



Regional Early Childhood Education and Care Report



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Regional Early Childhood Education and Care Report

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Pictured front cover: Western Australian School-based Apprentice of the Year 2022 Sophia Pitaro; Mikala Spry-Wiggan with her daughter Chelsea, and Camille Bernard with daughter Anaisha, both local mothers and participants in the Early Childhood Education and Care Job Ready program in Broome.

INTRODUCTION

This report builds on work commenced by the State Training Board (STB) in 2021. The STB is exploring issues affecting the child care sector in regional Western Australia and how the training sector may be able to assist. This work followed from the STB's Social Assistance and Allied Health Workforce Steering Committee, which investigated workforce and skill needs of the aged care, disability support, mental health, allied health, Aboriginal health and well-being and community services sectors. Due to the large scope of the project, the child care sector was not covered in detail with further consultation required.

In May 2021, an initial industry consultation was held by the STB on regional child care issues. Attendees discussed training and workforce development challenges currently facing regional child care providers, possible solutions and barriers to implementation. In attendance were members of the STB, Community Skills WA (CSWA), child care providers, the Regional Chamber of Commerce and Industry and representatives from various interest groups.

To inform the recommendations on strategies to overcome the issues facing the child care industry in the regions, attendees agreed that further consultation was necessary. This additional consultation work was undertaken by CSWA during July – October 2021. In October 2021 the STB convened an industry consultation to discuss CSWA's findings and provide an overview of existing initiatives and programs. These discussions confirmed that a number of existing initiatives could translate into potential strategies for the sector and would also align with government priorities and funding.

The STB's industry consultation and the additional work undertaken by CSWA have informed this report. The report aims to highlight continued challenges facing the sector, provide an overview of existing initiatives and programs identified through stakeholder consultations, and identify strategies to address training challenges.

A vital factor in the delivery of early childhood services in the regions is a skilled and well supported workforce. The strategies identified in this report aim to acknowledge the workforce challenges facing regional child care providers and highlights the importance of access to quality local training and employment pathways.

The identified strategies will go a long way in supporting the workforce development of the early childhood sector and achieving quality outcomes for children in the regions. Identified opportunities will also contribute to the State's efforts to address labour market challenges within the social assistance and allied health sector and State recovery from COVID-19.

STAKEHOLDER CONSULTATION

CSWA would like to acknowledge the following stakeholders for their involvement and input into this report:

- Chris Hall, State Training Board member
- Professor Cobie Rudd, State Training Board member
- Professor Juli Coffin, State Training Board member
- Kylie Helgesen, General Manager, Regional Early Education and Development Inc. (REED)
- Todd Dawson, State Manager, Goodstart Early Learning
- Analena Gilhome, Manager, Policy, Chamber of Commerce and Industry WA

- Irina Cattalini, Executive Director (Perth), One Tree Community Services
- Trish Barron, Pilbara Development Commission
- Josique Lynch, Board Member, Community Skills WA
- Kitty Prodonovich, CEO, Regional Chambers of Commerce and Industry WA (RCCIWA)
- Susan Cull, State Manager, Regional WA, CME
- Des Rogers, Senior Business Development Advisor, World Vision
- Tina Holtom, CEO, Child Australia
- Sara Hinchley, Executive Director, Child Australia
- Rachelle Tucker, Executive Officer, Australian Childcare Alliance WA
- Ann Marie Chemello, President, Australian Childcare Alliance WA
- Tonia Westmore, CEO, Gowrie WA
- Jude Sorenson, State Manager, World Vision
- Stephanie Jackiewicz, General Manager, Wanslea
- Suzanne Carroll, Executive Manager, People and Culture, YMCA
- Caroline Herris, Meerilinga Young Children's Foundation
- Angela Lynch, A/Director, Office of the State Training Board (OSTB)
- Maria Rologas, A/Principal Policy Consultant, OSTB

RECENT ANNOUNCEMENTS

The *WA Recovery Plan* acknowledges that Australian women have experienced the greatest economic and social impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic. The \$57 million recovery package announced in July 2021 for TAFE and the training sector further expanded the *Lower fees, local skills initiative* and included \$25 million for 'Free TAFE Short Courses' to engage displaced workers, and include female-dominated industry courses to meet immediate and emerging skill requirements.

On 12 October 2021, the Government further announced an expansion of the *Lower fees, local skills initiative*². Central to the announcement was additional child care courses to upskill existing workers. The announcement provided for reduced fees for existing worker traineeships for industries which have a critical need to upskill workers, including child care. Subsidised existing worker traineeships in the Diploma of Early Childhood Education and Care and Certificate III in Early Childhood Education and Care are now available. These initiatives were in response to the workforce issues raised by industry leaders at the recent Perth and Regional Skills Summits.

The *Lower fees, local skills initiative* has reduced fees by up to 72% and has trained more than 72,600 Western Australians in 2021³. Over the past 12 months, WA has seen increases in training across all sectors, with the most significant changes being in the health care and social assistance sector with a 26% increase in publicly funded enrolments for the 12 months to September 2021⁴.

SUMMARY OF KEY THEMES AND STRATEGIES



Key themes identified through industry consultations

1. Tightening regional labour market;
2. local workforce initiatives and Aboriginal workforce development needs;
3. promotion of early childhood career pathways;
4. untapped labour markets;
5. barriers of the training and regulatory environment;
6. housing affordability; and
7. skilled migration.

Recommended workforce strategies

1. Progress the development of a Job Ready Program into child care;
2. strengthen current programs in Aboriginal communities that support the local workforce to obtain skills and qualifications for a career pathway in early learning;
3. map current initiatives to inform the Year 9 Career Taster Program;
4. target the promotion of employment opportunities and career pathways;
5. clarify RPL models for the existing workforce and for those wishing to re-engage with the sector;
6. investigate mentoring and volunteering opportunities within the local employment pool; and
7. further investigate minimum qualification requirements with ACECQA to identify other possible occupations for inclusion.

Additional strategies for consideration

8. These fall outside the STB's remit but will impact on the effectiveness of the above workforce strategies;
9. explore the implementation of incentives to assist with the attraction and retention of a high quality early childhood workforce into regional areas; and
10. explore the implementation of strategies that aim to optimise the availability of skilled migrants for the ECEC sector and improve the utilization of skills, qualifications and experience.

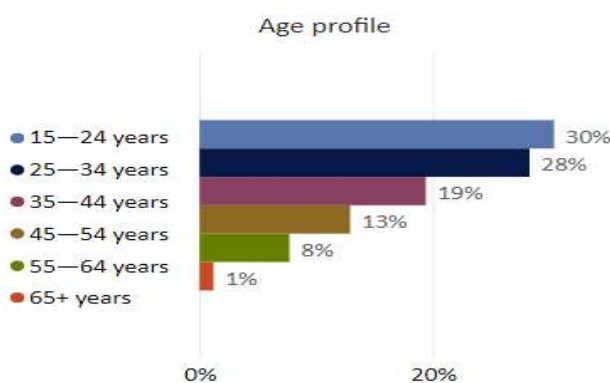
KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF THE ECEC SECTOR

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) refers to children's early education and care services operating under a number of different arrangements. Service types recognised within the National Quality Framework (NQF) are long day care, family day care, outside school hour's care and preschools/kindergartens. Delivery through a mixed market model provides families with variety and choice, however also means there is no 'one-size-fits-all' approach to be effective and deliver adequately on the outcomes sought.

Nationally recognised training for children's education and care occupations is delivered under the *CHC – Community Services Training Package*. The indicative lead time in formal education and training to enter this occupation is three years. The nominal duration of persons undertaking employment-based training through the Western Australian vocational education and training (VET) sector to enter this occupation is between one and two years on the job training.

The *2021 State priority occupation list (SPOL)* released by the State Government has categorised child carers (also referred to in the industry as early childhood educators) as a high priority where action needs to be undertaken via formal education and training pathways to address current issues⁵. This occupation remains important to the State's labour market as a key component of assisting parents back into the workforce. Quantitative based evidence suggests this occupation may be experiencing issues relating to structural factors such as training lead times, qualification levels or skills portability relative to other occupations.

Figure 1: Age profile of child carers⁶



Data sourced from the ABS Census 2016, indicates that for the ANZSCO occupation 4211 – Child carers, females comprise 97% and young persons aged 15-24 comprise 30% of the occupation. In August 2021, 11,362 persons were employed as child carers in WA⁶.

Industry insights⁷

WA Industry has indicated that there is a very high level of demand for child care workers and family day care workers across Western Australia, particularly in the regions. Industry advised that both regional and metropolitan locations are struggling to find quality staff and there is an urgent and critical need to attract, train and retain highly qualified and competent people. Challenges being experienced by the industry but magnified in regional communities include policy/legislative frameworks, the attraction and retention of staff and the need for ongoing professional development.

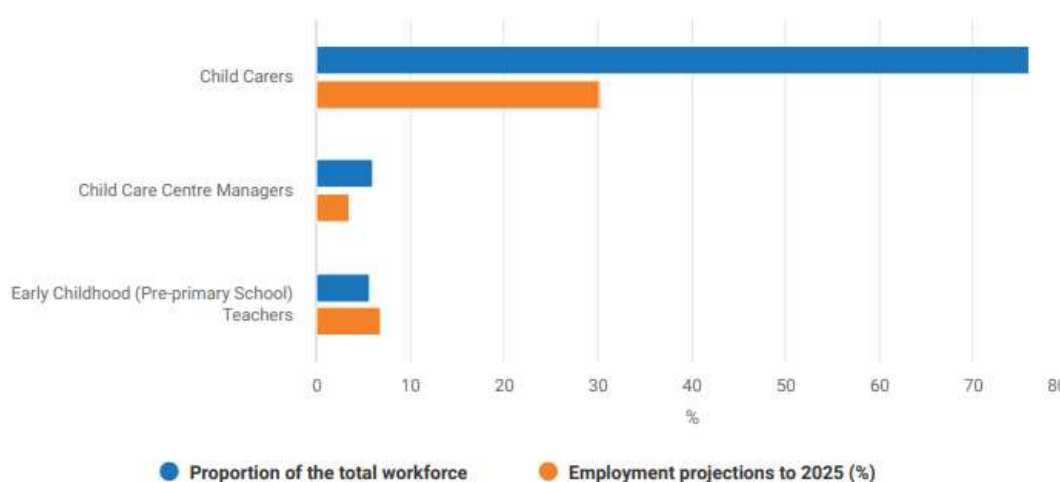
Industry believes the demand is in response to more casual employees, competition from other sectors and a lack of access to overseas workers as a result of COVID-19 travel restrictions. Recent government child care subsidies and a focus on participation of women in the workforce will see more child care places required and a strong demand in future years.

Staff retention is a significant issue within the ECEC sector and there is a strong competition with the education sector, with many ECEC pre-primary teachers leaving the long-day care sector due to relatively low wages, longer hours, low professional status and difficult work conditions. In 2021, the national average salary for a child care worker was \$29.63 per hour. This is in comparison to an average school teacher who earned \$33.65 per hour.

The current low level of remuneration also makes it difficult to retain highly qualified staff and unfavourable work circumstances can act as barriers to educators investing additional time and resources into upskilling. Ongoing professional development opportunities, and the need for a skill set to allow existing workers to upskill as a result of updates to the national training packages are necessary.

Employment snapshot

Figure 2: Occupations as a proportion of the child care services industry workforce and projected employment growth⁹



Since 2008, the number of people employed as child carers in Western Australia has increased steadily over time, with 11,362 persons employed in this occupation in August 2021⁸. Nationally the number of those employed as child carers is projected to increase by 30% between 2021 and 2025⁹. The Department of Education, Skills and Employment’s Internet Vacancy Index also indicates a sharp rise in the number of job advertisements in Western Australia since 2020¹⁰.

Figure 3: Number of job advertisement in Western Australia since 2020¹⁰



Training snapshot

As of October 2021, there were approximately 4,818 program enrolments (PE) in children’s education and care-related qualifications in Western Australia, a 27.1% increase from the previous year. Program enrolments were split mainly between the certificate III level (63%) and the diploma level (35%)¹¹.

Figure 4: Program enrolments for child care qualifications between 2020 and 2021¹¹

National ID**	Qualification	2020 Oct	2021 Oct	PE Change	% Change
CHC30113	Certificate III in Early Childhood Education and Care	2,715	3,031	316	11.6%
CHC50113	Diploma of Early Childhood Education and Care	1,011	1,699	688	68.1%
CHC40113	Certificate IV in School Age Education and Care	62	87	25	40.3%
CHC50213	Diploma of School Age Education and Care*	4	1	-3	-75.0%
Total		3,792	4,818	1,026	27.1%

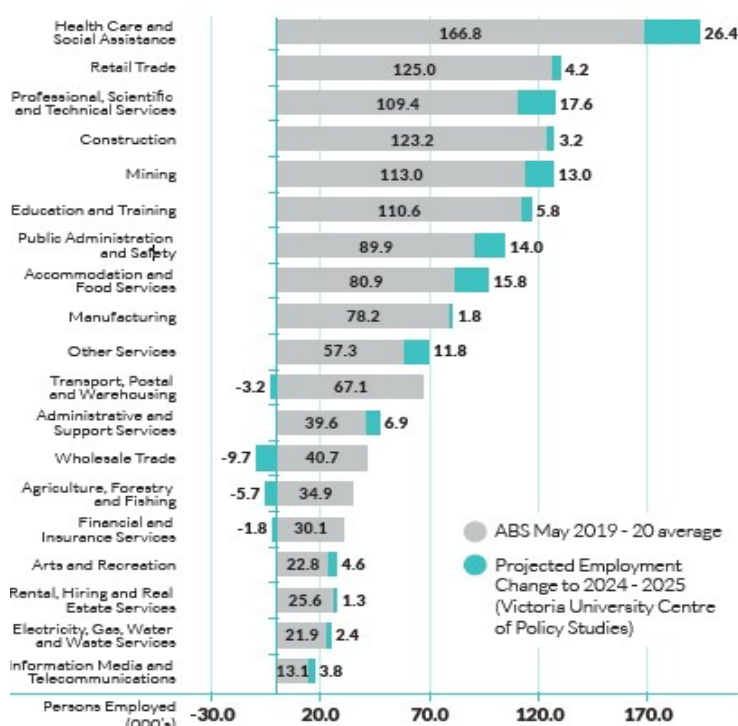
*Not currently funded under the Lower fees, local skills initiative

**National codes have since been updated

Key theme 1: Tightening regional labour markets

Western Australia’s health care and social assistance sector has continued to grow over the last year, confirming its position as the largest employing industry in the State. Over the next four years (to 2024-25) current employment projections suggest this workforce will grow by around 26,400 additional workers, which will only further strengthen this position¹².

Figure 5: WA jobs growth by industry – projected growth to 2024–25¹²



Over the next 20 years child carers will become one of the largest growing occupations and employment within the child care services sector in Australia is expected to increase by 127.1%¹³.

In the 10 years to November 2019, child carers were one of the top 15 occupations for migrants and temporary residents entering Australia¹⁴. International and interstate border restrictions along with growing consumer demand have created significant skill shortages for many roles within the health care and social assistance sector including in the early childhood sector.

Preliminary findings from the 2022 WA Jobs, Education and Training survey (WAJET), indicate that border closures have had a direct impact on the sector's ability to supplement its local workforce with labour from interstate and overseas.

With the sector unable to offer the remuneration of other sectors such as mining, innovative approaches and collaboration are required to attract, recruit and retain workers for these critical roles.

Attracting, developing and retaining a high quality workforce continues to be a significant challenge, with the challenge magnified for the regional and remote workforce¹⁵.

Consultation with industry has also confirmed an increased demand for workers particularly in regional and remote areas where service providers are reporting specific contextual workforce challenges such as limited access to training, professional development and mentoring opportunities.

Stakeholder consultations have indicated the need to increase the local workforce pool by supporting bigger businesses, industry and infrastructure projects in the regions. In the East Kimberley, the absence of big industry and an economic investment pool is limiting the number of potential workers in the ECEC sector as new families are not being attracted to the region. In the Pilbara, where the opportunities within the mining sector and remuneration are substantially higher, the ECEC labour pool is significantly reduced. With the demand for roles in early childhood education and care increasing and with the available labour pool shrinking, this results in a tightening of the regional labour market.

Consultations confirmed that stakeholders were keen to explore how the Job Ready Program could be expanded into child care and align with current initiatives. This may include the development of a screening process in line with other Job Ready Programs, to inform the development and mapping of career pathways and accredited courses. Currently CSWA in consultation with the Department of Training and Workforce Development is investigating the expansion of the Job Ready Program into child care and has established a working group who will consider the proposed model and provide advice to progress the initiative.

Current initiatives

1. 'Thriving Futures'

In 2020, Child Australia supported by BHP founded Thriving Futures to address the ongoing shortage of child care availability in the Pilbara. Thriving Futures works collaboratively with local communities, government stakeholders and early learning centres to recruit, train and develop a sustainable early learning workforce. This includes a 12-module model that can be customised to suit each student and involves a work placement. This program has recently been mapped to 5 units of competence, which will align with the new Certificate III qualification.

2. Job Ready

Job Ready programs provide a launch pad for job seekers to obtain real-world skills and provide pathways to employment, apprenticeships and traineeships. They represent a new approach to short course training by integrating industry-led candidate assessments and job placements into course design. Programs are generally four to five weeks in duration and reflect the short, relevant training industry has requested.



RECOMMENDED STRATEGY

1. Progress the development of a Job Ready Program into child care.

Key theme 2: Importance of local workforce initiatives and Aboriginal workforce development needs

Regional early education and care services comprise 20% of the total services in Western Australia¹⁶. Increased workforce development, particularly in regional and remote Western Australia is needed to address significant disadvantages and bridge the gap for the Aboriginal population.

This increased need for support and services for Aboriginal families and communities in remote and regional areas can only be achieved through coordination and collaboration between government and community. The development of the workforce offers the opportunity for local employment, increased economic participation and the development of more sustainable and resilient local economies.

Aboriginal early childhood workforce challenges identified include the frequent lack of experienced mentors for newly qualified educators and carers, associated difficulties accessing backfill for those wanting to attend professional development, difficulties accessing learning opportunities exacerbated by the cost of travel and required travel time and inadequate technologies for online learning. These challenges also apply to the regional and remote workforce.

Common characteristics of successful programs that support skills development and qualifications for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators include a strengths-based approach, local adaptation, local mentors/champions, embedding training into the community e.g. inviting women who have completed training to become the trainers for the next generation, local mentors, face to face visits and financial support for study costs¹⁷. It is also important to minimise the risk of social and professional isolation by building networks and supporting workers with mentors¹⁸. The concept of establishing cultural mentors for Aboriginal people entering into educational and workforce opportunities should be supported.

The application of a strengths based approach in regional and remote communities to address workforce challenges offers many positive outcomes for childrens' learning, local employment, parent participation and community involvement¹⁹. There is an opportunity to expand current successful models which may include the identification of suitable candidates by the community, an auditory and visual recognition of prior learning (RPL) process to identify capabilities and a holistic and scaffolded approach to learning. Supporting local organisations to deliver accredited training to people in the regions will assist in meeting the demands of the future workforce.

Consultations confirmed that the Aboriginal community plays a key workforce development role in providing local place-based services that are responsive to community needs and are culturally safe and secure. For example the playgroup environment provides the potential to develop a certificate II qualification for this cohort and a possible pathway to a certificate III. Whilst this was explored as part of the initial training package review it was not pursued. There is an opportunity to revisit this idea and CSWA in consultation with World Vision has identified possible ways to further develop this model.

It is recommended that opportunities to strengthen programs in Aboriginal communities that support the local workforce to obtain skills and qualifications for a career pathway in early learning are further explored and developed. This could include facilitating the RPL process to streamline accreditation, development of RPL tools and potentially a certificate II in a playgroup environment to support a scaffolded approach to career development.

Current initiative

World Vision's Early Childhood Care and Development Program

A unique collaboration with local communities, this program ensures children are able to participate in community-run playgroups that promote “both-ways” learning. This approach to education values and celebrates culture, with mainstream and Indigenous learning complementing and strengthening each other.

The playgroups provide opportunities for parents to increase their confidence with other early years development services and share and build their knowledge about child development. They also provide employment opportunities and practical training to local parents who facilitate the playgroups. This ensures they are culturally rich and drawing on the best of the local culture and mainstream approaches. Parents and other family members are encouraged to form playgroup committees or reference groups to ensure that the playgroup service is community-led and managed.

In Western Australia work has been undertaken in the West Kimberley and the East Pilbara.



RECOMMENDED STRATEGY

2. Strengthen current programs in Aboriginal communities that support the local workforce to obtain skills and qualifications for a career pathway in early learning.

Key theme 3: Targeted promotion of early childhood education career pathways

As the largest growing sector over the next four years, promotion and raising awareness of career pathways and employment opportunities in the ECEC sector is another way to attract the right people into the sector and ensure there is a pipeline of labour for the years to come. The promotion of qualification pathways and professional learning expectations can also contribute to improved professionalism in the industry²⁰.

Promotion of career pathways not only helps to raise awareness but assists school students to make connections between education and post-school opportunities. Raising awareness of early childhood career pathways in regional and remote communities may also help those already in the local community/workforce identify opportunities for other careers or employment.

When students graduate from school, it is assumed they will have some idea of who they are and where they will go career-wise. This has become increasingly difficult, as occupational aspirations and choices are not separate, but are interrelated to one's personal and social

identities. Consultations have confirmed that there is currently a lack of contemporary information about clear career opportunities and information is usually not easily accessible in one place.

There is a need for the promotion of VET qualifications that align with employment outcomes and are realistic for completion within the school environment, such as those highlighted in the *VET qualifications register for secondary students*, published by the Department of Training and Workforce Development.

In addition, those from regional and remote communities who wish to study are faced with unique and significant challenges regarding access to VET. In order to meet the demands of the future workforce, flexibility, innovation and collaboration between industry, registered training organisations (RTOs) and secondary schools to provide meaningful work placements at a local level are required. Pipeline pathways on an equitable basis to all secondary school students across the State should be considered.

Young people require accessible training that builds work-related transferable skills in high demand job roles. Regional public and private training providers play an important role in responding to localised access issues by delivering training in line with cultural and place-based needs.

Supporting local organisations to deliver accredited training to people in the regions will address some of the access barriers. At present, delivery in schools is on a fee-for service basis. Further exploration of alternative funding models for ECEC training in Years 11 and 12 should be explored to improve access across the State.

There is a need to expand the availability, affordability and accessibility of high quality work experience placements and VET for regional students. There is a need to support regional communities to implement innovative approaches to education delivery designed to improve education access and outcomes for students living in remote communities.

It is recommended that a mapping of current initiatives to inform the Year 9 Career Taster Program is undertaken. This may assist in the development of targeted materials for regional school students and identification of local champions. It will also assist to identify initiatives that could be adapted and organisations who could promote the ECEC sector to the local workforce in regional areas.

Current initiative

Year 9 Career Taster Program

The State Government's \$19.2 million Career Taster Program (CTP) for Year 9 students provides earlier access to career information through experiential and engaging activities so that students are able to see, explore and experience career options in a practical way.

Informing high-school aged students of career possibilities before they reach their final years of high school will better equip them to take up further education, training or employment on graduation.

The flexibility of the CTP will enable schools to adapt or develop a number of delivery models, to maximise the relevance and outcomes for different student groups.



RECOMMENDED STRATEGY

3. Map current initiatives to inform the Year 9 Career Taster Program.
4. Target the promotion of employment opportunities and career pathways.

Key theme 4: Untapped labour markets

There are currently around 229,200 Western Australian people who are either unemployed, or employed but wanting additional hours of work. This is equivalent to approximately one in every seven people in the State's labour force wanting more work than they are currently receiving²¹. Analysis indicates that many such workers want to work and are actively seeking work. They are discouraged when efforts to seek employment consistently fail due to processes that focus on what they do not have (such as credentials) rather than the value they can bring (such as capabilities)²².

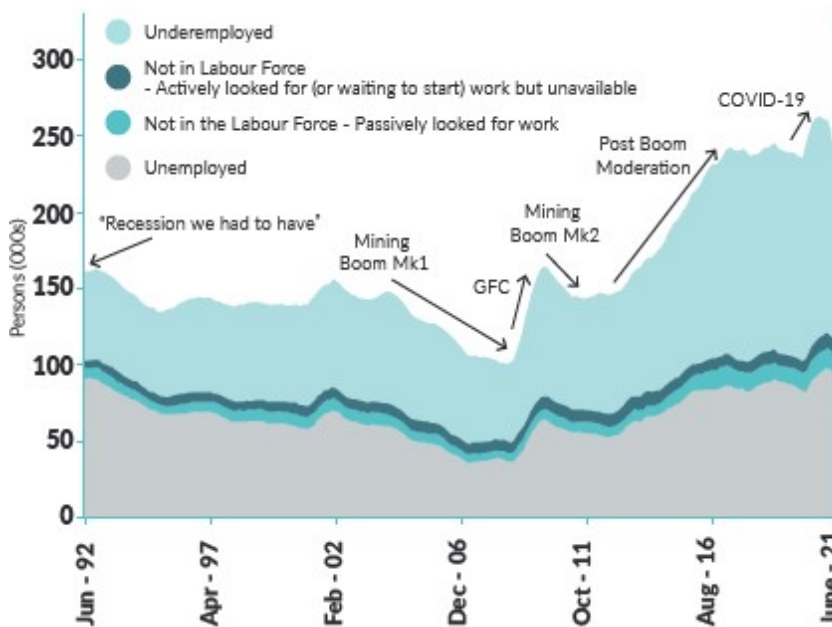


Figure 6: Underutilisation of persons in Western Australia – 12 month average

Source: ABS 6202.0 and 6291.0.55.001, DTWD calculation, 12 month average.

Current initiatives, such as the *Connecting Generations for School Success* project across Kwinana, Peel and the Upper South West regions of Western Australia, which uses retirees to provide learning support in classrooms, highlights a potential pool of applicants that could be tapped into to fill the current labour market need or provide the much needed mentoring support for new graduates. Whilst the current emphasis is on qualifications, it is important that the concept of non-formal knowledge and experience is not discounted. Another scenario could involve tapping into community resource centres for whom Linkwest provides a central coordination role. For this reason mentoring and volunteering opportunities within the local employment pool should be further investigated.

Stakeholder consultations have also confirmed that opportunities to capture skills obtained in other areas are needed and that there is a potential untapped labour market of skilled employees who have the necessary skills and abilities for a career in ECEC but whose skills are not recognised under the current national qualification requirements RPL.

For those wishing to transition across to the early childhood sector from other health and social assistance occupations or for those individuals interested in pursuing a career in early childhood, key barriers consistently expressed through stakeholder consultations are that they lack the qualifications required or the qualifications they do have are not relevant to the industry even though many of the skills are transferable²³.

An example of this may be an education assistant working in lower primary. Exploring the ability to use recognition of existing knowledge, capabilities and experience would provide certainty of what training and skills are needed to be developed or obtained without undermining the sector.

Targeted strategies are required to overcome barriers to entry into the sector for those in regional and remote locations who could become prospective child carers. Strategies that support the workforce to obtain qualifications and experience to prepare them for the workplace, that remove the complexities, and ensure flexibility are required. Some of these constraints can be addressed through an RPL process, which does not compromise outcomes, recognises existing knowledge and experience and enables the provision of gap-training. This will enable those with prior knowledge and experience to re-engage with the sector without having to replicate prior training and experience. It should be noted that the RPL process has been identified as a priority at the Commonwealth level but further clarification of planned activities and timeframes are yet to be provided.

Overall there needs to be a motivation to identify breakthroughs that allow untapped workers to enter the labour force and leadership to find ways to connect these untapped workers with potential to employers.

Current initiative

EdConnect Australia: Connecting Generations for School Success

Since 2016, EdConnect Australia in partnership with the Alcoa Foundation has facilitated the *Connecting Generations for School Success* project across Kwinana, Peel and the Upper South West regions of Western Australia.

The goal of the project is to sustain a community volunteer program in the region.

Students across the regions receive academic and social support while older generations have the opportunity to remain active and connected to their communities.

Volunteers in the program provide mentoring for students at risk whilst making a difference in their local communities. In 2020, there were 163 active volunteers participating.



RECOMMENDED STRATEGY

5. Clarify RPL models for the existing workforce and for those wishing to re-engage with the sector.
6. Investigate mentoring and volunteering opportunities within the local employment pool.

Key theme 5: Barriers of the training and regulatory environment

In 2012, the NQF was introduced to encourage the development of education and care services that support optimal childhood development, focusing on quality, consistency and continuous improvement, with higher qualifications strongly associated with improved childhood outcomes²⁴.

Current regulations on training within the child care sector, under the NQF require:

- at least 50% of the educators must have, or be actively working towards, at least an approved diploma level education and care qualification; and
- all other educators must have, or be actively working towards, at least an approved certificate III level education and care qualification²⁵.

However in regional and remote areas service providers face the specific challenge of needing to meet the NQF quality standards in the context of a tightened labour market. Childhood education and care services located in remote areas continue to have the highest proportion of staffing waivers, reflecting the greater difficulty of recruiting and retaining staff in those locations. Nationally, as at 1 July 2021, around 10% of services in outer regional, remote and very remote areas have a temporary waiver in place for one or more of the staffing arrangements under the NQF²⁶.

The Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) is an independent statutory authority that assists governments in implementing the NQF for early childhood education and care throughout Australia.

ACECQA's requirements for early childhood teaching are regularly reviewed and updated. The *National Children's Education and Care Workforce Strategy 2022-2031* identifies an opportunity to undertake a specific review focusing on the contemporary and emerging skills and knowledge needed for early childhood teaching, as well as innovative design and delivery approaches²⁷. There is an opportunity to provide input into ACECQA's review to guide the development of innovative design and delivery approaches in regional areas.

Governance and viability challenges will be further exacerbated with recent changes to the ECEC Training Package, revised qualifications and the introduction of mandatory entry requirements for the Diploma of Early Childhood Education and Care. The child care industry is now facing an additional urgency to upskill existing workers to meet the sector's new mandatory accreditation requirements for a qualified workforce. Stakeholder's consultations have also identified that there are limited opportunities for employees to undertake further training or study, especially in rural and remote areas where the lack of opportunities also impacts on recruitment and retention.

Recent funding announcements by the State Government are a positive step and a critical factor for the development of the workforce and have resulted in reduced costs for existing workers undertaking training via certificate III and diploma level traineeships. However, the roll out is likely to be affected by an update to qualifications with early analysis identifying some impacts for the existing workforce, including:

- participants looking to commence a traineeship immediately will only be able to do so by enrolling in the existing qualifications which are only being offered by private RTOs;
- the updated Certificate III in School-Based Education Support is no longer an approved qualification to work in an ECEC setting;

- qualifications CHC30808 and CHC30812 (both Education Support qualifications) from any Australian RTO awarded on any date before 1 January 2017 are approved for an ECEC setting;
- Certificate III in Education Support qualification code CHC30213 (any date range) from any Australian RTO is a nationally approved certificate III qualification in an ECEC setting; and
- until the new qualifications are on a scope TAFEs are unable to commence delivery.

The current workaround is that students are enrolled in the old qualification and rolled over into the new qualification when it is on scope, to ensure they meet the new mandatory requirements.

CSWA is working with the sector to support the transition to the new qualifications and this work will include an update to the existing traineeships and a potential RPL process to enable workers with previous qualifications to be able to meet the new diploma entry requirements.

Initial stakeholder consultations indicated that COVID-19 vaccination mandates would have a significant impact on the workforce and make it more difficult for child care centres to meet legislated staff-to-child ratio requirements. However, preliminary 2022 WAJET findings have indicated that the mandates have had minimal impact on the sector with the majority of providers indicating little or no impact on staffing levels.

In WA, COVID-19 preparation and response guidelines for ECEC services specify the need to ensure a robust plan for workforce management is in place including identification of critical staff positions and contingency planning for replacement of staff and additional staffing requirements for thorough cleaning and disinfection²⁸. These requirements may place further pressure on workforce supply and impact a service if there is an outbreak. Observations of other jurisdictions indicate that some services have been forced to close or operate at reduced capacity because staff are either sick with COVID-19 or are close contacts that need to isolate.

An ongoing conversation with the ECEC workforce to address the challenges is required. ACECQA has recognised this need and committed in its *National Children's Education and Care Workforce Strategy* to provide stakeholders with ongoing opportunities to provide advice and feedback regarding industry engagement, improvement of qualifications and high quality delivery of VET.

Current initiative

National Children's Education and Care Workforce Strategy

Shaping Our Future, is a ten-year workforce strategy facilitated by ACECQA, and developed to support the recruitment, retention, sustainability and quality of the sector workforce.

The strategy builds on existing initiatives and investments and provides a roadmap for ongoing collaboration and partnerships for all stakeholders.

The ten-year timeframe for the strategy recognises the complexity of the workforce challenges faced by the sector.

Work will now commence with all stakeholders to co-design implementation and evaluation plans to guide collaborative efforts to achieve the strategy's objectives.



RECOMMENDED STRATEGY

7. Further investigate minimum qualification requirements with ACECQA to identify other possible occupations for inclusion.

Key theme 6: Housing affordability

A continued challenge in the regions is the current shortage of affordable housing, one that is consistently raised by stakeholders as a workforce barrier. Whilst not a training issue it acts as a barrier to the recruitment of employees and further impacts on the provision of services due to understaffing.

This issue was also reported in the 2021 WAJET, noting that the absence of housing is creating a barrier to the recruitment of employees from outside of the region²⁹. As an example, vacancy rates in Broome alone at the end of 2021 were 0.5% (204 vacancies) with an annual rental growth of 38% and a median rental value of \$887³⁰.

In the child care sector alone, the absence of affordable housing is contributing to significant workforce shortages, which impacts on the provision of other services to regional areas when critical workers, including teachers, doctors, nurses and police are unable to find appropriate care for their children.

Stakeholder consultations have confirmed that different strategies and models are required for regional areas than those implemented in metropolitan locations. A whole-of-government approach may be useful to increase the accessibility and affordability of regional areas, and attract intrastate and interstate workers. The implementation of incentives or subsidies to assist with the attraction and retention of a high quality early childhood workforce into regional areas should be explored further.

This could include travel and relocation allowances, funding for remote training, housing, tailored professional development, and income incentives.

For example, housing support offered by the Department of Education for teachers moving to regional and rural WA, could be offered for child care workers to incentivise moving to the regions. The ECEC sector could also be included in the Commonwealth Government's *Relocation Assistance to Take Up a Job* (RATTUAJ) program, which offers workers moving to a regional area up to \$6,000 for relocation costs.

Current initiatives

The Department of Education has implemented the following initiatives:

Country Practicum Program

Pre-service teachers or school psychologists interested in completing a placement in a rural, regional or remote school receive funding and additional support when undertaking a professional experience. In addition to financial support, participants have access to an induction program, a career coach and ongoing support. Those teaching at a remote school may also be eligible to apply for Remote Teaching Service Leave.

Teacher Flying Squad

Run by the Department of Education, Flying Squad teachers fill vacancies in rural, regional and remote schools at short notice. Teachers in the Flying Squad receive free accommodation and free travel to and from the location of any appointment. Teachers receive a locality and/or school specific allowance applicable to the teaching staff at the school of appointment in addition to their teaching salary.

Regional teacher support hubs

An established specialised support network offering access to a range of additional support including professional development workshops, networking opportunities and mentoring programs.



RECOMMENDED STRATEGY

8. Explore the implementation of incentives or subsidies to assist with the attraction and retention of a high quality early childhood workforce into regional areas.

Key theme 7: Overseas workforce

Training locals is important to growing sustainable regional communities. However, there is an immediate need for experienced workers to fill critical worker shortages, including new entrants to the profession. However, sponsoring migrants has become more difficult due to border closures and the introduction of more stringent visa rules³¹.

Stakeholder consultations indicated that stringent skilled migrant visa requirements stipulating Diploma of Education attainment and a requirement for proven two years of work experience in the child care field are impacting on providers' ability to recruit to the sector. In practice these requirements make sponsoring a migrant very difficult because they often do not have the required amount of experience. Options for allowing experienced, double vaccinated early learning and care workers into Western Australia outside of current international arrivals caps should also be considered. A review of these arrangements may be required to attract more migrant workers to work in regional and remote areas.

A fly-in-fly-out (FIFO) workforce approach such as the one utilised by One Tree Community Services may be a possible solution to address the critical shortages in the short term. The Department of Education's Teacher Flying Squad is another example of a mobile workforce to fill vacancies at short notice.

Child care managers and early childhood teachers are currently included on the Western Australian Skilled Migration Occupation List (WASMOL)³². This inclusion is yet to translate into strategies to attract the workforce to Western Australia and overcome current entry requirements. In addition, where early childhood teachers are able to enter on a skilled migrant visa, the guidelines do not currently require them to work in an early childhood setting.

Stakeholder consultations indicate that local government authorities are leading applications for Designated Area Migration Agreement (DAMA) visas for early childhood. Instead of pursuing regional DAMAs, a state-wide approach could be explored.

Stakeholder consultations have also confirmed that further initiatives and policy levers are required to attract the required workforce. The implementation of strategies that optimise the utilisation of skills, qualifications and experience of migrants should also be explored. Possible strategies that may assist in improving the availability of skilled migrants for the ECEC sector include:

1. stipulating ECEC settings for pre-primary teachers to the priority migration skilled occupations list;
2. decreasing requirements for qualifications for sponsorship i.e. recognition of two years of work in a previous role in the sector not just in the nominated role;
3. removal of working hour caps for student visas in the early learning sector, which would immediately increase labour availability for some workers, noting that the hospitality sector has this in place currently; and
4. prioritising visa processing for the child care/early learning sector including DAMA applications and any visa transfers, and reduced fees.

Finally, stakeholder consultations confirmed the need to have an open channel for overseas workers. Allowing experienced workers to come from overseas to fill the immediate gap must be considered as a complement to training and growing the local workforce.

Current initiatives

EduTribe FIFO program

One Tree Community Services has been offering remote and regional children's services for 47 years. In early 2021, a unique FIFO educator program was introduced where early child care educators travel to regional and remote locations on short-term work contracts.

Developed in response to the child care issues rural and remote towns face, the program has already had great early success with 23 educators supporting rural and remote services in Western Australia. The EduTribe FIFO program has enabled One Tree Community Services to maintain child care places in 11 locations. Educators are provided with housing and transport to support their placement.



RECOMMENDED STRATEGY

9. Explore the implementation of strategies that aim to optimise the availability of skilled migrants for the ECEC sector and improve the utilisation of skills, qualifications and experience.

CONCLUSION

This report aims to highlight the challenges of providing ECEC services in regional Western Australia. It also provides an overview of existing initiatives and programs identified through stakeholder consultations, and discusses strategies to address training challenges and opportunities for workforce development for the State Government's consideration. It is hoped that this report will provide important input and advice to inform the development of specific ECEC workforce strategies for Western Australia.

Stakeholder consultations have confirmed that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has emphasised the critical importance of the ECEC sector and its workforce. Recent funding announcements by the State Government are a positive step and a critical factor in the development of the workforce and should continue to be supported.

Current initiatives and models that could translate into potential strategies for the sector that align with government priorities and funding already announced include expansion of the Job Ready Program into child care and mapping the provision of professional development for the early childhood education workforce, mentoring, coaching, opportunities to develop cultural capabilities, and supporting the Year 9 Career Taster program.

A vital factor in the delivery of early childhood services in the regions is a skilled and well supported workforce. Stakeholders including government, service providers, and peak associations are already investing in a range of initiatives to address the challenges being faced. Continued promotion of existing training and workforce opportunities and targeted efforts will create a sustainable, high quality and valued early childhood workforce that meets local regional needs.

There needs to be a motivation to identify breakthroughs that allow untapped workers to enter the labour force and leadership to find ways to connect these untapped workers with potential to employers. Identified opportunities to expand and support current initiatives, especially within remote and Aboriginal communities to engage mentors will also contribute to the State's efforts to address labour market challenges and recovery from COVID-19.

The identified strategies are a first step in supporting the workforce development in the ECEC sector and achieving quality outcomes for children in the regions. Stakeholders agreed that the effectiveness of the above strategies would be constrained if barriers around housing affordability, vaccination mandates and skilled migration issues were not taken into consideration. A holistic view of the issues, ongoing conversations with the ECEC workforce and collaborative responses are required.

END NOTES

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8. Source: Number of people employed is sourced from the Australian Bureau of Statistics Labour Force Detailed data set EQ08 and averaged over the previous four quarters.
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