Preschool education in AUSTRALIA

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Authors:

Dr Andrew Dowling
Principal Research Fellow, Policy Analysis and Program Evaluation, ACER

Ms Kate O'Malley
Research Fellow, National and International Surveys, ACER

Introduction

Early childhood education (ECE) in Australia will soon experience a 'radical makeover.' In 2008, all Australian governments made a commitment through the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) that by 2013,

> *all children in the year before formal schooling will have access to high quality early childhood education programs delivered by degree-qualified early childhood teachers, for 15 hours per week, 40 weeks of the year, in public, private and community-based preschools and child care.*

The purpose of this policy brief is to summarise the current structure of preschool in Australia in contemplation of this major policy shift. This paper describes the context in which the COAG commitment will be implemented, including:

- The current organisation of, and participation in, preschool education in Australia;
- The different regulations governing different types of preschool in Australia;
- The apparent under-supply of degree-qualified ECE teachers in Australia;
- The contentious debate over curriculum and assessment that is currently occurring amongst preschool practitioners; and
- The urgent need for better data about preschools in Australia.

Terminology

By the time a child reaches their second year of formal schooling in Australia they are in 'Year 1,' yet it is unclear what to call the experience that occurs beforehand.

This paper uses 'preschool' to describe ECE in the year before formal schooling but as Table 1 shows, this is far from accurate in all states ('kindergarten' is also a common term used in many states). The focus throughout is on educational programs in the year before formal schooling, including those in 'stand alone' preschools as well as those integrated with child care (which are referred to in this paper as 'long day care,' or LDC). Unless otherwise specified, a reference to 'preschool' is to preschool in both settings.

Preschool participation in Australia

Preschool is something that in Australia is not compulsory, but which governments aim to promote.

The Productivity Commission's *Report on Government Services 2009* (PC ROGS 2009) refers to participation in terms of enrolment but only when those preschools are government provided or subsidised (i.e., privately funded preschools are not captured in Table 2).

Queensland's low participation rate (26.6 per cent) is due to a reconfiguration of Queensland schooling in 2007 which caused preschools in that state to be re-badged as the first year of school. In the past, young Queenslanders started and finished school a year earlier than their interstate colleagues. In the interests of creating a uniform school starting age, this is no longer the case. But Queensland's introduction of a 'preparatory' year was enabled by making preschools 'prep.' There are now very few government preschools left in Queensland catering to four year olds.

Some states (Western Australia and Tasmania) have participation rates in excess of 100 per cent which is primarily due to double-counting children who move in and out of the preschool system. Double-counting of children is endemic to this sector. Data from *Growing up in Australia: The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children* (LSAC) show that one quarter (25.3 per cent) of all four-year old children who attend an ECE program, attend more than one children's service (Ainley, 2008)[1]. Because there is no unique student identifier across the sector many children are counted twice, particularly in those jurisdictions which estimate enrolments from surveys.

The sector is also inherently complex due to the fact that attendance is non-compulsory and children can be enrolled in more than one setting. ECE data as a whole in Australia have been described as confusing, with the sector containing a serious lack of national comparability and having 'orders of magnitude' more complex than schooling (see, for example, ACTU 2003; Elliott 2006; Harrington 2008; and McEwin and Ryan 2008). However, the persistence of data problems also stems from the fact that Australian investment in ECE has, in the past, been abysmally low.

Australian investment in preschool

The OECD's *Education at a Glance 2008* (EAG 2008) reports that Australia's proportion of national income spent on pre-primary education is among the lowest in the developed world (see Figure 1).

Australia ranked equal 30th with Korea and was only ahead of Ireland out of 32 countries on the percentage of GDP expended on institutions for pre-primary education in 2005 (0.1 per cent of GDP, compared to an OECD average of 0.45 per cent). This situation is unchanged from 2004.

The OECD's *Education at a Glance* includes preschools but excludes other early childhood institutions, such as LDCs. About 45 per cent of Australia's child care centres are consequently not reported and as a result the reported data understate the actual level of expenditure. But this restriction is true for all countries and Australia's expenditure on pre-primary education is low, even when the underreporting of this expenditure is taken into account.

COAG's universal access commitment to ECE will no doubt increase Australia's expenditure relative to other countries but this changed status will not be reflected until the 2012 EAG, which will report on 2009 expenditure.

1 LSAC is funded by the Commonwealth Government and managed by the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS). This longitudinal study involves two cohorts of about 5,000 children each with a sample retention rate of 90 per cent between Wave 1 and 2 (Gray and Smart, 2008).

Table 1: ECE State Nomenclature

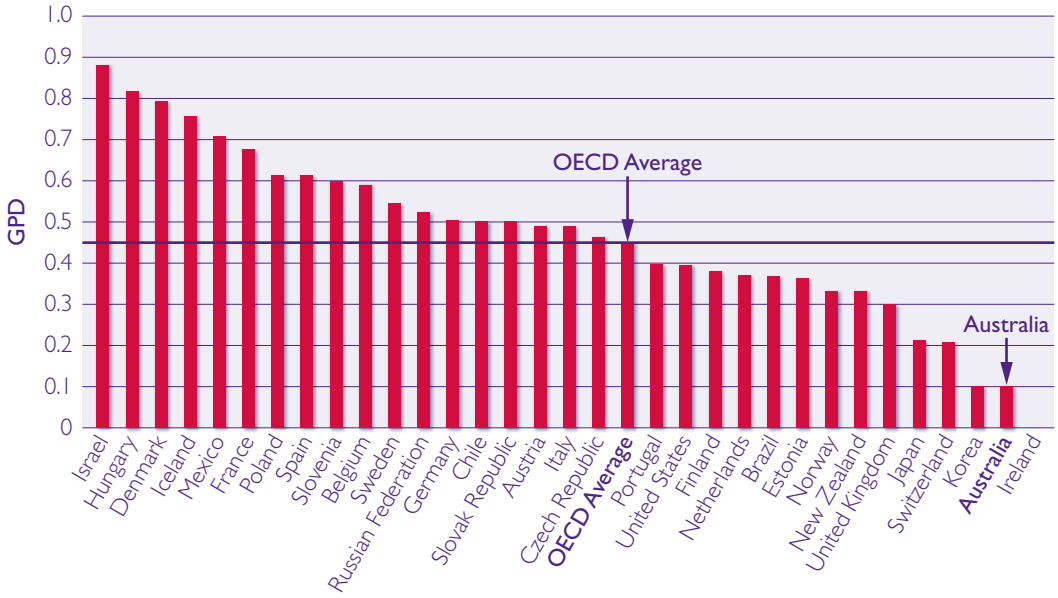
		Year before formal schooling	First year of formal schooling	Second year of formal schooling
NSW	Name	Preschool	Kindergarten	Year 1
	Age	*4 (by 31 July)*	*5 (by 31 July)*	
VIC	Name	Kindergarten	Preparatory	Year 1
	Age	*4 (by 30 April)*	*5 (by 30 April)*	
QLD	Name	Kindergarten	Preparatory	Year 1
	Age	*4 (by 30 June)*	*5 (by 30 June)*	
WA	Name	Kindergarten	Pre-Primary	Year 1
	Age	*4 (by 30 June)*	*5 (by 30 June)*	
SA	Name	Kindergarten	Reception	Year 1
	Age	*Continuous entry after 4th birthday*	*Continuous entry after 5th birthday*	
TAS	Name	Kindergarten	Preparatory	Year 1
	Age	*4 (by 1 January)*	*5 (by 1 January)*	
ACT	Name	Preschool	Kindergarten	Year 1
	Age	*4 (by 30 April)*	*5 (by 30 April)*	
NT	Name	Preschool	Transition	Year 1
	Age	*Continuous entry after 4th birthday*	*5 (by 30 June)*	

Table 2: Children using State and Territory government funded and/or provided preschool services in the year before full time school, 2007/08

	NSW	VIC	QLD	WA	SA	TAS	ACT	NT	AUS
Children using State Government funded and/or provided preschool services									
Year before full time school (no.)	52,238	60,969	14,465	27,456	16,020	5,990	3,648	2,996	183,782
Estimated residential population									
4 to less than 5 years (4 year olds) (no.)	86,486	63,671	54,282	26,542	18,218	5,897	4,131	3,520	262,776
Proportion of residential population using State Government funded and/or provided preschool services									
Year before full time school (%)	60.4	95.8	26.6	103.4	87.9	101.6	88.3	85.1	69.9

Source: PC ROGS 2009, Table 3A.12 .<http://www.pc.gov.au/gsp/reports/rogs/2009>

Figure 1: Expenditure on pre-primary education (for children 3 years and older) as a percentage of GDP (2005), from public and private sources



Source: OECD, EAG 2008, Table B2.2

Notes: Data are unavailable for Canada, Greece, Luxembourg, and Turkey. However, data are presented for OECD partner countries Brazil, Chile, Estonia, Israel, Russian Federation, and Slovenia. Ireland does appear on this graph but its spending on pre-primary education is recorded as zero.

The structure of preschool in Australia

It is possible to consider that the provision of ECE takes place along a continuum in regard to States and Territories, at each end of which there are two distinct models (see Figure 2).

The three largest states in Australia (New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland) are more aligned with Model 2, the non-government model, while the other states and territories (Western Australia, South Australia, Tasmania, the Northern Territory, and the Australian Capital Territory) are more aligned with Model 1, the government model (see Table 3).

The location of jurisdictions into a 'government' or 'non-government' model is illustrated through the type of preschool management that exists in each State and Territory (see Table 4) .

No jurisdiction entirely fits the 'government' or 'non-government' model (even Western Australia has a number of non-government schools-based preschools that receive subsidies from the state government). Jurisdictions are a mix of the two models and the reality is more complex than these models suggest. For example, in New South Wales, the government delivers some preschool education (in government schools) subsidises some preschool education (community preschools) but neither subsidises nor delivers preschool services

Figure 2: Two models for describing preschools in Australia

Table 3: Government and non-government model

MODEL 1: GOVERNMENT MODEL (WA, SA, TAS, ACT & NT)	MODEL 2: NON-GOVERNMENT MODEL (NSW, VIC & QLD)
The vast majority of preschools are government owned and run. The State government funds these preschools in much the same way as they fund their government schools. The State may provide supplementary funding to community preschools but generally not to preschool programs in LDC.	Most preschools are non-government owned but are subsidised by state and / or local government. Government preschools are few in number and are explicitly targeted at disadvantaged communities, in contrast to government schools, which aim to be comprehensive rather than residual. Preschool programs in LDC are generally funded by the Commonwealth (through the Child Care Benefit and Child Care Tax Rebate) and by parents' fees.

Table 4: Percentage of licensed and /or registered preschool providers, by management type, by jurisdiction, 2007/08

	NSW	VIC	QLD	WA	SA	TAS	ACT	NT
Community	80.6%	74.2%	92.9%	n/a	4.9%	n/a	8.7%	-
Private	8.6%	8.2%	n/a	n/a	n/a	26.7%	n/a	3.6%
Government	10.8%	17.6%	7.1%	100%	95.1%	73.3%	91.3%	96.4%
TOTAL	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Source: PC ROGS 2009, Tables 3A.41, 3A.48, 3A.55, 3A.62, 3A.69, 3A.76, 3A.83, 3A.90

Note: n/a = not available.

provided in the non-government school sector. However, jurisdictions do have a tendency towards one model or the other. Of the jurisdictions that fit the 'non-government' model (New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland), none owns more than 20 per cent of preschools (Victoria being the highest at 17.6 per cent). Of the jurisdictions that fit the 'government' model, none owns less than 70 per cent and most own more than 90 per cent of preschools.

Table 4 does not specify the number of children who receive preschool in LDC centres in the year before formal schooling. Yet a significant proportion of Australia's approximately 200,000 children who attend a preschool program in the year before school do so in an 'integrated' LDC centre.

The Productivity Commission's *Report on Government Services* (PC ROGS) shows the number and proportion of centre-based LDC in each jurisdiction without specifying the number that provides a preschool program (although the 2006 Australian Government Census of Child Care Services (AGCCCS) estimates this proportion to be 48 per cent). The PC ROGS data shows that LDC centres in all jurisdictions are mostly community or privately run and that there are less of them in 'government,' or Model 1, jurisdictions.[2] It is likely that jurisdictions that fit the 'non-government' model would have more preschool occurring in LDC settings while for those jurisdictions that fit the 'government' model, far less preschool would occur in these settings.

The two models referred to, where the government manages and delivers preschool on the one hand ('government') or subsidises the non-government sector to do so ('non-government'), parallel whether preschools are 'stand alone' or integrated with child care. Most debates on preschool quality relate to the actual or perceived difference in educational quality that results from preschools that are 'stand alone' or integrated with child care.

2 For example, in 2007/08, Western Australia, South Australia, Tasmania, the Northern Territory, and the Australian Capital Territory had 22 per cent of Australia's 4 year olds but only 14 per cent of privately run LDCs. See PC ROGS 2009, Tables 3A.41, 3A.48, 3A.55, 3A.62, 3A.69, 3A.76, 3A.83, 3A.90. For number of 4 year olds, see PC ROGS 2009, Tables 3A.38, 3A.45, 3A.52, 3A.59, 3A.66, 3A.73, 3A.80, 3A.87.

Stand alone versus integrated preschool

In Australia, the most obvious differences between 'stand alone' preschool and the more integrated model offered by LDC centres (with qualified early childhood teachers) are hours of operation and sources of funding. Generally, a stand alone preschool will have the same six hours of operation as schools (9.00am until 3.00pm), and where programs are government funded children are likely to attend for up to 12 hours per week, that is on a 'sessional basis'. In child care centres ('long day care' or LDC preschools) which are open for much longer, from 10 to 14 hours a day (ranging from 8.00am till 6.00pm to 6.00am till 8.00pm), the early education program activities, especially if not funded separately by a state government, are likely to be spread across the day. Stand alone preschools are generally funded by State governments (with a nominal parent contribution) while LDC programs, including those that offer a formal early education of 'preschool' program with a qualified early childhood teacher, are generally funded by parents' fees and, for eligible parents, by Commonwealth subsidies such as the Child Care Benefit (CCB) and the Child Care Tax Rebate (CCTR).

The evidence is mixed as to which setting – stand alone or integrated – offers the higher quality care. Longitudinal research in England has found that fully integrated centres are amongst the most effective in ensuring better intellectual progress for children (Sylva et al. 2003). It has also been argued, amongst other benefits, that integrated centres provide:

- Complementary skills of a wide range of people working together;
- Greater access to more specialised support; and
- A single inspection point for child care and preschool.

(Siraj-Blatchford et al. 2007)

Discrete preschooling is also argued to be an inappropriate conceptual model for young children's development and learning in situations where care and learning cannot easily be separated (Elliott 2006).

Yet there are arguments in favour of stand alone preschools, especially where it is well integrated with school. It remains the case that the states with relatively high rates of preschool participation in Australia are those that provide effectively free, government-funded preschool services that are largely stand alone and integrated with schools (see Table 2). One explanation for these high rates of enrolment is that parents are happy with the system and that children in those systems gain good learning and development experiences. The Australian evidence on this issue is limited, yet the variety of preschool systems offers a good opportunity for fruitful research and analysis in this area.

While LDC better supports families' need for care, there is a strong public perception that stand alone preschools have higher standards of educational quality than LDC preschools. This public perception is related to the fact that the legislated quality for stand alone preschools is higher than for LDC.

Legislation

It is not the case that preschools fall between the cracks of two different types of legislation, one for child care and one for schools.[3] However, preschool does sit uneasily between these two institutions in a regulatory sense. Table 5 shows the difference amongst selected jurisdictions as to whether various types of preschools are covered by an Education Act or a Children's Services Act (or their respective equivalents in a given state or territory).

Appendix A explains this legislation in greater detail, including why one type of preschool can be covered by two different types of legislation. But Table 5 reinforces the complexity surrounding preschool provision in Australia, where the regulating legislation has an inconsistent background, hovering between education and child care.

This divide stems from the emergence in the late nineteenth century of the kindergarten movement on the one hand, with its focus on early learning and preparation for school, and day nurseries, on the other, with their charitable and welfare focus (Elliott 2006; Hayes 2006). The practical consequence of this divide today is that different regulations can cover the 'care' aspect of preschool, traditionally associated with LDC, as opposed to the 'education' aspects, traditionally associated with 'stand alone' preschool. In summary, the different regulations mean that:

- 'Stand alone' preschools tend to employ qualified teachers who tend to be early childhood qualified, while LDC centres tend not to employ qualified early childhood teachers (except in New South Wales, where it is mandated but only above a certain threshold point of 29 children in a centre).
- Teachers in LDC work longer and appear to be paid less than those in other settings, and are often not eligible to be registered as teachers by State teacher registration boards, despite in many cases holding a formal four year teaching qualification.

3 Although three year olds attending private school preschools in Western Australia are, in fact, not covered by any legislation.

Table 5: Example of legislation covering preschools in Australia

	NSW	VIC	QLD	WA	SA	TAS
Govt Preschools	Children's Services + Education	Children's Services	n/a	Education	Education	Education
Non-govt School Preschools	Children's Services + Education	Children's Services	Children's Services	Education	Children's Services + Education	Education
Community Preschools	Children's Services	Children's Services	Children's Services	Education	Children's Services	n/a
Long Day Care (LDC) Preschools	Children's Services	Children's Services	Children's Services	Children's Services	Children's Services	Education

Note: Appendix A provides more detail on the specific legislation involved.

These different regulatory requirements work against the integration of preschool and child care by placing less consistent quality demands on preschool programs in LDC. It remains the fact that:

a) teaching in LDC involves longer hours;

b) teachers in LDC appear to be paid less than teachers either in preschools or primary schools (see Table 6); and

c) teachers in LDC are often not registered by State teacher registration authorities. The reasons for not registering LDC teachers vary.

In New South Wales the stated explanation is that LDC teachers do not teach a recognised Board of Studies curriculum. Queensland, on the other hand, has a requirement that registered teachers must spend at least one year out of every five in a school, a requirement not easily met by LDC teachers. However, other jurisdictions (such as Western Australia, South Australia and the Northern Territory) do allow early childhood teachers to be registered as a teacher.

Table 6: Award salaries of primary school teachers, preschool teachers and teachers in long day care

State	Level of training (if applicable)	Early Childhood Teacher				Primary School Teacher	
		In Child Care Centre		In Preschool			
		Beginning	End	Beginning	End	Beginning	End
NSW	3 yr trained	$41,329	$61,100	$39,742	$55,010	$45,558	$75,352
	4 yr trained	$43,946	$64,557	$42,256	$62,120	$50,222	$75,352
VIC	3 yr trained	$38,502	$52,863	$38,502	$52,863	-	-
	4 yr trained	$40,587	$52,863	$40,587	$52,863	$51,184	$75,500
QLD	3 yr trained	-	-	-	-	-	-
	4 yr trained	$36,196	$47,971	$36,196	$47,971	$43,201	$68,839
WA	4 yr trained	$36,387	$51,169	$37,009	$77,744	$37,009	$77,744
SA	3 yr trained	-	-	-	-	-	-
	4 yr trained	$39,272	$42,369	$38,522	$48,666	$38,522	$48,666
TAS	3/4 yr trained	$36,899	$40,035	$48,638	$71,133	$48,638	$71,133
	5 yr trained	-	-	$51,139	$71,133	$51,139	$71,133
ACT	3 yr trained	$36,872	$43,708	$48,219	$74,279	$48,219	$74,279
	4 yr trained	$38,041	$48,602	$52,128	$74,279	$52,128	$74,279
NT	3/4 yr trained	$47,789	$53,872	$39,459	$70,047	$39,459	$70,047

Source: Relevant industrial awards and Early Childhood Australia administrative data.

Notes: - not applicable

The end result is a diminution of the LDC teacher's status, most powerfully felt through salary differentials (see Table 6). These salary amounts are based on awards, not real salaries, and there are approximately 50 state and federal industrial awards covering staff working in preschools and child care centres (ABS 4232.0 2007). But as Table 6 illustrates, teachers in these settings are paid less, at least in terms of the awards, than those in schools or where preschools are integrated into the school system.

It is important to realise that many, possibly most, ECE teachers are not employed on awards and so this table could be considered irrelevant to real teaching conditions. Also, while this table relates to formal qualifications, Early Childhood Australia estimates that 'up to 45 per cent of the early childhood education and care workforce have no formal childcare qualifications' (2009, p. 7). Yet in terms of formal awards for qualified teachers, LDC teachers are paid less than those in stand alone settings.

One commentator has recently asked, 'What does it say about how we value children in our society when often their carers are paid less than parking attendants who look after cars?' (Stanley, 2009). Professor Stanley was probably referring to unqualified child-care staff yet the difference between salaries for staff with the same (or similar) qualifications but who work in different settings is significant. In some instances, teachers in LDC at the top of their salary scale receive over 40 per cent less, in terms of an award wage, compared to similarly qualified early childhood teachers in stand alone preschool and primary schools.

In some jurisdictions (NSW and SA), the beginning salary for LDC teachers is higher than those in preschools. However, this is largely due to the fact that LDC teachers are generally expected to work longer hours over a longer working year with LDCs usually operating over a yearly minimum of 48 weeks as compared to the preschool average of 41 weeks. Further, qualified teachers in LDC tend to be in management positions, for example, as centre Director, and may be paid a salary that accounts for this additional management load. In most cases, the LDC award decreases markedly, in comparison to teachers in stand alone preschools and primary schools, as teachers work their way up the pay scale.

This type of pay difference, together with less favourable working conditions such as shift work and shorter holidays (four weeks in LDC compared with ten weeks in other settings), makes teaching in LDC settings far less attractive to qualified individuals, causing a shortage of teachers in the child care system wherever there are opportunities in schools and a further deepening of the care-education divide. This supports the observation that Australia is experiencing a shortage of qualified early childhood teachers, especially in LDC due to that sector's relatively poor pay and working conditions (Purcal & Fisher, 2007).

Summary

Many LDC centres do successfully provide both full time care and quality early childhood education. However, there is also a strong perception that stand alone preschools have higher standards of educational quality than LDC in Australia. This perception stems from the fact that preschools are subject to higher regulation and/or to traditions that link them to educational provision rather than to 'care'.

One of the main reasons for the perceived lower educational quality of LDC compared to stand alone preschools is the real concern that there may not be a teacher at all in LDC settings. There is no legislative requirement to employ a teacher in LDC in most jurisdictions. New South Wales is the only state that legally requires all centre-based care to employ a degree trained early childhood teacher once child numbers exceed 29; however, there is anecdotal evidence to suggest that LDC providers in New South Wales enrol 29 children or less precisely to avoid this requirement. The other 'non-government' jurisdictions, Victoria and Queensland, use financial incentives (if not legal requirements) to employ teachers in LDC.

Further, although children are in LDC settings for longer, this does not necessarily mean they are receiving more teaching in those settings. There is little Australian data on the hours that children currently receive preschool programs in child care settings.

In summary, the different regulatory requirements that govern the two types of services substantiate rather than relieve concerns about the lower quality of early educational programs in LDC settings.

Workforce

Many commentators believe that regardless of the setting in which the child is located, an important indicator of quality lies in the skills and qualifications of the teacher involved (see ABS 4232.0, 2007). Yet it has been argued that early childhood teacher education capacity in universities will 'need to be increased dramatically – and quickly' if universal preschool education is to be implemented (Elliott 2006, 38).

It is encouraging to see that this increase is currently occurring. On 14th October 2009, the Federal government announced 780 new university places in early childhood teaching – 500 available in 2010

and 280 in 2011 (Ellis & Gillard). Yet this increase may not be large enough.

Demand for preschool is likely to increase in all States and Territories due to the increase in the four year old population, which will grow by almost 30 per cent in high growth jurisdictions such as Queensland (27.08 per cent) and Western Australia (28.78 per cent) over the next 12 years and even up to 10 per cent in low growth jurisdictions such as New South Wales (9.41 per cent); growing in total by almost 18 percent across Australia from 2008 to 2020 (see Figure 3).

Accurately estimating the supply and demand of ECE teachers in Australia is a complex task involving the consideration of multiple variables such as fertility rates, immigration policy, patterns of interstate migration, class size decisions, changes in the economy and the broader labour market, changes to superannuation policies affecting retirement decisions, different models of initial teacher education, and applications of technology to teaching and learning (Connors, 2009).

Such a task is beyond the scope of this paper. But an examination of important variables, such as national ECE teaching degree completion and enrolment numbers against the projected preschool population, suggests a future under-supply of degree-qualified ECE teachers in Australia. Increased demand for preschool will stem not only from the increase in the four year old population but also from the COAG commitment to universal access. In this context, it is unlikely that the supply of qualified ECE teachers will keep up with this demand, possibly even with the 780 new university places recently announced by the Federal government.

Australia is experiencing a shortage of qualified early childhood teachers, especially in LDC but also across the board. This policy paper's brief review of teaching graduates supports this point (see Figure 4).

Some jurisdictions, such as Queensland and the Northern Territory, are experiencing a significant drop in their ECE teaching graduates (-18 per cent and -67 per cent respectively). In the Northern Territory, enrolment numbers appear to have plummeted by over 80 per cent from 2001 to 2007 with completion numbers decreasing by more than two thirds. Even if the number of early childhood teachers is higher than indicated by these statistics (possibly because early childhood teaching is embedded in a non specific teacher education program), the trend is worrying. Whilst Northern Territory is home to only 1.3 per cent of the nation's four year olds, the current and future supply of ECE-qualified teachers cannot hope to adequately meet the ECE needs of the Northern Territory population.

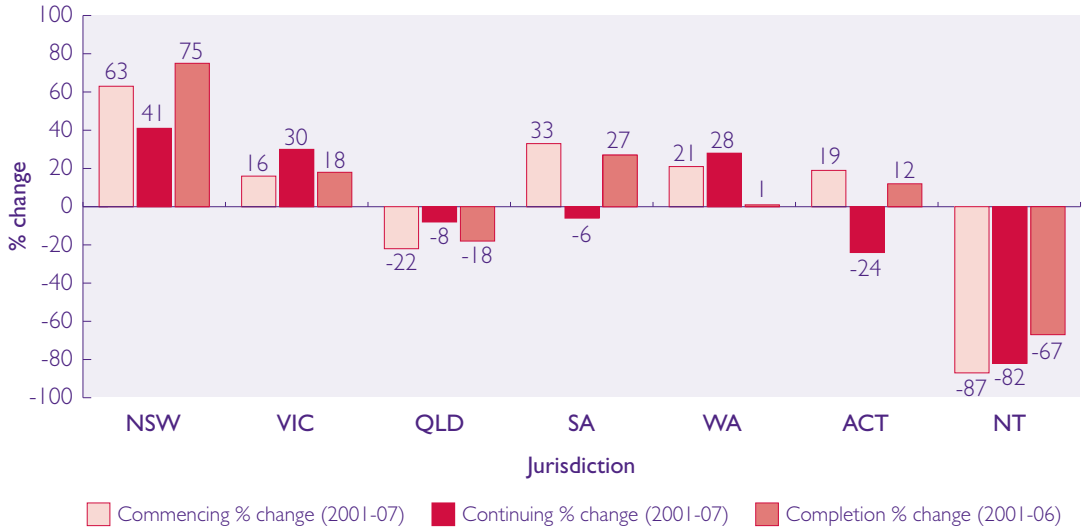
The number of ECE teaching completions in Victoria is also small, representing approximately 10 per cent of national completions annually (206 from a national total of 1,962, excluding Tasmania, in 2006). Such low numbers are in contrast to the number of preschool aged children in Victoria, with almost 25 per cent of Australian four year olds living in the state.

Figure 3: Resident 4 Year Old Population Projections: 2008; 2013; 2020

Source: ABS 3222.0 Population Projections, Series B, Australia, 2006 to 2101; September 2008.*

* The ABS Series B projections represent a moderate projection series (as compared to Series A or C) based on the following assumptions: a) total fertility rate is equal to 1.8 babies per woman; b) net overseas migration is 180,000 persons; and c) life expectancy at birth is 85 years for males, and 88 years for females

Figure 4: Percentage change in commencing, continuing and completion ECE Teacher education student numbers



	NSW	VIC	QLD	SA	WA	ACT	NT	Australia
2001 Commencing	1,073	301	880	186	333	43	136	2,952
2007 Commencing	1,750	392	811	248	403	51	18	3,673
2001 Continuing	1,757	514	1,929	456	540	104	171	5,471
2007 Continuing	2,484	595	1,498	430	691	79	31	5,808
2001 Completing	536	174	574	89	184	33	33	1,623
2006 Completing	939	206	471	113	185	37	11	1,962

Source: DEEWR, Higher Education Information Management System (HEIMS) data.

Note: Tasmania is not captured by this data set.

Even New South Wales, the boom state when it comes to ECE teaching graduates, relies on an 'interim approvals' policy to meet demands for teaching staff in LDC centres. The 'interim approvals' policy was introduced in New South Wales in 2002 to allow children's services providers to temporarily employ a person with a lesser qualification if the person was enrolled in an approved early childhood teaching course or was willing to enrol (Purcal & Fisher, 2007). The fact that a jurisdiction such as New South Wales with a growing supply of ECE graduates and a relatively stable number of four year olds feels compelled to use such a policy suggests that the current supply of ECE teachers does not meet existing demand, much less an expansion of demand.

The increase in university places for early childhood teachers recently announced by the Federal government recognises this dilemma and will hopefully go some way towards solving it.

Curriculum

It is often argued that preschools should not be bound by a formal curriculum or assessment for preschool children. Even those jurisdictions with the most formalised frameworks, such as South Australia, Western Australia and Tasmania, emphasise non-assessed, play-based learning rather than formalised assessment. All jurisdictions have a curriculum 'framework' for preschool (except for Victoria, which is in the process of implementing one) but these are not mandatory and there is no formal mechanism for assessing children's progress in preschool before they enter full-time school. Curriculum frameworks are not prescriptive and the term 'curriculum' is generally used to focus more on what professionals do than on what children experience or learn.

However, Australia's first national Early Years Learning Framework for early childhood educators (the national framework), which has only recently been published, does advocate assessment for

children's learning. Assessment in this context refers to 'the process of gathering and analysing information as evidence about what children know, can do and understand' (DEEWR, 2009, p. 17). Without stipulating specific forms of assessment, the national framework describes the types of diagnostic assessment that can occur in a play-based learning environment, as well as describing, in some detail, elements that constitute the framework's Key Learning Outcomes. The national framework recognises that early childhood years are 'not solely preparation for the future but also about the present' (p. 7), while also recognising the importance of evaluating the present.

It remains the case that preschool education programs are not simply unstructured activity. Preschool teachers, like other teachers, are involved in an intentional, planned process towards achieving certain goals and objectives for children. These goals include:

- Improving prior-to-school literacy and numeracy performance;
- Monitoring children's development and learning with a view to recommending their suitability for a school environment;
- Identifying activities that most enhance or limit opportunities for age-appropriate child development; and
- Facilitating cognitive, social, psychological and physical developmental outcomes through participation in formal / informal learning programs.

While curriculum is different to assessment, the two are linked.

In Australia as elsewhere, there is a tension between undertaking diagnostic assessment (not to be confused with 'grading') and resisting any form of assessment. A contentious debate that is occurring across Australia at the moment (which is unlikely to be resolved by the national framework) is whether preschool outcomes should be measurable.

The major arguments against measuring early learning outcomes emphasise that:

- Play is not a measurable, quantifiable entity;
- Measurement cannot capture the spontaneity and 'magic' of a young child's play;
- It is very hard to quantify interpersonal interactions between child and educator;
- Assessing outcomes will narrowly focus early learning programs on what is measurable and devalue non-measurable goals;
- 'Labelling' children too early is counter-productive;
- Measuring outcomes will pressurise under-resourced staff and place pressures on time in an already busy program.

The arguments for measuring outcomes emphasise that:

- Preschools should be child and family focused, and families need a guarantee that their children are meeting intended learning outcomes;
- Measuring outcomes can place children at the centre of the learning processes, allowing for personalised and targeted learning experiences that focus on intended learning outcomes;
- It is better to understand individual need through measurable outcomes when the individual is young;
- Nationally consistent measures would improve the 'feedback loop' of reporting on children's learning for families and schools and especially facilitating continuity of learning between preschool and school;
- Measuring outcomes will increase teacher investment in and responsibility for intended learning;
- Government funding requires some assessment that government money is well spent.[4]

This policy brief draws attention to the debate without advocating one view over another. However, the challenges involved in specifying and measuring intended learning outcomes in preschool require careful consideration and more research is needed in this area.[5]

4 Thanks to Alison Elliott for assisting in the construction of this list.

5 It is not the case that it is impossible to measure early learning outcomes. In the United Kingdom (UK), the 'Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project', the first major European longitudinal study of its kind, found that effective preschool pedagogy included interactions traditionally associated with the term 'teaching,' and that knowledge of curriculum content was vital (such as the teaching of the sound patterns of words) (Sylva et al. 2003). Australian research has come to similar findings, including that high teacher quality and knowledge of curriculum conveyed to children in a structured environment are central to achieving better results. For example, ***Project Good Start,*** a Federal Government initiative conducted by the ACER into the effectiveness of numeracy programs for Australian children in the year before school and the first year of schooling, found that well-trained, strategically focussed, energetic and enthusiastic teachers were the key to success in numeracy, as was systematic, planned play rather than random play (Thomson et al. 2005).

Conclusion

Australia's 'radical makeover' of its preschool sector, as contemplated by COAG's universal access commitment, is welcome. But for the reforms to be effective, coordinated action amongst the States and Territories and the Commonwealth is needed in three main areas:

a) One of the most essential improvements is to increase the consistency and comparability of preschool data. This paper has described only some of the data problems beleaguering the sector. If Australia's under-investment in ECE is to be rectified, then one of the first priorities should be an emphasis on nationally consistent and comparable preschool data.

b) There is a contradiction between the need for high quality LDC and the fact that Australia does not consistently legislate or regulate for high quality LDC. Professional opinion often favours LDC and changing workforce needs demand it. Yet less quality demands are placed on LDC, teachers appear to be paid less in LDC, and often there is no requirement for a teacher to be present at all in a LDC centre.

   Australia may be on the cusp of a change in the industrial framework governing qualified staff in LDCs, where such staff are placed on a more equal footing with their peers in other ECE settings. This workforce reconfiguration would be welcome. But even achieving the teacher quality goals, the universal access commitment will be difficult in the context of a national, and global, under-supply of teachers. The Federal government's increase in ECE teacher places at universities is welcome, but may not be enough.

c) The ways in which children's early development and learning outcomes should be assessed, documented and reported are the subject of on-going debate and discussion. On one hand there is a strong view in the early childhood field that it is inappropriate to measure developmental and learning outcomes for young children; this view co-exists with a contrasting view about the need to understand educational and social outcomes that will place the child at the centre of the learning experience. The capacity to assess and document young children's learning and development within a play-based early learning program requires careful consideration and further research.

It remains the fact that,

- Australia's proportion of GDP spent on pre-primary education is amongst the lowest in the developed world;
- Australia regulates for different quality in different preschool settings; and
- Australian preschools are some 15 to 20 years behind Australian schools when it comes to national comparability for even the most basic data items.

The importance of preschool education for an individual's future life opportunities demands a more rigorous and committed approach. COAG's welcome commitment to universal access illustrates a government awareness of the long shadow cast by early learning experiences. But implementing this commitment will require significant cooperation between the Commonwealth and the States/Territories to ensure that preschools do reflect our society's professed care for its youngest participants.

APPENDIX A: Legislation covering preschools in Australia

	NSW	VIC	QLD	WA	SA	TAS
Govt Preschools	Child care / Education[1]	Child care[2]	n/a[3]	Education[5]	Education[7]	Education[10]
Private School Preschools	Child care / Education[1]	Child care[2]	Child care[4]	Education[5]	Child care / Education[8]	Education[10]
Community Preschools	Child care[1]	Child care[2]	Child care[4]	Education[5]	Child care[9]	n/a
Long Day Care (LDC) Preschools	Child care[1]	Child care[2]	Child care[4]	Child care[6]	Child care[9]	Education[11]

Notes	Explanation
1	The definition of 'children's service' and 'centre based children's service' makes it clear that the NSW Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998 and the Children's Services Regulation 2004 cover all types of preschools. However, the major exception is when a preschool is offering 'formal education in accordance with the school curriculum set out in Part 3 of the Education Act 1990 is provided by a government school or a registered non-government school.' School-based preschool (whether government or non-government) can be covered by either the child care or education legislation, depending on its curriculum focus. From 1st July 2008, school-based preschools will be required to be licensed by the NSW Department of Community Services (DoCS), unless they are teaching a version of the school curriculum, in which case they will be regulated by the NSW Board of Studies rather than DoCS.
2	All children's services in Victoria, whether they be preschool or child care services, are bound by the same pieces of legislation, namely the Children's Services Act 1996 and the Children's Services Regulations 1998. All children's services in the state must comply with this legislation in order to be licensed by the DEECD.
3	The provision of preschool through the state education system has been discontinued, and whilst these services are still – in part – funded by DETA, preschool is now being delivered through C&K (community) providers and the private sector. However, a small number of government preschools in Queensland do occur under the Bound for Success program run in Indigenous communities.
4	Both preschool and child care services in Queensland are regulated by the *Child Care Act 2002* and the subordinate *Child Care Regulation 2003*.
5	Government, non-government and community preschools which have been registered under the School Education Act 1999 are bound by this Act, as well as the School Education Regulations 2000. Certain preschools or classes of preschools can be exempted from particular regulations at the discretion of the Minister for Education (e.g. preschools located in non-government schools are exempt from Regulation 140 which prohibits fees or contributions for instruction).
6	Long Day Care Centres are bound by the Childcare Services Act 2007, the Childcare Services (Childcare) Regulations 2006 and the Childcare Services Regulations 2007, though the actual number of LDCs offering in-house preschool programs in WA is extremely small (2006 CCCS estimates two per cent).
7	Government run preschools are not bound by the Children's Services legislation, but instead come under the jurisdiction of the *Education Act 1972* as the majority are attached to primary schools in the state.
8	Some preschools attached to non-government schools are subject to the Education Act 1972, while others are licensed as 'early learning centres' under the Children's Services legislation.
9	These children's services are regulated by the Children's Services Act 1985 and the Children's Services (Child Care Centre Regulations) 1998. All services must be licensed under the Act, and either registered and incorporated under this Act, or else incorporated under other legislation such as the South Australian Associations Incorporation Act 1985.
10	Preschool education is predominantly delivered within the primary school system with most services being co-located with government or non-government schools. The relevant legislation is therefore the *Education Act 1994*.
11	Long Day Care Centres are regulated by the *Child Care Act 2001* but Preschools in Long Day care Centres are regulated under the *Education Act* as above.

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