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Higher education in 2015 – transition or reflection?

Industry dominates but where is the education in VET?

The politics of education
When reviewing 2014 from an early childhood perspective it is important to recognise that, in line with international definitions, these years include a birth-8 range and encompass childcare, preschool and also the early years of school.

Looking back over the year using a birth-8 lens it could best be described as a period of uncertainty and review. The Coalition released its ‘Better Child Care and Early Learning’ policy in September 2013 and following that, the Abbott Government moved comparatively quickly to announce policy change in the early education sector.

Assistant Education Minister, Sussan Ley, with responsibility for Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), quickly affirmed Coalition support for the National Quality Framework (NQF) and acknowledged the significant growth and change achieved in the sector under this reform. The NQF had been agreed by The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) and introduced at the beginning of 2012. The implementation of the NQF meant that for the first time in Australia the diverse, uneven and outdated regulatory standards applicable to ECEC across the states and territories were brought together and unified under a single framework.

However, along with this, the assistant minister signalled that the new government intended to minimise the paper work and ‘regulatory burden’ under the existing NQF requirements by instigating three major reviews to examine these issues. The included: ‘A review of the Early Years Quality Fund (EYQF)’, a ‘Productivity Commission Review of Childcare and Early Childhood Education’ and a ‘Review of the National Quality Framework’. The terms of reference for the reviews and inquiries identified some of the most contentious aspects instigated by the previous ALP Government: Issues of early childhood educator qualifications; appropriate adult
to child ratios; and workloads and how these are related to costs. The reviews focused on ‘flexibility, affordability and access’. This emphasis on flexibility and cost fails to recognise that the transition from home care to external care for young children has serious implications for their intellectual and emotional development, particularly in early years where patterns are set, affecting them for the rest of their lives. Moreover, staff looking after young children would need specialised training and experience.

As a result of the review into the EYQF, one of the first changes that occurred in 2014 was the freeze and then redirection of this funding. Initially intended to support an increase in wages for early childhood educators [current hourly rate for a Certificate 3 is $19.30], the EYQF funding was a one-off pool of money and implementation of the EYQF was seen to be inequitable, unmanageable and became a target for reform by the Abbott Government. The Coalition redirected this finite pool of funding to professional development rather than increasing wages for childcare educators.

Throughout 2014 there was considerable uncertainty regarding the continuation of the 15 hours preschool entitlement introduced under the ‘Universal Access’ policy in which each preschool child was entitled to 15 hours funded preschool education. Although the increase from 12 to 15 hours for each child in preschool may seem insignificant to some outside the field, in reality, the increase is in line with much international policy. There is now a body of research demonstrating the long term educational benefits of quality preschool participation and many other countries have already laid the groundwork for educational achievement before children begin their formal education by increasing access to quality preschool.

To implement the extra three hours, early childhood educators readjusted program hours, days and staffing to accommodate the change. The concern that the 15 hours may be wound back to 12 hours signalled a worrying trend in Australian early childhood care and education policy. However, the assistant minister announced in September that the funding for the extra three hours would continue for 2015. This announcement was welcomed by the field. However, the extension of one year can hardly be seen as a commitment to ongoing continuation of this policy.

The invitation to submit to the Productivity Commission’s inquiry into Childcare and Early Learning resulted in 468 submissions [http://www.pc.gov.au/projects/inquiry/childcare/submissions]. These included a wide range of individual opinions, organisational responses from businesses and researchers (for example, the Australian Institute of Family Studies [AIFS] response). As a result of this process, a 900-page report by the Productivity Commission Inquiry was released in July. This report [still considered to be in draft] was sent out for further comment and feedback prior to final decisions being made in October. As of 19 October, there are 455 post-draft submissions. It will be interesting to see the results of this process and what changes are made to the huge round of recommendations included in the draft report.

The actual recommendations in the draft report were a mixed bag, with the NQF being retained with some streamlining and refining. Some of the most contentious recommendations relate to the funding of childcare. This issue is of primary concern to both families and governments. One of the report recommendations involves a move to a means-tested single subsidy, paid directly to the provider. This must be viewed positively as a simplification of the incredibly complicated payment and funding process that now exists. The possibility of a ‘top-up’ additional subsidy for children with special needs or a disability is also a welcome recommendation and may go some way to addressing equitable childcare for these children and their families.

However, underpinning these beneficial changes, the report states that the subsidy would be based on a set ‘reasonable’ cost of care and this raises the questions of how this ‘reasonable’ cost will be determined and whether quality will be criteria?

Lastly, the possibility of including nannies as eligible for childcare subsidies raises issues regarding the regulation and types of qualifications that will be required. How will such a provision be regulated and what level of qualification would be required?

The review of the NQF was undertaken by an external research company - Woolcott Research and Engagement and sought feedback from face-to-face public consultation sessions, online comments and submissions. The purpose of the review was to ‘assess the extent to which the objectives and outcomes of the National Partnership Agreement on the National Quality Agenda for Early Childhood Education and Care had been achieved. In particular, the review would examine whether the NQF had improved the efficiency and cost effectiveness of regulation of services and reduced the regulatory burden for providers and regulatory authorities’. The findings of the review were released in October (2014) and the reviewers stated that:

Throughout the consultations participants supported the National Quality Framework and its current implementation timeframe. While it was thought some improvements could be of benefit and there were some implementation issues, it was clear the National Quality Framework has provided significant benefits to children and services since it began in 2012’ (p.5).

As a result of the review, a ‘Consultation Regulation Impact Statement [RIS]’ will be released towards the end of 2014. This will outline any suggested changes to the National Quality Framework and will present options for change and

As a result of the review into the EYQF, one of the first changes that occurred in 2014 was the freeze and then redirection of this funding.
This year has also seen some interesting developments in the early years of school. Alongside the announcement of the reviews outlined above, there was also a significant increase in funding to the Out of Hours Care (OSHC) sector. This was an interesting policy because it represented a shift of focus from the early years to school age care programs.

The Productivity Commission Report’s recommendation that schools will be directed to provide preschool child care was contentious. Including three to five year olds in OSHC requires significant resourcing. This recommendation will need to take into account the particular rights of very young children to adult attention [ratios], suitable indoor and physical spaces and a program that will be appropriate for this age group. Similar issues arise with the recommendation that occasional care programs are expanded.

The recent release of the Review of the National Curriculum also has many implications for the early years of schooling. For those of us who have worked with, and advocated for, young children over many years, it was encouraging to see recognition of the importance of these years and also an endorsement of an Australian Curriculum based on children’s early learning needs. The reviewers’ state:

‘Consultations for this review with early learning experts, combined with research into international experience, confirm the vital importance of the early years of schooling in terms of a student’s educational development. Curriculum content clearly plays a key role in this and there is convincing evidence to suggest that the early years should be regarded as quite distinct, and treated differently from the rest of the learning spectrum [p. 99].’

The review also recommends a focus on the ‘basics’ of literacy and numeracy in the early years and reiterates that the early years’ curriculum draws from the lives of children:

‘...the teaching of literacy and numeracy can easily be integrated pedagogically with other content by using examples relevant to the lives of students of these ages. Since literacy is the main foundation for the whole school curriculum there seems to be convincing evidence that Foundation to Year 2 should be separated both conceptually and organisationally in the whole curriculum [p. 99].’

In conclusion this review of 2014 from an early childhood perspective, given the contemporary importance and status of international comparisons of educational outcomes, the Australian public and policy debates should be attentive to the fact that in OECD comparisons, the countries who are performing best, invest much more than Australia in early childhood education. The proportion of GDP invested by Australia is 0.6 [UNICEF, 2008] and when this is compared with that of the countries that consistently perform at the top of the international comparisons [for example, Finland and Sweden, 1.3] the relationship between consistent ongoing investment in early childhood education and long-term educational outcomes becomes evident.

Access to universal, integrated health care and quality early education must be viewed as an entitlement rather than a privilege.

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References
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