Introduction

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Australian newspapers often feature stories about child care and its potential benefits or hazards and many parents read them diligently, wondering if they are making the right decisions for their own children. Controversy over how to care for children has also given rise to new books by Australian authors, with some arguing that child care has negative effects on children (Biddulph 2006; Manne 2005). Pointing in the other direction are reports by international organisations that emphasise the positive and often critical impact that high quality early childhood education and care can have on children’s current and future development and wellbeing – particularly children from low-income households (OECD 2006; UNESCO 2006). Amid all this debate, however, a growing number and proportion of Australian infants and young children are using diverse forms of child care. This growth reflects changing economic, labour market and social factors, particularly the increasing rate of labour market participation of Australian women in the absence of universal paid parental leave. This makes the provision of a system of good early childhood education and care of pressing importance. In the chapters that follow, we take the demand for child care as a given, and we focus on how it can best be provided with the best outcomes.

The provision of a good childcare system is far from the full picture of supports that Australian citizens and their children need. We recognise that there are very good arguments for discussion of other policies, especially leave arrangements that facilitate familial care. We strongly support the creation of a national system of paid parental leave. International evidence about its effects on child health (see for example The Economic Journal, February 2005) and maternal wellbeing is accumulating. We believe a good case exists for a period of at least a year of paid parental leave. To be meaningful for workers who depend upon their own earnings, this must be paid at a living wage level. Given the strong preference in Australia for parental care, a period of one or one and a half years paid parental leave would give many families a practical choice to care for their infants and young children. At present less than
half of all working Australian women have access to any paid parental leave and only a small proportion for longer than a few weeks or months.

This makes early childhood education and care a significant element of social policy in Australia. But it seems that policies around early childhood education and care in Australia are in a muddle, and that the costs of this muddle are very high for some. It is especially high for women who want to work and cannot, for the economy, for households and, in particular, for those who can speak least in their own defence – Australian infants and children, and their carers. It was concern about this muddle and its impact upon those who have least voice in the ‘system’ that led to the development of a research workshop on the issue, and this book.

In July 2006 a group of Australian academics with expertise in child care, work and early childhood met at Sydney University as part of a workshop funded by The Academy of Social Sciences in Australia (ASSA). The workshop was convened by the ‘Work and Family Policy Roundtable’, a group of academics who analyse research and policy about work and family in Australia. The aim was to develop an approach to policy development that would clarify the relationship between early childhood education and care, and children’s health, development and future prospects, as well as respond to the needs of carers and workers.

The workshop brought together 21 Australian and international researchers on early childhood education and care from a range of academic disciplines including economics, sociology, paediatrics and child health, early childhood, political economy, psychology, government and working life. Five experts from the community sector and government also attended¹. Discussion focused around the current research evidence about early childhood education and care in Australia and internationally. Fifteen papers were presented, most of which are brought together in this volume.

The group of experts agreed on the need for a new nationally coordinated, planned approach to an integrated system of early childhood education and care (ECEC). Discussion supported an ECEC system that gives priority to the needs of children and their wellbeing, places the issue of high quality care and education more

¹ See Appendix 1 for a full list of workshop participants.
centrally on the policy agenda, and recognises the pressing need for increased public funding to ensure universal access to early childhood education and care services for all children from birth to school entry. Discussion also recognised the need to locate good ECEC policy alongside other important policy initiatives like paid parental leave and a progressive individual tax system.

The workshop was held at the same time as the Council of Australian Governments was meeting to consider a National Reform Agenda covering, among other areas, Human Capital. The resulting communiqué included Human Capital reforms in four priority areas including:

**Early childhood** – with the aim of supporting families in improving childhood development outcomes in the first five years of a child’s life, up to and including school entry

**Child care** – with the aim of encouraging and supporting workforce participation of parents with dependent children (COAG Communiqué, 14 July 2006, p 6).

Clearly the users of ECEC cross the boundaries of state/federal relations in Australia and are on the policy agendas of all governments.

**Policy principles for a national system of early childhood education and care**

Workshop participants agreed upon the following set of policy principles for a national system of early childhood education and care.

1. **Promote the wellbeing of all children**

The primary goal and guiding principle of a national system of early childhood education and care (ECEC) should be the wellbeing of all children.

A system of high quality education and care should emphasise children’s development and wellbeing. This will have measurable positive effects on the health and wellbeing of children in the present and into the future and promote social equity.
2. Early childhood education and care is a public good

A high quality early childhood education and care system is a public good, and so requires significant public investment.

The benefits of high quality early childhood education and care accrue to children and their families, but they also accrue to society more broadly. High quality early childhood education and care that prioritises the needs of children will have a positive impact on women’s participation in employment, gender equity, human capital development and economic growth. This ‘public good’ property of high quality ECEC means that significant, ongoing government investment is required to ensure adequate resources are devoted to it.

3. Universal early childhood education and care

Australian governments should implement a national, universal and integrated early childhood education and care system, particularly for children in the two years prior to starting school, and up to three years for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

International evidence about the positive role that early childhood education and care plays in the development and wellbeing of all young children provides a strong case for this. The evidence supports access to at least two years early childhood education for all children under school age, and access from the age of two for children in disadvantaged households. Education and care interventions in the early years have a demonstrated capacity to narrow social inequity and improve the health, educational and economic outcomes of children from disadvantaged backgrounds over the life course. Universal access to a guaranteed option of education and care prior to starting formal schooling will complement the services available to babies and infants under a nationally integrated ECEC system.

4. Rational planning of ECEC system growth

Governments must collaborate to plan a rational expansion of the ECEC system in order to meet the needs of all children equitably, to ensure that service quality is high, and to maintain diversity in provision so parents are given genuine choice.
Private investment decisions, rather than need, increasingly determine the distribution of ECEC services in Australia. Further, increasing rates of corporate provision of ECEC services in Australia, especially long day care, pose a significant challenge to accessible, high quality outcomes for children. A growing body of international and Australian evidence suggests that quality is threatened where the interests of shareholders conflict with the interests of children. Government support should therefore be adjusted to expand public ECEC services, especially those linked to other services and community-capacity-building activities. This needs to be in the context of a rationally planned expansion of provision that includes renewed support for capital grants and/or the provision of land at concessional rates and encourages public services to be built in poorly serviced areas that are integrated with other public services.

5. High quality standards

High quality education and care, especially a high ratio of university or TAFE trained and appropriately qualified staff to children, is the priority issue in ensuring positive outcomes for children.

Increasing international evidence suggests that positive outcomes for children arising from early childhood education and care are directly related to the quality of the environment provided. High quality is a function of staffing ratios, carer and teacher skills and qualifications, and the size of the care group. National quality standards must reflect international best practice. Research supports staff/child ratios of at least 1 adult to 3 children for infants (1:3); at least one adult to four children for one to two year olds (1:4), and at least one adult to eight children for three to five year olds (1:8). A commitment to high quality care requires implementation of these ratios in all sectors of ECEC. Teachers and other ECEC staff must be appropriately trained and qualified. To be effective, these standards must be linked to a robust regulatory and compliance regime.

6. Good employment practices

High quality care depends upon stable, qualified, appropriately rewarded staff.
Children and parents benefit from long-term care relationships. Stable care relationships, involving the recruitment and retention of skilled teachers and carers, require secure jobs, attractive pay and conditions, and rewards for higher education and training. Wages in the sector remain too low despite recent increases, and many services lack enough skilled teachers and carers. Professional qualifications and wages for carers and teachers must be upgraded. Trained and qualified staff must be rewarded commensurate with other comparable workers. Resources must be made available to allow teachers and other staff adequate time to undertake program design, documentation, reporting and in-service training. Government has a strategic role to play in developing a workforce planning strategy to meet current critical shortages of appropriately qualified ECEC teachers.

7. A robust regulatory system

High quality early childhood education and care requires a robust and integrated system of monitoring and compliance that is based on best practice and which targets structural, process and adult work quality dimensions.

Government regulation can play a critical role in promoting and safeguarding high quality ECEC. Australian research suggests that the current national accreditation system and state regulations have limited capacity to effect high quality ECEC. An effective regulatory framework will promote high structural standards (that is, staff to child ratios, small group sizes, and qualified teachers); standards of excellence in children’s experiences while in ECEC services; and best practice adult work experience (for example, job satisfaction, work conditions, staff retention rates). A robust system must be able to identify and enforce sanctions on centres that provide poor quality care, while also actively recognising and supporting ECEC teachers and staff committed to providing high quality education and care. An effective regulatory system will be transparent and subject to ongoing independent review by appropriately qualified reviewers.
8. Affordable and equitable ECEC services

Access to ECEC and good outcomes for children depend upon affordable services.

Evidence suggests that the costs of ECEC are increasing much faster than inflation in Australia. The cost of high quality care makes affordability a significant and ongoing concern for parents and ECEC providers. An investigation into alternative funding methods to ensure affordability and sustain the growth of ECEC provision into the future must be undertaken. COAG is urged, as part of its National Reform Agenda addressing the promotion of Human Capital, to investigate the feasibility of pooling public sector funding for early childhood infrastructure and funding from different jurisdictions and government agencies to create a more affordable, equitable and integrated system of ECEC.

9. Supportive parental leave and tax policies

A high quality ECEC care system requires supportive, complementary policies.

International evidence shows that significant benefit will flow to children and working carers from Australia’s adoption of a universal system of paid parental leave that gives parents and primary carers the practical opportunity to take leave from work for at least a year, and preferably up to 18 months. This requires a payment system that confers a living wage during the period of leave, allows it to be combined with other forms of leave (including the opportunity to request to return to work part-time) and allows parents to share leave (and requires fathers to use a portion of it on a ‘use it or lose it basis’). The effective and efficient use of parental leave policies requires a progressive individual tax system that does not penalise parents who move between paid work and caring duties or disadvantage dual-income households.

10. Building healthy communities and social networks

Well resourced ECEC centres provide a focal point or ‘hub’ for multiple community services that support families with young children and strengthen community capacity.
Co-locating ECEC services with other educational and child and parent health clinics and services, facilitates important ‘social joins’ and strengthens social connections for both children and parents. These settings can be sites for other universal family support services for families with babies and very young children. This will ensure that all adults responsible for the care of young children are able to access the support they need to offer young children the best possible experiences for nurture and learning. ECEC services that link with schooling facilities help to build child and parent communities and create natural bridges for children into formal education and social life. These are cost effective, as well as transport and time efficient.

These ten *Policy principles for a national system of early childhood education and care* are drawn from the papers delivered at the workshop and presented in this volume. Part 1 asks the question: what defines a high quality system of ECEC? What is necessary, what is possible? In Chapter 1 Barbara Pocock and Elizabeth Hill set out the current Australian context of ECEC policy. They suggest that poor planning and a lack of clear policy goals has delivered a residual care regime in which children’s wellbeing and development is not given priority. Weaknesses in the system become clear when evaluating current patterns of use, quality and affordability, and challenges arise in the area of employment, staffing and funding. In Chapter 2 Anita Nyberg presents the Swedish experience of the public provision of ECEC. Nyberg details the development of Swedish childcare policy since the 1960s and how it has changed its focus from supporting employment, to promoting child development and wellbeing through the public provision of child care for all Swedish children, irrespective of the labour market status of their parents. Nyberg suggests that the Swedish experience of increasing supply, while maintaining affordability and quality, might hold some lessons for Australian policy developments. The international context within which Australian policy is formulated is further developed by Deborah Brennan. In Chapter 3 Brennan provides an overview of the domestic and international contexts that frame the development of Australian childcare and early education policy. In particular Brennan argues that there is a lack of synthesis between the child-focused approach to ECEC policy being implemented at
the international level, and the Australian Government’s adult-centred instrumentalist approach that views ECEC as a labour market support. In Chapter 4 Patricia Apps addresses the problem of gender discrimination embedded in family tax and welfare policy and the absence of a public childcare system. Apps concludes that to overturn these new forms of gender discrimination requires a return to a progressive individual tax system, and a high quality, affordable and publicly provided childcare system.

In Part 2 Bettina Cass and Lynne Wannan consider the goals of a good national system of ECEC. In Chapter 5 Cass takes a child-centred approach to the discussion of childcare goals, introducing the notion of children as present citizens, not just future citizens with a human capital worth. Cass pays particular attention to the right of all children, particularly children from disadvantaged backgrounds, to have access to early childhood education and care. In Chapter 6 Lynne Wannan develops the idea of child focused ‘children’s services’ further, stressing the importance of a nationwide network of sustainable, quality, community owned, not-for-profit early years children’s centres. Wannan argues that such a system would meet the needs of all stakeholders by supporting children’s developmental needs, supporting parents’ need to work and raise their children, supporting community cohesion and safety, and enhancing the participation of all families in Australia’s social and economic life.

Part 3 shifts the focus of analysis to the Australian public and the workers who staff Australia’s ECEC services. In Chapter 7 Gabrielle Meagher explores what Australians think about child care. Meagher explores three specific questions: where do Australians stand on working mothers and child care for young children, and how have these views changed over time? What kinds of organisations do Australians think are best to deliver child care? And what kinds of rationales for public subsidies for child care do Australians support? In Chapter 8 Emma Rush reports on a national survey of staff employed in long day childcare centres. The staff survey assessed the quality of the care provided to children in the long day care setting. The findings of the survey suggest that the quality of care and education varies across the long day care sector and that quality is correlated with provider type, raising important questions about the current expansion of provision through large corporate chains.
In Part 4 the critical issue of quality in ECEC services is addressed. In Chapter 9 Frances Press maps the fragmentation of ECEC services in Australia and the decline of public investment. Against this policy backdrop she analyses existing patterns of ECEC quality and the challenges associated with improving the quality of provision. Press argues that impediments to high quality ECEC include the multiple levels of government involved in the sector, the multiple regulatory regimes, quality standards and various curricula. Alison Elliott builds upon some of these arguments in Chapter 10, highlighting the need for consistency across all aspects of the early childhood education and care system, and coherence between education and care in the preschool years. In particular, Elliott argues that a high quality system requires highly trained professional staff, and that a formal system of registration, accreditation, and regulation of the profession will improve professional practice and quality in the sector. In Chapter 11 Margaret Sims concludes the discussion on quality care with a report on her research into changes in cortisol levels in children and caregivers in long day care settings. Sim’s study shows that cortisol levels are correlated with childcare quality: abnormally high in children attending centres rated as unsatisfactory, and typically low at the conclusion of a day in high quality centres with well trained staff. Interestingly, cortisol levels in caregivers increased in good quality centres and decreased in unsatisfactory centres, raising concerns about staff health and wellbeing in good quality centres.

In the final part Joy Goodfellow and Eva Cox discuss the question of who should pay and who should provide ECEC services: employers, consumers, government or the market? In Chapter 12 Goodfellow discusses the influence of free market ideas on the provision of early childhood education and care arguing that the idea of a market does not work for ECEC and that the responsibility for early childhood education and care should lie primarily with government, in collaboration with parents and communities. In Chapter 13 the complex issue of funding is addressed with Cox suggesting that the policy emphasis on parental choice and market forces has redefined ECEC as a commercial, not community enterprise, and led to the commodification of early childhood education and care. An alternative funding model would see federal funding given to individual centres rather than corporate childcare
chains, with funding linked to service contracts that include provisions for quality, budgets, fees etc. In this model, Cox argues early childhood centres become community hubs that promote the wellbeing of children and their carers, build social capital and facilitate healthy social support networks.

We hope the research evidence and discussion presented in this volume will assist social scientists make an ongoing contribution to a more informed, evidence-based discussion of the challenges Australia faces in the ECEC field, and especially make a contribution to the discussion of potential solutions. We also hope that the *Ten policy principles for a national system of early childhood education and care* can help inform Australian governments as they reform early childhood education and care and develop positive outcomes for children and our larger society.

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References


