

United Voice
Pre-Budget Submission
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About United Voice

United Voice is a union of workers organising to win better jobs, stronger communities, a fairer society and a sustainable future. As the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) union we represent early childhood directors, teachers and educators across Australia. We have members in every state and territory working in both large organisations and smaller centres.

We are proud of the work we do educating over one million young Australians. As professionals working in centres delivering early education and care every day, United Voice members have unique insights into the strengths and weaknesses of current and proposed policy settings. It is the expertise of these professionals that informs this pre-budget submission.

I love working in early education and care, but I have become increasingly frustrated that my profession isn't valued in the same way as a school teacher's work.

Our pay rates are up to a third less than those of primary school teachers, despite our qualifications.

My pay does not reflect the specialist knowledge and experience that I have developed over the years.

Elizabeth, Educator, QLD



Executive Summary

Everyone agrees: education is the key to unlocking a child's potential.

This means that every educator has an enormous responsibility and duty. They are shaping the future, one child at a time.

While there is a consensus across the sector that quality matters in early childhood education and care, a gap still exists between theory and practice when it comes to how we value early education and the people who provide it.

This submission will outline United Voice's vision for a sustainable sector that guarantees high quality early education for all children in Australia. In doing so, we argue that in order to value every child, we must value every educator.

Valuing children means allowing them to develop and learn with the help of qualified and experienced educators with whom they can form ongoing, secure attachments in a nurturing environment that is sufficiently and expertly staffed. Valuing educators means first and foremost according them the professional pay they merit for the professional work they perform.

United Voice's pre-budget submission argues that major investment is required from government into ECEC to address the following key issues:

1. In order to value every child, we must value every educator

Early childhood educators are now a qualified, highly skilled workforce whose professionalism remains under-recognised. Children develop and learn best when they have strong attachments to qualified and experienced educators in a nurturing and adequately staffed environment. Professional pay for educators is critical to arresting existing levels of employee turnover, attracting the best and the brightest new recruits to the sector, and developing the human potential of our children.

Recommendation: that Australia, at a minimum, increase its investment in ECEC to the level of 1 per cent of GDP, and that part of that increase is dedicated to funding professional wages for educators.

2. Quality jobs for women – addressing the gender pay imbalance

Ensuring professional wages for educators is a crucial step in redressing the imbalance between women and men's earnings in Australia and improving the quality and status of jobs in female-dominated fields.

Recommendation: that the federal government recognise the endemic low pay that characterises gender-segregated occupations and industries such as ECEC and that it assumes responsibility for addressing this inequity.

1. Value every child, value every educator

Educators spearheading quality

The last twenty-five years have seen a radical transformation in the importance that is attached to quality in the Australian ECEC system. United Voice has consistently been a driving force in fighting for quality as a core component of ECEC in Australia.¹ Prior to 1993, there was no national quality accreditation in early childhood education and care. United Voice members worked towards the establishment of the very first national quality accreditation scheme in 1993. Since that time, members have continued to advocate for improved quality standards.

In 2009, the National Quality Framework was introduced, mandating standards for several markers of quality ECEC in the sector. Lower educator-to-child ratios, employee qualifications, and tailored, play-based learning programs made a huge difference to the capacity of the ECEC system to nurture young Australians and enable them to fulfil their potential.

Today, following decades of campaigning and lobbying by United Voice members, the battle of ideas has been won. Few today would continue to argue that long day care centres provide a babysitting service where parents drop their children off before work. Families and the government accept that modern, high quality ECEC is a now complex field that requires educators to have significant technical skill and knowledge in order to assist children to develop emotionally, cognitively and socially. We require those educating our youngest members of society to possess an understanding of early childhood developmental stages, language acquisition, individualised play-based pedagogy, behaviour management, and the knowledge of how to work with families to support every child's learning and development. These skills are preconditions to working in our system, and rightly so.

Professional educators are the beating heart of our system of early childhood education and care. Study upon study has shown the vital role they play in allowing children to develop and thrive. In fact, research shows that skilled and qualified educators are *the principal factor* leading to quality early education and care.²

Valuing educators is in everyone's interest

For children, the benefits of a funding model that acknowledges and funds professional wages would be immense. They will benefit from the skills and experience of quality educators and from improved cognitive, emotional and social outcomes relating to a stable, valued workforce.

For educators, it would allow the existing workforce to realise their ambitions of building a lasting career in the sector while encouraging new entrants to take up the profession.

For parents, such a funding scheme would enable higher quality care for their children and encourage greater workforce participation.

For governments, it would enhance the capacities and prospects of our youngest Australians, as well as lead to long-term economic benefits.

Why should educators be paid a wage that negates the importance of their work and, too often, undermines their ability to self-nurture and thrive?

How can an educator be expected to maintain the standard and level of care our children need, if they are not paid accordingly?

It's time to show our educators and the children they care for the respect both deserve by paying professional wages.

Julia, Parent, NSW



Attracting and retaining the best and the brightest

The difficulty in attracting and retaining qualified and experienced staff poses a critical barrier to ensuring a qualified, highly skilled, and sustainable workforce in the ECEC sector.

Numerous studies have confirmed the centrality of continuity in establishing strong attachments between children and their educators.³ Close, ongoing relationships between educators and children are crucial to their social and emotional learning.⁴

Long day care (LDC) centres continue to experience difficulty in attracting and retaining employees to meet the requirements of the national quality standards (NQF).⁵ In the context of the 2014 Productivity Commission inquiry into Childcare and Early Childhood Learning, many providers reported shortages of Early Childhood Teachers (ECTs) as a crippling workforce challenge.⁶ The reason this continues to be a problem is that ECTs in LDC earn one third less than their counterparts teaching preschool programs in schools. Difficulty attracting and retaining Diploma and Certificate III-qualified educators also posed a problem for many services, particularly those in regional areas.

There are few indications of improvement in the years since the 2014 Productivity Commission inquiry. This year, research from the Queensland University of Technology revealed that, despite the fact that the overwhelming majority of educators love working with young children, one in five educators plan to leave the profession within the year.⁷

Every time an educator leaves their position or the sector altogether, the impact is felt by dozens of children.⁸

The departure of an educator similarly affects their colleagues. Those who remain must modify their roles or take on new tasks to make up for the staffing disruption; this can disturb centre routines and cause unnecessary stress to children.

The main reason educators give for leaving the sector is inadequate compensation. Other reasons include poor working conditions; low professional status; lack of career progression; lack of support for professional development; and high stress levels caused by the physical demands and unpredictability of the job.⁹ Low pay, nonetheless, is consistently found to be the strongest predictor of staff turnover.

The extent of workforce turnover is a major obstacle to the achievement of a world-class ECEC system in Australia.

Fortunately, the solution to the problem is not hard to identify. Adequately remunerating educators with pay that reflects their professional skills and responsibilities will substantially decrease staff turnover in ECEC.¹⁰



Professional pay will mean recognition for a career I've been putting my heart and soul into for over twenty years.

Educators leave at turnover rates that are unsustainable, as they can earn more in retail. These educators could be making a difference in children's lives, but not without making financial sacrifices in their own.

Emma, Educator, ACT

Building on quality ECEC through professional wages

Although ECEC is recognised as an essential service that provides over one million children with the best possible start in life, the work of early childhood educators remains underpaid. Like other education sectors, early education involves the creation of individualised, developmentally appropriate learning programs and requires qualified educators and teachers to develop, deliver, and evaluate these programs.

Early childhood educators deserve professional wages for professional work, but they earn about one third less than those educating children just a few years older. Their pay is also one third less than workers in male-dominated professions with comparable levels of skills and qualifications. Most educators in Australia meet the official OECD and Fair Work Commission (FWC) definition of 'low-pay workers', in that their wages are less than two-thirds of the median wage.¹¹ Certificate III-qualified educators earn around \$20 an hour, almost half the average workforce wage.

ECEC wages – hourly rates of pay and full-time equivalent weekly and annual earnings

Level	Hourly	Weekly	Annually
Educator (Cert 3)	\$20.61	\$783.30	\$40,731.60
Max pay for non-managerial educator (Diploma)	\$23.21	\$881.90	\$46,071.54
Early Childhood Teacher	\$26.25	\$997.53	\$52,051.63
ABS average for entire workforce	\$39.89	\$1,516.00	\$79,832.00

I love my job, I love teaching young children, but in my role as an educational leader I cannot fathom how it is that I do the same work as a teacher, yet am paid just a fraction of the money.

I still live pay cheque to pay cheque, worrying about how I can possibly continue as an educator - my dream job - when I decide to have children, and the cost of basic living goes up so much.

Hannah, Educator, TAS



In addition to low wages, many educators are employed on an insecure basis. Over 58 per cent of educators work under part-time or casual arrangements that are not necessarily of their own choosing.¹² When the high incidence of part-time employment is taken into account, the average weekly earnings for all educators (Certificate III and Diploma-qualified combined) are \$614.¹³

The impact of low pay on educators is wide ranging. Research has shown a demonstrable effect on their physical and mental health, which in some cases may flow on to their ability to form strong attachments to children.¹⁴ Low wages can also prevent educators (over half of whom are under 35), from obtaining a home loan or starting a family.¹⁵ Many of our members are only able to meet the cost of living, doing the job they love, by living with their parents, by working second or even third jobs, or by relying on the higher income of their partner. None of these coping mechanisms constitute a satisfactory, sustainable solution to the workforce issues that form a systemic compromise to quality ECEC.

There are quality and productivity gains to be had from ensuring professional wages and stable working conditions for educators. As the US-based Century Foundation report argued:

Just as economic instability can cause stress, depression, and distraction, economic stability is an important factor in enabling employees to show up to work energized, engaged, and present. These traits are understood to be drivers of greater productivity in the workforce generally, and early care and education is no exception.¹⁶

Professional wages would also heighten the impact of existing measures to improve retention that have been implemented through the COAG national workforce strategy, such as early childhood teacher scholarships, TAFE fee waivers and professional development opportunities.¹⁷

No governmental commitment has been made at a national level to continue these non-pay-related workforce initiatives, which are due to expire in mid-2017.¹⁸ Alongside investing in educators' wages, United Voice therefore recommends a number of additional ways in which government must act to support the early childhood education workforce. These include:

- ongoing commitment to professional development and the creation of meaningful career pathways;
- greater oversight of registered training organisations' ECEC programs to ensure that they are producing educators with the requisite skills; and
- greater levels of data collection about the ECEC workforce, particularly in relation to management type, job satisfaction, professional development, working conditions and pay, intention to stay in the job, and intention to stay in the sector.

All of these parallel strategies need to support – not replace – professional pay. The national and international experience shows that improving skills and qualifications alone will not lead to better wages in isolation from an intentional wages commitment by policymakers.¹⁹

I have worked in this sector for sixteen years. It saddens me to watch many talented, dedicated, and accomplished educators leave our sector, due to them being unable to financially support themselves.

They have been forced to move on, instead of staying in their first choice of profession.

Joyce, Educator, VIC



The need for professional wages is widely recognised

Governments abroad have come to understand that any attempts to improve quality in ECEC will be ineffectual without a policy to raise educators' pay.

A number of policymakers and politicians in the US, for instance, have recently articulated the importance of improving the early learning workforce's pay. In a report co-authored by the Department of Health and Human Services and the Department of Education, the US Federal government outlined the dual impetus for supporting the early learning workforce: 'to improve the quality of early learning programs [and] to ensure fair pay so that they [educators] can support their own families.'²⁰ One of the report's key recommendations was to ensure that 'earnings [are] sufficient to attract and retain a high-quality workforce.'²¹ During his presidency, Barack Obama sought to engage the states onto this path in a concerted manner; and throughout her ultimately unsuccessful campaign, presidential candidate Hillary Clinton publicly stated her support for the ECEC workforce by explicitly committing to 'improve the quality of child care and early learning by giving a RAISE to America's child care workforce.'²²

Australian parents, for their part, have long understood that professional wages for educators are vital if we are to have a high quality and stable ECEC sector.²³ 88 per cent see the role of early educators in their child's development as being just as important as the role of those working in schools.²⁴ More than two-thirds of those surveyed consider educators' pay to be too low.²⁵

Finally, the Australian government itself has recognised that higher pay is essential to attract and retain quality educators at school level.²⁶ Why should educators working with children under the age of six be any different?





Quality ECEC makes good economic sense too

Economists love to point out the economic benefits of a quality, accessible ECEC system. International studies illustrate that for every dollar invested into ECEC there is a significant return on investment once increased maternal workforce participation and reductions in criminal justice, health and social service spending are taken into account.²⁷

A 2014 Price Waterhouse Coopers report, *Putting a value on early childhood education and care in Australia*, demonstrated that investment in ECEC would bring three key benefits to GDP (amounts are cumulative to 2050):²⁸

- Children receiving a quality education and care program: Up to \$10.3bn
- Increased participation of vulnerable children: \$13.3bn
- Increased female workforce participation: \$6bn

Australia has comparatively low levels of maternal workforce participation. In 2011, just 51 per cent of Australian mothers with a child under four were in paid work, well behind Denmark (78 per cent), Canada (70 per cent) and the United Kingdom (60 per cent).²⁹ Difficulties affording and accessing high quality ECEC play a large part in this low participation rate.

If Australia had the same rate of female workforce participation as Canada, our GDP would rise around \$25bn within a decade.³⁰

2. Quality jobs for women - addressing the gender pay imbalance

It has been a long time since it was lawful to discriminate on the basis of gender when it comes to pay in Australia. The fight for equal pay for equal work was won in 1969, closely followed by equal pay for work of equal value in 1972, and since 1984 it has been unlawful for any employer in Australia to pay a woman less than a man for the same work by virtue of her sex.³¹

Our economic and social systems have taken a while to catch up, though.

Although formal discrimination is illegal, the legacy of comparatively low wages being paid in female-dominant industries has been remarkably persistent.

On current estimates, it will be another 170 years – six generations of women workers – before the gender pay gap will close globally.³² In Australia the difference between women's and men's earnings has stagnated between 15 and 19 per cent for the past twenty years.³³ Formal equality measures have only taken us so far.

To address the pay imbalance, we must understand it. Researchers have identified a number of reasons why women's pay lags so consistently behind men's. Formal discrimination, interruptions to paid work and periods of part-time employment due to care giving all play their part. But a significant factor in the difference between male and female earnings is the fact that many industries and occupations are segregated, with female-dominated industries remaining at a lower level of pay. Occupational and industrial gender segregation accounts for almost one third of the imbalance between women and men's earnings, and in fact increased as a share of the gender pay imbalance between 2007 and 2014.³⁴


Australia's labour market is one of the most gender-segregated in the world, and ECEC is one of the most gender segregated industries in our economy.³⁵ In long day care, 97.3 per cent of the workforce is female.³⁶

ECEC is not the only sector of the Australian economy where gender segregation happens. The social and community sector is also predominantly female. In 2012, workers from this sector fought and won a battle for recognition in the Fair Work Commission, winning wage rises of between 19 and 41 per cent.

Early childhood education has historically been seen as 'women's work' – a caring role that one does out of love for children. But love doesn't pay the bills.

United Voice members, like generations of women working in feminised industries before them, are sick of living in an Australia that undervalues the work of people based on their gender.

We cannot simply wait for 'the market' to value educators' work. It hasn't and it won't.



It is an ongoing battle for equal pay for women in many jobs, but I hope you think about the educators like myself, working two jobs, seven days a week, trying to save to buy a house in the beautiful country in which I live.

Laura, Educator, NSW

Pay equity will not happen without ordinary people putting extraordinary pressure on our political, legal and social structures. The goal is to ensure that educators are paid wages that reflect the value of their work and the value of the children they care for and educate.

United Voice members have been leading a campaign amongst their colleagues, lobbying their local Members of Parliament and politicians across the political spectrum, and building support from stakeholders for their role in quality ECEC to be recognised. United Voice members are also pursuing a legal remedy by lodging an application for an Equal Remuneration Order (ERO) with the Fair Work Commission.

Fixing the system, however, can only come through concerted government intervention.

Piecemeal mechanisms for change, such as enterprise bargaining, are not fit for the large-scale transformation we need. The ECEC sector is highly fragmented, with 83 per cent of providers operating only one service, and only 1 per cent of providers operating more than 25 services.³⁷ Striking deals with individual employers is not only impractical; if done in isolation it is likely to push the cost of implementing change onto families, who are already paying too much.

Since the Commonwealth Government provides funding to the sector, we are lobbying the Government to support our ERO application. This is what happened in the first and only other ERO case run for the social and community sector in 2010-2012 where the Government agreed to fund its share of the increased cost from the application.

An Equal Remuneration Order (ERO) for Australia's early childhood professionals

- In 2013 United Voice lodged an application for an Equal Remuneration Order in the Fair Work Commission for the Children's Services Award and early childhood education sector.
- The case is an effort to ensure educators receive the professional pay they deserve. It is premised on the argument that ECEC workers are not paid equally to employees in male-dominated industries who perform work of equal or comparable value. United Voice's ERO will also contribute to creating and sustaining a viable, skilled early childhood education workforce for the future.
- The case is still afoot. In September 2016 United Voice lodged an amendment to our application setting out an appropriate comparator. We have asked the Commission to determine whether we have an appropriate comparator for our claim at its earliest convenience.
- The fight for professional wages cannot be won in the legal arena alone. Ultimately, the systemic fix we need requires dedicated government investment in the sector.



Conclusion: How to fix the system

A world-class early education system is a matter for government to address.

At present, Australia underspends on ECEC compared to countries of similar or lesser means. In 2013-14, Australia spent just 0.48 per cent of GDP on ECEC, significantly less than the OECD average of 0.8 per cent of GDP, and vastly less than that spent by comparable developed countries such as the UK (1.1 per cent), New Zealand (1.1 per cent), Denmark (1.6 per cent) and Sweden (2 per cent).³⁸ Our investment is currently less than middle-income and low-income countries such as Korea, Mexico and Romania.

The consequences of that long-term, systemic underinvestment are plain to see:

- Parents struggle to find high quality places for their children, and to cover the costs of ECEC, which limits their capacity to participate in further study or the paid workforce. As a consequence, rates of maternal workforce participation in Australia are below the OECD average.
- Education quality is eroded by high staff turnover as educators struggle to make ends meet and build a career on low wages that do not reflect their skill level. The system as it currently stands is effectively being subsidised through the low wages of educators.³⁹
- Access to ECEC for children from low socio-economic groups, who benefit the most from ECEC, is profoundly limited. The effective exclusion of such children from the system leads to a range of unjustifiable and avoidable negative human, social and economic consequences down the track.⁴⁰

There is no way to repair these problems without a significantly increased investment of resources into the system.

United Voice recommends that Australia, at a minimum, increase its investment in ECEC to the level of 1 per cent of GDP, which would place us in the range of comparable OECD countries, and for a proportion of that increase to be dedicated to funding professional wages for educators.

We can and should have a system in which all children are given the best possible start in life through their continuous access to quality early education opportunities delivered by skilled educators earning professional wages. To do so is in the interests of children, families, and government.

It is time for an Australia that values every educator and the education of every child.

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