



Queensland Catholic Education Commission

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Submission to the Review of the Universal Access National Partnership

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Introduction

The Queensland Catholic Education Commission (QCEC) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Review of the Universal Access National Partnership (the Review) addressing the five key questions of the Review. QCEC endorses the recognition of the importance of the early years of life and improving outcomes in early childhood education.

QCEC is the peak strategic body with state-wide responsibilities for Catholic schooling in Queensland. This submission is provided on behalf of the five Diocesan Catholic School Authorities and 17 Religious Institutes and other incorporated bodies which, between them, operate a total of 306 Catholic schools that educate more than 149,000 students in Queensland.

QCEC is the Central Governing Body for 30 approved Queensland Catholic kindergarten services with approximately 50% of these services located in regional and remote locations. Since the National Early Childhood Education and Care Collection of data commenced in 2010 the number of Catholic kindergarten services and subsequent enrolments has increased from a total of 4 services with 50 enrolments in 2011 to 30 services with 1,028 enrolments in 2019.

QCEC supports the important recognition by all Australian Governments that investing in early learning has the potential to deliver significant economic and social benefits to Australia with high quality early education being linked to higher levels of employment, income and financial security, improved health outcomes and reduced crimeⁱ. In September 2018 the Education Council endorsed the *Early Learning Reform Principles* which acknowledge the importance of these and other long-term benefits that flow on from early learning and the need for joint investment to achieve them. In the context of this commitment to cooperation and shared responsibility for early learning QCEC considers that the funding contribution by the Australian Government to early childhood learning is an essential and appropriate commitment that must be continued.

The insecurity and uncertainty created by the ongoing one-year extensions of funding, provides considerable and unnecessary stress for families and service providers. The absence of a long-term

commitment limits the ability to plan delivery of quality early learning across Queensland and creates additional associated and unnecessary challenges across communities.

QCEC provides the following responses addressing the five questions of the Review.

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

QCEC agrees that significant progress has been made towards the overarching UANP policy objectives of increasing universal early childhood learning participation for children in the year before full time school with a focus on participation by Indigenous, vulnerable and disadvantaged children and a learning program delivered by a qualified early childhood teacher (ECT).

QCEC considers that the funding provided through the UANP by the Australian Government, was and continues to be essential to realising increasing participation rates by improving affordability for families. Since the commencement of the UANP the number of Queensland Catholic kindergartens and enrolments has increased each year. For Aboriginal and Torres Islander children who are a specific focus of the UANP, data provided by Queensland Catholic kindergarten services indicates that an increasing number of children/families who identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander are accessing Queensland Catholic kindergarten services. Whilst there is no single reliable measure of vulnerability and disadvantage, data indicates an increasing number of families with a health care card are also accessing early learning through Queensland Catholic kindergartens.

QCEC is of the view that the funding provided by the Australian Government through the UANP has been critical to achieving increased participation by enabling more affordable early learning programs across a range of settings and facilitating children's early learning and development. In Queensland, subsidies to facilitate access to 600 hours of early learning per year for children in the year before full-time school delivered by a qualified ECT are provided to kindergarten services meeting the requirements of the Queensland Kindergarten Funding Scheme (QKFS).

The objectives of the UANP for children to access a quality program and to facilitate children's transition to school is being achieved in Queensland through the requirement under the QKFS for kindergarten services to deliver an approved learning program based on the Queensland Kindergarten Learning Guidelines (QKLG). The QKLG aligns with the five broad learning outcomes identified in the national Early Years Learning Framework and is focused on holistic child centred learning and on preparing children for a successful transition to school. As required under the UANP agreement, Queensland Catholic kindergartens provide a high-quality kindergarten program, aligned with the QKLG and delivered by a degree qualified early childhood teacher.

QCEC notes the evidence reported in the UANP review discussion paper (the discussion paper) of the outcomes (i.e. increased enrolment rates, particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Students and delivery of programs by qualified teachers) that show the significant gains made in achieving the objectives of the UANP. Despite these gains, the [Lifting Our Game Report](#) and the New South Wales Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation identify that Australia continues to lag significantly behind many OECD countries in terms of both overall investment in early childhood education and number of hours of early childhood education provided per weekⁱⁱ. Given the progress to date that has been achieved

as a result of the funding provided under the UANP, and the significant work which remains to achieve the desired policy objectives (including parity with other high achieving OECD countries) it would appear that there is a strong need for a continued long-term funding commitment. QCEC would welcome the opportunity to provide input into any funding arrangement which builds on successes to date. However, it is important to note that any funding arrangement should not be based on attendance (kindergarten is not compulsory and school funding is not based on attendance) and that funding remain available to address the barriers to regular and continued attendance, particularly by the identified priority cohorts.

Question 2: What should the UANP target and measure, and how should data be collected and used?

QCEC holds the view that the UANP should target and measure children's attendance in addition to enrolments due to the importance of consistent, regular attendance for learning outcomes. Attendance data should be used to identify enrolled children who are not regularly attending kindergarten. The purpose of collecting this data should be to enable services to engage with families to establish why a child is not attending and provide extra support to remove barriers to participation that families may be experiencing and really boost participation.

A key consideration for QCEC is that tracking of attendance data must not be linked to funding because, unlike school attendance, participation in a kindergarten is not compulsory and therefore cannot and should not be enforced by services.

QCEC supports collection of data on teacher qualifications, number of years teaching early childhood, turnover and conditions, to be used for investigating the potential for achieving comparability of conditions for ECTs in kindergartens with primary school teachers. This data would be valuable for informing a national workforce strategy to attract and retain highly qualified professionals to deliver early childhood learning programs. Other related considerations regarding the collection of data on early childhood teachers is the differing registration requirement in states and territories, the differing pay and conditions across settings (for example long day care, sessional kindergartens and state delivered programs) as these all impact on the attraction and retention of the workforce necessary to achieve the UANP policy objectives.

Question 3: Are the current UANP arrangements efficient and effective and how could the efficiency, effectiveness and equity of UANP funding be improved?

QCEC suggests that the current UANP funding arrangements are most effective for kindergarten services and long day care centres in greater metropolitan areas. Feedback to QCEC from kindergarten services in regional and remote locations is that the viability of many services continues to be uncertain due to low enrolments. This highlights a tension that exists for kindergarten services arising from the provision of funding being based on confirmed enrolments. Kindergarten services in regional and remote locations often have a limited number of enrolments reducing the overall amount of funding available to a kindergarten service to operate. Even if families contribute to the operational costs with higher fees a service with low enrolments still faces considerable challenges in order to be financially viable. There are many fixed costs when delivering a service that do not reduce simply as a result of fewer children (e.g. electricity, rates, insurance). Often, where possible, these services are cross-subsidised by other sources of income, including fundraising by volunteers, which are not always reported and taken into

consideration when governments are assessing the cost of delivering a high quality early learning program in rural and remote areas.

QCEC strongly supports capital funding for not-for-profit kindergartens under a new or revised UANP. QCEC has identified 80 primary schools where a kindergarten facility could be supported and would meet an existing identified community need. The proposed locations include some of Queensland's most disadvantaged areas in regional and remote locations. Capital funding for new kindergarten services is essential for expanding the number of kindergartens located on school sites throughout Queensland and supports the goal of increasing participation by making it simpler for families who also have children in school removing the need to drop children to different locations. In some Queensland locations, the distance between an early learning centre and school can be 50 or more kilometres.

The time before children start full time school is when they learn to communicate, get along with others, connect with their world and build self-confidence. It is also the time when 90% of brain development occursⁱⁱⁱ. The effectiveness of the UANP would be improved by increasing the commitment to universal access to 600 hour per year of early learning for three year olds. Extending universal access to three year olds amplifies the long term benefits of early learning and has the potential to reduce the impact of disadvantage as studies show that high quality early learning for three year olds can act as a protective factor for disadvantaged children^{iv}. The benefits of two years of quality early learning extend even further than this and can actually achieve equity in educational achievement for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. It is in the early years of learning that children rapidly develop foundational capabilities on which subsequent development builds^v. Consequently, early investment in early childhood learning plays a crucial role in offsetting the effects of disadvantage. The Effective Preschool, Primary and Secondary study (UK) found that disadvantaged children benefit the most from high quality early learning.

Improving educational outcomes is another compelling reason for extending universal access to three year olds. The *Lifting Our Game Report* also outlines that OECD analysis of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results has established that two years of early childhood education is the minimum duration needed to improve student performance at age 15 and that Australia has seen a consistent decline in its performance in international tests such as PISA and Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS)^{vi}. In 2015 in comparison to Australia, 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^{vii}. In New Zealand, children aged three, four or five can access 20 hours of fully subsidised early childhood education for up to 6 hours a day, per week^{viii}.

QCEC also supports arrangements under a revised UANP that would support emergent funding for kindergarten services operating in communities in regional and remote areas where the communities are experiencing unique challenges specific to the local context such as drought or closure of local industry. The operational costs associated with running a kindergarten service such as wages for staff, utilities, maintenance, equipment and resourcing continue to escalate and make the viability of many small kindergarten services vulnerable.

Question 4: How does the preschool system operate across States and Territories and settings?

The delivery of preschool/kindergarten varies across states and territories. The majority of children in Queensland attend kindergarten through long day care settings complemented by a substantial community kindergarten sector. There are 30 stand-alone Catholic kindergartens operating in Queensland with a mixture of community and school based locations.

The QKFS provides essential funding per-child to approved kindergarten providers. The funding contributes to the costs of implementing and operating a kindergarten program. Queensland's funding scheme also provides additional subsidies for priority groups, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families with a health care or concession card and multiple births, to ensure access is low or no cost.

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

QCEC strongly advocates for the focus of a new or revised UANP to be informed and shaped by the *Early Learning Reform Principles* agreed to by Education Council. Recognition of the importance and profile of the early years of learning and development has been elevated but continues to hold a lower status and funding allocation compared to the schooling sector. Future national policy on early learning needs to commit government to moving beyond the reform stage to a stage where investment and commitment to early learning is guaranteed, similar to that of school funding.

There is compelling evidence of the long term economic and social benefits that are realised for individuals and society overall from participation in quality early childhood education. An increasing number of Australian research reports and existing international research, studies and trials contain the same findings. The consistent findings are now well known, children who attend high quality early childhood education have improved school performance, they develop self-regulation skills that help them make positive choices, they have better life experiences, including higher rates of post-secondary education, increased likelihood of employment, higher potential earnings, lower rates of imprisonment and arrest and reduced reliance on social services. There are also flow on effects for government through improved productivity from higher female workforce participation, decreased expenditure on remedial education, criminal justice and health and social services^{ix}.

QCEC supports a future national policy that has a long-term focus and a staggered commitment to increasing overall long-term funding while reforms continue to build on the strengths of existing early learning services. QCEC advocates for:

- capital works funding to expand the kindergarten infrastructure and locate more kindergartens on school sites;
- an extension of universal access to 600 hours per year of early learning for all three-year-old children;
- a commitment to investigating the benefits of and potential for **increasing** the number of hours available to all children in the year before full time school;

- a national approach to an ECT workforce strategy and a review of early childhood teaching qualifications to ensure there is flexibility in course requirements and options to specialise in the three to five-year age group and develop expertise specific to this cohort;
- a specific focus on raising the quality of interactions in kindergarten settings and in early education programs; and
- a commitment to reducing the gap between Australia’s investment in early childhood education and the OECD average.

QCEC considers the current UANP arrangements have provided a useful starting point by bringing a consistent national focus to certain actions that facilitate access to, and participation in affordable quality early childhood education programs and provide clear and specific direction regarding the purpose of the Commonwealth financial contribution. The current arrangements would be significantly enhanced by the inclusion of the goals and objectives outlined above.

If you require further information regarding this submission, please contact Emily Wilson, Senior Education Officer, by email emilyw@gcec.catholic.edu.au or phone (07) 3316 5862.



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Endnotes

ⁱ Pascoe, S. and Prof Brennan, D., (2017) [Lifting Our Game Report](#); NSW Department of Education, Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, [A review of the effects of early childhood education](#), page 8

ⁱⁱ Pascoe, S. and Prof Brennan, D., (2017) [Lifting Our Game Report](#) page

ⁱⁱⁱ [First Five Years Fund; First Things First](#); Commonwealth Government (2017), April 28) Your child and neuroscience: Learning potential, [https:// www.learningpotential.gov.au/your-child-andneuroscience-2](https://www.learningpotential.gov.au/your-child-andneuroscience-2)

^{iv} Taggart, B., Sylva, K., Melhuish, E., Sammons, P., & Siraj, I. (2015) Effective preschool, primary and secondary education project (EPPSE 3-16+): How preschool influences children and young people’s attainment over time page 16.

^v NSW Department of Education, Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, [A review of the effects of early childhood education](#), page 3

^{vi} Pascoe, S. and Prof Brennan, D., (2017) [Lifting Our Game Report](#) pages 40 and 58 and OECD (2017) Starting Strong.

^{vii} Pascoe, S. and Prof Brennan, D., (2017) [Lifting Our Game Report](#) page 61.

^{viii} Pascoe, S. and Prof Brennan, D., (2017) [Lifting Our Game Report](#) page 60.

^{ix} Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, [A review of the effects of early childhood education](#) and Price Waterhouse Coopers, [The Front Project, A Smart Investment for a Smarter Australia: Economic analysis of universal early childhood education in the year before school in Australia](#).