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Jobs and Skills Australia
Department of Employment and Workplace Relations
GPO Box 9828
Canberra ACT 2601
Australia



Submission to Jobs and Skills Australia Early Childhood Education and Care Capacity Study

Swinburne University of Technology appreciates the opportunity to contribute to Jobs and Skills Australia (JSA) Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) Capacity Study and we welcome the government's continued investment to address skills shortages in the sector through additional Fee-Free TAFE places. Free training is playing a significant role in securing a sustainable early childhood education workforce, in addition the Early Childhood Education Workforce package is helping to retain the existing workforce through professional development support.

Swinburne has been active in participating in a range of government consultations including through the Universities Accord, ECEC Workforce Strategy and the Victorian Skills Plan. We commend the extensive suite of initiatives made available to the sector from both Commonwealth and State Governments, however, to make a stronger and more sustainable ECEC sector and to stem the growing workforce shortage, we need to support more learners to participate – particularly those from underrepresented groups – and be more future-focused and responsive to changing needs in our children's early years and skills requirements of the sector.

The future of learning in Australia will not be solved simply by undertaking either vocational or higher education: For many learners, it will, more often than not, require both. As a dual sector university, Swinburne offers a suite of learning opportunities spanning the spectrum of education from foundation skills and certificate level qualifications to bachelor up to PhD. In ECEC Swinburne has students studying a range of qualifications, and through our strong industry partnerships, these students undertake work integrated learning, which is crucial to set students up for success with job ready skills prior to entering the workforce.

At Swinburne we market ECEC courses to numerous cohorts including school leavers, new arrivals and mature aged who are looking at a career change or re-entering the workforce. Waiving the training cost through Fee-Free TAFE and cash incentives have assisted in attracting these cohorts, especially when there is a high likelihood of obtaining a job after they have completed their studies. In many cases students have already secured a job during their work placement.

To meet future workforce demand, Swinburne urges governments to innovate and experiment through streamlining pathways, greater flexibility and innovation in course design and paid placements. This, we believe, will be a prerequisite to achieving long-term success in meeting future workforce needs.

Swinburne has articulated our response around three themes, each addressing a number of questions. In each section, we have weaved through the idea that for the sector to be stronger, future-focused, and resilient we must invest in innovative programs and greater support for the workforce.

Future of the workforce

The biggest challenges facing Australia's ECEC workforce is attracting new entrants while retaining existing workers. The Victorian Skills Plan outlines that an additional 65,000 workers will be required over the next 3 years in Victoria's health and community service sector, which includes child carers.

In the ECEC sector, staff and teachers are facing a growth in complex needs from children and pressures to be inclusive and taking into account all children's social, cultural and linguistic diversity needs. The expectation is to ensure that all children's experiences are recognised and valued, and that all children have equitable access to resources and participation, and opportunities to demonstrate their learning and to value difference.

These complex and ever evolving pressures will need to be adequately addressed in the education of a future workforce and upskilling existing staff and teachers. The Victorian Government has developed and rolled out modules to upskill the existing workforce to understand children with autism better and plan inclusive programs to support their learning and development. Another example is the Robotics Play Program developed by Swinburne researchers. The aim of this program is to provide evidence-based resources for educators and communities to better understand strategies and techniques for improving children's social-emotional, communication, literacy, and oral language skills as well as early numeracy skills through robot play while fostering STEM learning at an early age. Since 2021, the Robotics Play Program has successfully rolled out to eight kindergartens across Victoria thanks to funding through the Victorian Government's School Readiness Program. Feedback to date has been extremely positive from children, parents and educators.

Swinburne recommends that government's provide additional funding to develop a suite of modules to support the upskilling of the existing workforce and those who have previously exited, while promoting educational institutes to develop and deliver innovative learning on how to immerse children in areas such as STEM in early years. Through this additional investment, staff and educators will be well equipped and resourced for the future of early childhood education.

Pathways and qualifications

As a dual sector university, Swinburne offers a suite of learning opportunities relating to ECEC, providing pathways from a certificate III up to a Graduate Diploma of Early Childhood Teaching.

At present there are several barriers and inflexibility, especially in the vocational qualifications, that needs to be reviewed as a matter of urgency. Attrition and retention are being negatively impacted by the current CHC30121 Certificate III in Early Childhood Education and Care training package which is at least an AQF 4 not AQF 3, and being a prerequisite to study the CHC50121 - Diploma of Early Childhood Education and Care. Swinburne strongly recommends that package CHC30121 be contracted back to AQF 3 standard and CHC50121 be redeveloped as a direct starting point for those who want to enter the profession at this level of qualification. If not undertaken, this will negatively impact student enrolments and the future workforce pipeline.

Other areas of concern include mental and health challenges of those wanting to study ECEC. Significant support and resources is necessary to support these students to successfully progress with their studies, and support through foundation skills (literacy, numeracy and digital literacy) will greatly assist with their learning.

In addition, Swinburne recommends a working group be established to review options to fast-track learning for the sector including pathways, recognition of prior learning and options for fast tracked degrees.

Participation and engagement

As outlined, the biggest challenges facing Australia's ECEC workforce is attracting new entrants while retaining existing workers. To boost participation, low wage and challenging conditions need to be addressed, including being paid for work placements.

Similar to other teaching qualifications, students are required to undertake hundreds of hours of unpaid placement with many students opting not to undertake the study as they cannot afford to be out of work and not earning an income. The same applies to existing workers wanting to upskill or do professional development but cannot afford the cost or loss of income.

In relation to vocational studies, most candidates need to **earn and learn** making **traineeships** attractive, they are also attractive to employers. Unfortunately, deficits exist in these programs within ongoing coaching and mentoring required both from training provider and employer.

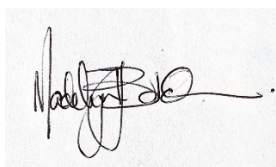
Terminology in the sector is important and hasn't been updated for some time. For example, the role of Childcare Worker has been titled "Early Childhood Educator" for many years. If we are looking at attraction and retention, then respectful terminology is important.

Swinburne recommends that funding is made available to supplement loss of income during work placement, this will go a long way in enticing more to study who cannot take the time off work. To address low wages and grow the workforce, Swinburne strongly recommends that the Commonwealth investigates intervention to increase pay for workers similar to the 15% increase for aged care workers that came into effect last year.

Swinburne again wants to commend the government's continued investment to address skills shortages in the sector through additional Fee-Free TAFE places and Early Childhood Education Workforce package. Both initiatives are playing a significant role in securing a sustainable early childhood education workforce for the future.

Thank you for your consideration. We look forward continuing to work with Jobs and Skills Australia on this important topic. In the meantime, feel free to contact Mathew Cooper, Manager of Government Relations at, mjcooper@swin.edu.au if have any further questions.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Madelyn Bolch', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Madelyn Bolch
Pro Vice-Chancellor and Chief Executive Vocational Education
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