrainer programs.^{xvi}

Yet investment in social infrastructure has more positive implications for GDP and women's employment than investment in physical infrastructure. The 2016 *Investing in the Care Economy* report by the UK Women's Budget Group estimated that a 2% investment of GDP, in conditions of high unemployment, would lead to the creation of 600,000 jobs in Australia and a 2.3% growth in employment, in comparison with 0.5% growth in employment from a similar investment in construction. Moreover, more of these benefits would accrue women^{xvii} in a feminised sector where work is lower paid and less secure thereby progressing the Government's commitment to women's economic security.

Investing in ECEC could include government actively managing planning and supply of services in line with need, to ensure there are quality services to fill gaps and with a focus on provision to low income and marginalised families. Australia has precedent of a planning model for ECEC, which has the further benefits of guaranteeing supply, and regulating fees and quality.^{xviii} Federal government could also incentivise employers to raise the number of qualified educators and educators (and which could be aligned with the JobTrainer scheme), and the ratio of educators to children. This would have both child development benefits and improve work and pay conditions for educators, and could be implemented under the National Quality Framework (NQF). Direction should be taken from New Zealand's *He taonga te tamaiti, Every Child a taonga: Early Learning Action Plan 2019-2029*,^{xix} which aims to incentivise for 100% and regulate for 80% qualified teachers by 2029, to increase educator to child ratios to 1:4 for children under 2 years, and 1:5 for older children, while investigating a mechanism to improve work and pay conditions in the sector.

¹ According to the Workplace Gender Equality Agency, remuneration in feminised sectors, in which women make up the majority of the workforce, is lower than in gender-equitable or masculinised sectors. Increasing pay conditions increases the attractiveness of the sector to men, and a gender equitable workforce can drive pay equity.

Recommendations:

Medium term – December 2020 (or when economic stability is achieved) – 2022

5. Review the early education and child care system (ECEC), with consideration given to:
 - **Investigating a mechanism to support decent pay and working conditions** for early childhood educators;
 - **Government investment in actively planning and managing supply of services in line with need;**
 - **Investigating, incentivising and investing in increases in service quality**, including qualifications of educators and increasing ratios of adults to children.

Background

Early Childhood Education and Care in Australia

ECEC is both crucial to gender equality in workforce participation (and its significant contribution to Australia's economic growth) and for supporting the healthy and equitable development of Australian children. Australian ECEC costs are among the highest in the OECD;^{xx} at the same time, Australia sits below the OECD average for preschool enrolment per capita^{xxi} and in the bottom third of OECD countries for enrolment of three-year olds in early learning.^{xxii}

ECEC was recently overhauled through the *Family Assistance Legislation Amendment (Jobs for Families Child Care Package) Act 2017*. The 'Child care Package' rolled the Child Care Benefit (CCB) and the Child Care Tax Rebate (CCTR) into a single Child Care Subsidy. The key elements of the package include:

1. Child Care Subsidy (CCS) – the main form of assistance which is activity and means tested;
2. Additional Child Care Subsidy (ACCS) – additional fee assistance for families experiencing financial hardship or marginalisation;
3. Inclusion Support Programme (ISP) – support for services to build capability to include children with additional needs; and
4. Community Child Care Fund (CCCF) – grants for child care services to address barriers to participation and sustainability based on need for services.

Together, the ACCS, ISP and CCCF comprise a Child Care Safety Net designed to increase access for marginalised families. While the new package increased the benefit available to parents and simplified the system by rolling together the Child Care Benefit and Child Care Tax Rebate, the Child Care Subsidy is also a more tightly activity- and means-tested payment.

ECEC is marked by a significant gender pay gap within the sector, and by comparison with other industries. As highly feminized, ECEC has lower average base remuneration rate than other industries.^{xxiii} The Child Care Services sector employs 95.6% women, with a 27.9% gender pay gap. In Preschool Education, women are 86.7% of the workforce and the gender pay gap is 28.0%.^{xxiv} It also worth noting that the ECEC sector is an important employer for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and women on temporary visas. For these groups, the impacts of low pay and insecure working conditions are experienced intersectionally.

Child care during COVID-19

Early in the crisis, ECEC was on the brink of collapsing as enrolments quickly dropped. This drop is likely a result of parents choosing to keep their children home amid concerns about economic recession and insecurity about the health implications of a pandemic in care settings. On 2 April, the Australian

government announced a relief package for the ECEC sector, which comprised the payment of 50% of fees up to the fee cap for each child enrolled, on the condition that ECEC was provided for free, with enrolment preference given to vulnerable children and those whose parents were essential workers.

The funding was applied from 6 April, based on the number of children in care in the fortnight leading into 2 March. However, providers were already reporting high rates of withdrawal of enrolments before 2 March. Additionally, services also experienced an increase in enrolments following the announcement of free care, leaving services in the position of trying to provide care for an increasing number of children on reduced income.^{xxv} Further, the success of the package was reliant on the ability of providers to access the JobKeeper payment for employees. Many early childhood educators are employed casually and/or on temporary visas and were excluded from the JobKeeper payment. On June 8, the Australian government announced that the relief package would end for the ECEC sector on July 13, when the CCS and ACCS were reinstated. JobKeeper ended for the sector – the first of any sector in the country – on 20 July. The government is now providing a transition package covering 25% of free revenue or the hourly rate cap for the same reference period as the initial package. The activity test will also be waived for parents whose employment has been affected by COVID-19 for 12 weeks.^{xxvi}

Unpaid care, gender equality and women's economic security during COVID-19

The COVID-19 crisis has set back gender equality in Australia. Women² have borne the economic brunt of the COVID-19 economic impacts. Women have lost employment at a higher rate than men (men's employment down 6.2% and women's down by 8.1% between 14 March and 18 April).^{xxvii} Women's working hours have reduced more than men's (11.5% to 7.5%), and women's underemployment rate is higher than men's (14.8% to 13.7%). At the same time, women's unpaid work has increased as a result of social distancing measures. 76% of Australians kept their children home from school or ECEC in May. 22% of adults changed their hours to care for children and 38% worked from home. Women were three times more likely than men (46% to 17%) to look after children full-time while at home.^{xxviii}

This pattern is consistent with existing evidence on disasters, which have been shown to entrench gender norms and roles. During the 2011 floods, women in heterosexual partnerships were more likely to undertake unpaid child care and community work during recovery while men were more likely to undertake income-earning work, reinforcing the idea of women as 'domestic' and 'carers', and men as income-earners whose lives are in the public space.^{xxix} The COVID-19 crisis has created similar patterns: women have foregone or lost paid work while increasing their load of unpaid care. Evidence from other disasters has shown that entrenched gender roles and norms can have long term impacts on women's economic security, workforce participation and gender equality. The impact of job losses on women, the subsequent reduced household income for accessing ECEC in the longer term, and the increase in women's unpaid care during the crisis create a risk that the withdrawal of children from ECEC as a result of an inability to pay for services will threaten the viability and force the closure of centres, and with negative impacts on another feminized sector and jobs. There is a significant risk that women impacted by the downturn will become detached from the labour market permanently or long-term.

Women accumulate poverty over their lifetimes as a result of barriers to women's equal economic security and gender inequality. Women spend more time than men in unpaid work and care, experience the gender pay gap, earn less superannuation and have historically taken extended unpaid breaks from work to raise children. The result is the gender superannuation gap which, prior to this pandemic, resulted in older women becoming the fastest growing group at risk of homelessness.^{xxx} In addition, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, women with disability, migrant and refugee women, women experiencing violence,

² In this paper, the term women is used to reflect the data referenced. We acknowledge this data is based on a limited and binary view of gender.

and LGBTIQ+ women and gender diverse people face compounding barriers to economic wellbeing. While pay and super gaps have been declining in recent years, the conditions created by the COVID-19 crisis and recession may lead to a second wave or exacerbation of the gender gap in retirement savings and a further increase to older women's risk of homelessness among now young generations.

Equality Rights Alliance

Equality Rights Alliance (ERA) is Australia's largest network advocating for women's equality, women's leadership and recognition of women's diversity. We bring together 64 non-government organisations and social enterprises with a focus on the impact of policy or service delivery on women. We are one of the six National Women's Alliances, funded by the Commonwealth Office for Women.

This submission is endorsed in whole or in part by the following members of Equality Rights Alliance:

- 2020Women
- Aboriginal Legal Rights Movement
- Alevi Federation of Australia
- Australasian Council of Women and Policing
- Australian Baha'i Community – Office of Equality
- Australian Centre for Leadership for Women
- Australian Graduate Women
- Australian Federation of Medical Women
- Australian Motherhood Initiative for Research and Community Involvement
- Australian National Committee for UN Women
- Australian Women's Health Network
- CARE Australia
- Children by Choice
- COTA Australia
- FECCA Women's Committee
- Feminist Legal Clinic
- Fitted for Work
- Gender Equity Community of Practice
- Girl Guides Australia
- Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand
- Homebirth Australia
- Human Rights Law Centre
- Immigrant Women's Speakout Association NSW
- International Women's Development Agency
- JERA International
- Jessie Street National Women's Library
- Justice Connect
- Maternity Choices Australia
- Marie Stopes Australia
- Migrant Women's Lobby Group of South Australia
- Multicultural Women's Advocacy ACT
- National Association of Services Against Sexual Violence
- National Council of Churches of Australia Gender Commission
- National Council of Jewish Women of Australia
- National Council of Single Mothers and Their Children
- National Foundation for Australian Women
- NSW Council of Social Services
- National Union of Students (Women's Department)
- Older Women's Network NSW Inc
- Project Respect
- Public Health Association of Australia (Women's Special Interest Group)
- Reproductive Choice Australia
- Safe Motherhood For All Inc
- Sexual Health and Family Planning Australia
- Soroptimist International
- Sisters Inside
- Union of Australian Women
- United Nations Association of Australia Status of Women Network
- Victorian Immigrant and Refugee Women's Coalition
- VIEW Clubs of Australia
- Women in Adult and Vocational Education
- Women in Engineering Australia
- Women on Boards
- Women with Disabilities Australia
- Women's Equity Think Tank
- Women's Electoral Lobby
- Women's Environment Network Australia
- Women's Housing Ltd
- Women's Information Referral Exchange
- Women's International League for Peace and Freedom
- Women's Legal Services Australia
- Women's Property Initiatives
- Women Sport Australia
- Working Against Sexual Harassment
- YWCA Australia
- Zonta International Districts 22, 23 and 24

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