

June 2021



# VCOSS submission to the Victorian Early Childhood Workforce Strategy

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The Victorian Council of Social Service (VCOSS) is the peak body for social and community services in Victoria. VCOSS supports the community services industry, represents the interests of Victorians facing disadvantage and vulnerability in policy debates, and advocates to develop a sustainable, fair and equitable society.

VCOSS welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback to the Victorian Early Childhood Workforce Strategy.

Government has undertaken an ambitious reform agenda to support best outcomes for children and families as outlined in the discussion paper *Working Together to Build Victoria's Early Childhood Education Workforce*.

Building a sustainable and diverse early childhood education workforce is integral to achieving the government and sector's vision of ensuring every Victorian child has access to two years of high-quality early learning.

## Attraction and retention

VCOSS notes the government's discussion paper makes a distinction between attraction and retention initiatives. In our submission, we have integrated our insights on attraction and retention, given the interconnectedness.

### Pay and conditions

Pay and conditions are important for both workforce attraction and retention.

VCOSS members have highlighted that current pay and conditions "fall short" – they don't appropriately reflect the responsibilities of teachers and educators and don't allow for sufficient investment in learning and development.

Members particularly noted:

- Workplace culture is important – there is a direct correlation between investment in professional development (for example, leadership training), staff wellbeing and staff tenure. The sector will continue to lose educators and teachers unless there is greater investment in their wellbeing and professional development.
- The Victorian community is increasingly diverse and early childhood educators and teachers are dealing with greater complexity. Pay and conditions don't appropriately reflect this complexity – for example, the amount of time and the skills that staff require to manage relationships with families and manage families' expectations. This is exacerbated by gaps in pre-service training that mean staff are entering the sector not sufficiently prepared to respond to children and families who have multiple and complex needs. Members also noted that the number of children presenting with complex needs has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 stay-at-home measures in 2020.
- Where staff have access to professional development, there is often insufficient time and support to develop and put into practice their new skills (for example, to undertake complex communication and engagement support with children and families).
- There is insufficient time for documentation, reflection and planning.
- The administrative burden on staff is significant and growing. Members note that the sector has undergone significant change over the last 10 years. While these largely positive changes promote better outcomes for children, new reporting requirements have added to staff workloads. For example, the introduction of Child Safe Standards, Child Information Sharing Scheme and MARAM, alongside the introduction of School Readiness Funding (SRF), all carry an additional administrative function. These reforms are welcome; however, implementation is resource-intensive and adds to the workload of teachers and educators who are feeling under pressure and burnt out from COVID-19.

This all occurs on top of supporting the needs of individual children to set them up for success. The new Victorian Early Childhood Teachers and Educators Agreement (VECTEA) is a welcome step in addressing aspects of this.

Funding should take into account the staffing costs associated with introducing and implementing these reforms.

An additional solution is to fund peak bodies to alleviate some of this administrative burden. Additional funding would enable peak bodies to expand their remit to support their members to apply for grants, and support services to collect and analyse data and insights to support best practice outcomes for children and families.

## Mentoring

Members highlighted inequities in support available to VET-qualified early childhood educators compared to Bachelor-qualified early childhood teachers. For example, all staff can benefit from mentoring – mentoring can help to embed knowledge and develop their practice. However, VET-qualified early childhood educators do not enjoy the same access to Victorian Government mentoring initiatives as Bachelor-qualified teachers.

While SRF provides enormous opportunity for staff to undertake professional development and to build the capacity of the workforce, mentoring will continue to be a vital part of improving quality practice *in addition to* professional development opportunities.

## Dual qualified teachers

Additionally, members raised concerns about the attrition of dual qualified teachers from early learning to primary school. Members identified the following challenges:

- Lack of exposure to early childhood education and care during student placements. When dual qualified teachers gain training and support in the school system but not in early childhood settings, they can feel nervous or underprepared, and exit the early childhood system.
- Disparity in class sizes, pay and conditions. Some members spoke of the smaller class numbers in primary schools, and better pay and conditions particularly compared to those working in long day care settings.
- Members also noted the added complexity for early childhood educators in meeting every individual child's needs based on the child's interests, compared with delivering a more structured school curriculum.
- While the new VECTEA sees significantly improved conditions for those covered by the award, funding is not confirmed for the entirety of the agreement.
- For those not covered under the award, members spoke about the appeal of the primary school sector for teachers.

## Access to subsidised training

In terms of attraction, a key constraint for the sector is the eligibility criteria for accessing a government subsidised training place, including Free TAFE. Currently, students cannot access a subsidised training place to gain new skills and retrain if their nominated course does not lead to a 'higher' qualification. The exception to this rule is if a student can obtain an eligibility waiver. This means prospective learners who are looking to upskill or change career may be disincentivised to do so because they cannot afford the cost of undertaking additional education and training.

## Wrap-around support to boost student completion

The Free TAFE initiative has removed the major cost barrier to training for early childhood educators.

However, there are peripheral expenses that still prevent some Victorians on low incomes from taking up the opportunity. For example, there are prospective students who cannot afford to buy textbooks, a digital device or other course materials and equipment, pay for childcare or transport, or pay for a Working with Children Check. The government should provide additional support to low-income students to ensure they can take up and complete early childhood qualifications at TAFE.

For example, the government's scholarship program for higher education students (those studying a degree to become an early childhood teacher) is an excellent initiative that helps students pay for essentials while studying a Bachelor degree. The government could give consideration to extending this program to those studying to be an educator in the VET system.

A key challenge for government is to ensure these students complete their qualification and enter the early childhood education workforce. While completion rates for Free TAFE are not yet available, we know that, historically, completion rates for VET and higher education are poor,<sup>i</sup> and indicate students need more support to complete their qualifications and successfully transition into the workforce.

VCOSS acknowledges that TAFEs, in particular, provide a range of supports for students facing barriers to participation, learning and attainment. For example, students with disabilities can apply for reasonable adjustments and there are literacy and numeracy supports for students who have gaps in their foundational skills.

However:

- Some students don't have the knowledge, skills or confidence to access these supports.
- Some students have complex needs that exceed what is currently provided.

There is an opportunity to build on current supports. VCOSS encourages the government to:

- Make further investments in the capacity of the VET workforce, so staff have the time and skills to identify emerging issues for students undertaking early childhood education qualifications, work alongside students to help identify the right support to match their need, assist them to navigate processes and, where necessary, advocate for them. One way to increase this capacity is to invest in evidence-informed supported traineeship models – more detail is provided on page six of this submission.
- Expand investment in student support services, so that the suite of services on offer reflects the full continuum of student needs. Currently, students with more intensive support needs are not receiving the right type or frequency of support.

Some examples of personalised support that make a difference to students at risk of disengaging include: mentoring, counselling, or warm referrals to specialist supports (such as family violence or housing and homelessness agencies).<sup>ii</sup>

### Traineeship models

Traineeships can help attract more people to the industry, as they enable students to 'earn and learn'. They also provide employers with real-time insights into the quality of learning.

**Supported** traineeship models can provide additional value to trainees, employers and training providers, by providing a range of personalised supports that help to prevent education disengagement and/or placement breakdown.

The Victorian Early Childhood Workforce Strategy presents an opportunity for government to work with the early childhood sector to design and implement an industry-relevant supported traineeship model that is responsive to employer and student needs.

### ***Community Traineeship Pilot Program***

The Community Traineeship Pilot Program (CTPP) delivered by VCOSS and funded through Jobs Victoria is an example of a successful approach to growing and diversifying the workforce. The CTPP supports young people experiencing barriers to labour market participation to undertake a community services qualification, while supporting community service organisations to host traineeships and meet their future workforce needs.

The CTPP takes a holistic approach to supporting students into meaningful career pathways by providing up front resources (both human and financial).

A key feature of the program is a learner-focused support structure, that fosters connection and collaboration between trainees, employers, youth workers from the trainee's local community (from 'Local Partner Organisations'), VET providers and teachers. All parties work together, to ensure trainees are provided with early help where needed.

The model also has a strong focus on peer support, which provides further scaffolding for the trainee. For example, trainees are brought together in classes run specifically for them. A dedicated youth worker attends class with them, providing 1:1 youth work support to individual trainees, whilst assisting the whole group to build connection and mutual support. This assists trainees to build their identity as part of a learning community.

The holistic approach of the CTPP has seen positive outcomes. This includes a retention rate of 80 per cent for the first group of participants, with more than 50 per cent gaining further employment with their employer upon completion of their traineeship. The developmental evaluation of the CTPP has identified the flexible, high-support components of the model as a key success factor thus far.

This model could be used to diversify the early childhood workforce which would complement government's recent budget announcement of a new cross-government bicultural worker strategy.

For the early childhood sector, the supported traineeship model could be one way to stem the loss of new workers from the industry. Receiving on-the-job mentoring and guidance, and having the opportunity to build networks, could help new workers feel more supported and confident to access early help if challenges present. Supported traineeship models could also help to address employer concerns that some recent graduates are not meeting the minimum requirements of the role and are not suitable to employ.

Current Commonwealth wage subsidies make traineeships a more attractive proposition, but service providers will also need additional funding, particularly at the beginning of a traineeship. This is because, from an employers' perspective, when a trainee is 'learning the ropes', they are a supplement to, not a substitute for, experienced staff. Consequently, they are an additional cost the service carries, and should not be counted as part of the child to staff ratios. VCOSS members also spoke about the need for wage subsidy support beyond the first 12 months, where it takes more time to complete the qualification, to make the model sustainable. The Victorian Government could fill this role as demonstrated through the CTPP to support the entire length of a traineeship.

### Student placement support for community service organisations

Universities and VET providers and community sector employers have a shared interest in the provision of high-quality student placements. However, a significant challenge for early childhood education and care services is that they are often over stretched and have limited capacity to cover the significant administrative and staffing costs to support student placements.

VCOSS notes that the government has invested in training providers' capacity to coordinate student placements. For example, the *TAFE Reform* initiative provides brokerage funding for TAFEs to connect students with services to complete their placements. However, there is no equivalent support for community service organisations who do the heavy lifting as placement host and supervisor.

Models such as the Enhanced Pathways to Family Violence Work Project provide examples of how employers in other priority industries have been assisted to support their workforce to expand. These models recognise that, while placements provide high value to employers (particularly as a pipeline for new workers), there are significant costs associated with hosting placements that are hard for smaller and mid-size community service organisations to absorb. Employers that have participated in the Enhanced Pathways initiative have received funding, tools and training to assist them to host student placements.

## Other attraction and retention initiatives

In addition to improving pay and conditions to retain early childhood educators and teachers, there should be targeted incentives to support the return of people who have left the sector and those who have retired early.

Another factor that influences retention is access to professional development. Services need additional funding to enable staff to undertake career development activities such as leadership training. For example, additional resources would enable services to backfill staff with agency personnel.

An additional constraint raised by one member is the difficulty in accessing full-time roles in kindergarten settings. This member noted this was due, in part, to an unintended consequence of the introduction of 15 hours of universal access to early childhood education. A solution could be to support collaboration across neighbouring services to offer full-time positions to boost attraction and retention.

## Quality

### School Readiness Funding

School Readiness Funding supports services to deliver high-quality early childhood education to their student cohort. The investment has been universally welcomed. However, some VCROSS members spoke about the need for greater flexibility in how they use their allocated equity funding.

For example, we heard that there are services who want to use their SRF to employ an allied health professional, rather than engage them for a small number of sessions.

This is because, since the full rollout of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS), services are concerned there are children who are missing out on timely allied health support. Our members say this is because:

- The NDIS is “complex” and “confronting”, and services and families are still unclear about roles and responsibilities.
- Collaboration between early learning services and early intervention agencies has been eroded. Staff don’t have the same access to secondary consultations they enjoyed under the previous state-based system.



- Some children who would have likely received support under the state-based Early Childhood Intervention Service have been excluded from the equivalent NDIS stream (Early Childhood Early Intervention). This is because some parents have found it difficult to navigate the NDIS or meet evidence requirements, or some children have been deemed not to meet the eligibility criteria by a planner who is not familiar with their child or their particular disability or developmental delay.

## Training and qualification requirements

VCOSS raised in our submission to the Ten Year National Children's Education and Care Workforce Strategy (2021-30)<sup>iii</sup> that changes should be made to pre-service training to ensure teachers and educators are appropriately equipped with embedded skills and knowledge needed to support children with a range of needs from a range of backgrounds, including children with disability and/or developmental delay, those with complex needs, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.

VCOSS members report many educators and teachers do not feel equipped to support children with additional needs, which can lead to the exclusion of children and families.

Though the make-up of qualifications primarily sits within the Commonwealth's remit, consideration should be given at the state level about relevant qualifications and training requirements for discrete parts of the workforce providing specialised supports, for example, professionals that provide funded support for children with disability and/or developmental delay.

Members report good workers in particular programs like Kindergarten Inclusion Support are "snapped up quickly", leading to services engaging workers who have no qualifications in early childhood education. This means services spend additional time and resources 'upskilling' these workers before they can begin working to support children and families.

While any changes in this space would require a 'long-view' perspective given ongoing workforce shortages across the sector, the quality component of specialised workforces and their role in improving outcomes for children and families means they should be considered as part of this strategy.

This strategy should also examine existing inclusion supports provided through the state to ensure they are meeting the needs of children and families through a broader understanding of inclusion, not limiting support only children who have disability and/or developmental delay.

## Taking action together

Partnerships between early childhood education and care services and the broader community sector can improve service quality, providing additional expertise and support for children and families. However, establishing and sustaining partnerships takes time and costs money.

For example, VCOSS members spoke about reduced connection and collaboration between early childhood intervention services since the introduction of the NDIS. For services to fill these gaps, they need to be funded to collaborate so staff have the time to plan with other services and families, coordinate supports and embed inclusion strategies. This is not currently supported by NDIS or early learning funding, but it should be.

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A fully accessible version is available online at [vcoss.org.au/policy](https://vcoss.org.au/policy).

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<sup>i</sup> For example, 2018 VET completion rates in Victoria were only 48 per cent – the worst in Australia. Nationally only 41 per cent of students studying early childhood completed their degree, compared with 53 per cent in the primary and secondary school sector: National Centre for Vocational Education Research, *Australian vocational education and training statistics: VET qualification completion rates 2018, 2020*; Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority, National Children's Education and Care Workforce Strategy. Workforce Snapshot, <<http://snapshots.acecqa.gov.au/workforcedata/index.html>>, accessed 18 June 2021.

<sup>ii</sup> Youth Action – Uniting – Mission Australia, *Vocational Education and Training in NSW: Report into access and outcomes for young people experiencing disadvantage – Joint report*, February 2018.

<sup>iii</sup> Victorian Council of Social Service, *VCOSS submission to the Ten Year National Children's Education and Care Workforce Strategy (2021-20)*, May 2021.



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