

# Strengthening Australia's early learning and care workforce

## POLICY MEASURES

**The problem:** The shortage of qualified early childhood educators and early childhood teachers is worsening each month, limiting the capacity of early learning and care services to enrol children<sup>1</sup>. While the shortage has been exacerbated by COVID-19 (particularly the Omicron wave), it will not subside when the pandemic fades. The sector therefore requires targeted intervention by government to build supply in the shortest possible timeframe, with action to begin in 2022.

**We recommend that the Australian Government adopt the following policy measures, which are listed in order of priority:**

### 1. Extend support for traineeships

The Boosting Apprenticeship Commencements (BAC) wage subsidy has coincided with strong growth in traineeship commencements in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). Enrolments in ECEC traineeships jumped by 72.6% in the period January-June 2021, compared to the same period in 2020 (we are awaiting full-year results). We should seek to extend this impact, by extending the BAC program for ECEC traineeships for a further 12 months (beyond 31 March 2022) and supporting employers to allocate sufficient staff to mentor new trainees.

#### Action:

- Extend the Boosting Apprenticeship Commencement subsidy for ECEC by 12 months.
- Pay a grant of \$5,000 to each service taking on a new trainee, to support mentoring.

**Estimated impact:** If 20% of long day care centres take on one trainee each under the extended BAC program, this will add 1,688 educators to the workforce. Funding these centres to take a senior educator 'off the floor' for induction and mentoring in the first 6-12 weeks would support strong retention of the new trainees.

**Timeframe:** Short-term. New traineeships in 2022 would deliver fully-qualified early childhood educators in 2023.

### 2. Support upskilling for VET-qualified educators

The shortage of qualified early childhood teachers (ECTs) is particularly acute, but could be addressed rapidly by enabling experienced, VET-qualified educators to upgrade to degree level via an accelerated route.

#### Action:

- Co-fund a national fast-track program for early childhood educators with diploma qualifications, to upskill them to ECT level (Bachelor or equivalent) in less than the usual 3-6 years.

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Education, Skills and Employment (2022). Labour Market Information Portal.

- Develop a scholarships program to support educators to upskill to a Bachelor qualification by offering additional paid leave to undertake practicum requirements, time off the floor to study and funding for teacher mentors.

**Estimated impact:** There are approximately 52,792 diploma-trained educators in the sector who would be eligible to upskill. Based on a conversion rate of 15%, that could produce a potential pool of 7,918 educators upskilling. Upskill programs are proving effective, with retention rates (67%) exceeding the current completion rates of 13% (based on the Front Project's Upskill Program, 2022). There are programs that can be scaled to meet the national demand for qualified early childhood teachers. The Victorian Government's Early Childhood Innovative Initial Teacher Education program (780 diploma-qualified educators in early 2022, across five universities) and its Upskill Program (offered from 1 July 2022 for 100+ annual enrolments) are attracting strong enrolments. If enrolments were replicated in other states and territories on a population basis, we would see an additional 2,220 – 5,000 enrolments in an ECT qualification.

**Timeframe:** Medium-term. Once the program is established, commencing students could expect to graduate as ECTs in around 18 months for accelerated degrees and 2.5 years for those studying and working part-time. Given the strong positive outcomes of this measure for preschool education, it would be appropriate for state and territory governments to contribute to the costs. Employers in the early learning and care sector would also contribute, for example, through facilitating release and backfilling of positions, and providing support for students at the workplace level.

### 3. Run a national workforce campaign

The Children's Education and Care National Workforce Strategy has recommended a national communications campaign to promote early learning and care careers. However, this has been accorded only medium priority, meaning it should be delivered within six years (by 2028). The latest Job Outlook data indicates that we will need another 7,000 teachers by 2023 and 30,000 educators for the ECEC sector, so waiting six years to deliver on this strategy is too long.

#### Action:

- Fund immediate development of the workforce campaign, for launch within 12 months.

**Estimated impact:** A short digital marketing campaign (6 weeks) could expect to record around 4 million views and generate 40,000-60,000 visits to a campaign website (based on ELACCA's Big Roles in Little Lives campaign). If conversion of website visitors to course enrolments was only 2%, this would mean an additional 1,000 enrolments in an early learning qualification.

**Timeframe:** Short- to medium-term. The campaign will generate results over 1-4+ years (based on qualification timelines). The campaign should enable direct contact with employers and education and training providers, via a central information hub. It would also support school-based traineeships (see Item 4).

### 4. Initiate a national push for more school-based traineeships

There are not enough students taking up school-based traineeships (SBTs) in early learning and care. Retail qualifications attract more than twice the number of student trainees as the Certificate III in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC),

and both retail and business traineeships have been on a strong upward trajectory in schools since 2019, while demand for ECEC has flatlined<sup>2</sup>. Building career attraction, including respect for the role of early childhood educators, needs to start in schools.

**Action:**

- Coordinate a national effort to increase the uptake of school-based traineeships in early learning and care.

**Estimated impact:** Lifting enrolments in a school-based ECEC traineeship by 25% could produce an additional 270 educators, ready to work from the time they leave school.

**Timeframe:** Medium-term. SBTs typically run for two years.

**5. Lift the priority of early childhood educators and teachers in skilled migration**

Priority skilled migration offers the fastest route to filling vacancies for early childhood educators and teachers.

**Action:**

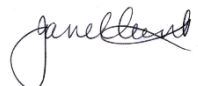
- Add early childhood educators and early childhood teachers, at all qualification levels, to relevant occupation lists: the Priority Migration Skilled Occupation List; Medium and Long-term Strategic Skills List; and the Regional Occupation List.
- Amend the Working Holiday Maker rules to enable visa-holders to work in early learning and care services, including for extended periods.
- Run a marketing campaign in the UK to support uptake of the forthcoming three-year Working Holiday Maker visa by early childhood educators.
- Streamline the recognition of overseas qualifications for early childhood teachers (particularly from the UK and Ireland).

**Estimated impact:** If we increase the (pre-pandemic) number of qualified ECTs migrating from the UK and Ireland alone by 20%, we can fill 100 vacant ECT positions almost immediately.

**Timeframe:** Short-term.



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<sup>2</sup> NCVER. (2021). [Apprentices and trainees 2021: March quarter – Australia](#). 19 October.