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Executive summary

At long last there is a commitment to a national agenda based on ensuring universal access to quality early childhood education and care, with a specific commitment to provide access to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children living in remote communities within five years.

There needs to be strong interconnections between the Government's early childhood agenda, the Closing the Gap policies and ensuring access to higher education and vocational education and training systems for an expanding workforce with upgraded qualifications. It is clear that many elements of the government's agenda are still being worked through and the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Training Network has the opportunity to help shape the future of the sector.

Almost half (49.2%) of all three and four year old Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are not enrolled in early childhood education, and Indigenous children aged 0-5 years are also under-represented in child care services.

There is widespread recognition of the vital importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers and staff to the educational wellbeing and success of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and to the involvement and support of their families and communities. Yet there are very few Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff in preschool and childcare settings across Australia.

If all 3 and 4 year old Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children participated in early childhood education programs offered by a degree-qualified teacher and were given access to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff, then a minimum of 1000 Indigenous teachers and 1000 other Indigenous staff would be required to staff services with substantial numbers of the children.

This gives some idea of the approximate scope of the possible targets to be set. The reality is of course that early childhood groups often include both Indigenous and non-Indigenous children, and children will experience both Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff, which is why workforce planning must also involve funding and planning for mandatory Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies for all non-Indigenous staff.

The two key policy areas which impact most directly on services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are Early Childhood Education and Care and Closing the Gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. In addition, the Skilling Australia funding and policy in relation to vocational education and training is of particular relevance to the sector, since implementation of the government's policy directions will require significant targeted education and training. The 2008-09 federal budget decisions reflect the pre-election policies of the Rudd government in these areas, including a total of \$533.5 million over 2008-09 to 2011-12 to provide for universal access to early childhood education and care.

COAG is now playing a much stronger and more central role in the development of policy directions, the overseeing and coordination of implementation plans and the approval of intergovernmental agreements. Seven working parties have been established to further the federal agenda, including the Productivity Agenda Working Group, which covers early childhood education and care, and the Working Group on Indigenous Reform.

COAG decisions are underpinned by an agreement to reform Commonwealth - State financial arrangements by the end of 2008. While the states and territories will be able to determine how the resources will be allocated, the reforms will consolidate the central role played by COAG since funding will be subject to agreement on outcomes and performance indicators.

COAG has agreed to a set of objectives, outcomes, progress measures, future policy directions as well as some strategies to strengthen early childhood education and care. Key policy directions include strengthening the health, development and learning of 0-5 year olds, improving the quality and sustainability of the early years learning workforce and enhancing and integrating the provision of early childhood education and care services. Ensuring all Indigenous four year olds in remote Indigenous communities have access to a quality early childhood education program within five years is a specific objective. Work is progressing on the development of a national quality framework, a rating system and an Early Learning framework. A National Early Years Workforce Strategy is reportedly to be developed by the end of 2008.

A summary of Closing the Gap objectives, performance indicators, policy directions, and priority targets was tabled at the October COAG meeting. One of the 'possible policy directions' and 'priority reform areas' highlighted in relation to participation in early childhood education and care is the 'development of a sustainable Indigenous workforce and a culturally competent non-Indigenous workforce'. This direction would appear to be a crucial factor in the success of the programs, but it is not clear yet how it will be implemented.

In October, COAG also signed the first National Partnership on Indigenous Early Childhood Development, with an initial focus from birth to three years and allocated \$564 million of joint funding over six years. Bilateral plans have reportedly been developed for implementing the reforms between each jurisdiction and the Commonwealth.

This paper attempts to delineate the structures that would deliver the very worthwhile goals and intentions of the above commitments. The intention is to provide the network and related groups with an understanding of the processes and capacity to ensure that decisions are able to be made with optimum inputs. However, the structures of any Federal decision making are complex and despite our best efforts, are not transparent. COAG working parties are comprised largely of high level departmental officers from both the Commonwealth and the states and territories. Early childhood education and care is now the responsibility of the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) and an Office of Early Childhood Education and Care has been established.

The Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) is responsible for Indigenous issues, including the development of a policy framework for achieving the Closing the Gap targets. An Office of Work and Family has been established within the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet to provide a whole of government perspective on social matters, including Indigenous policy and employment, education and skills.

In general terms, the states and territories are responsible for providing and/or funding as well as regulating preschool education. In addition they are responsible for regulating and licensing childcare services. In some cases they also fund some childcare services. Early childhood education and care structures in Australia have historically been fragmented and divided, either between education and care services or between services for children of school age and younger. In recent years a number of states have moved to develop more integrated structures by bringing all education and care services under the umbrella of one department. This is not however the case for all jurisdictions. These differences will need to be addressed in developing inter-governmental agreements.

The policy frameworks established by the Federal Government and COAG are still being developed and will hopefully represent major and positive steps forward for the development of a national framework for universal early childhood education and care, as well as ensuring the funding and skill base for Closing the Gap. However, the speed at which things are happening and the complexities of the structures make it difficult to ensure that the best decisions are made on the best available information, let alone keeping abreast of events and decisions. There are already some obvious gaps between some of the policy frameworks which must be

addressed in areas which affect the capacity of services to meet the needs of Indigenous children and families.

There is a need for an ongoing structure and/or process to ensure that the views of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stakeholders are heard and engaged and the Network is well positioned to play an active role in questions of skills and training.

The COAG Workforce Working Party has been asked to develop an early childhood education and care workforce strategy by the end of 2008. It is unlikely that a detailed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early childhood education and care workforce strategy can be developed by the end of 2008 since there are a large number of issues which need to be addressed, including the establishment of Indigenous training targets for both the VET and higher education sectors; strategies to provide access to training for existing and new workers, particularly in remote areas; financial and other supports required; recognition of Indigenous knowledge and inclusion in qualifications; and qualification structures and requirements.

Importantly, the workforce strategy must be an employment as well as a training strategy and measures need to be developed to ensure that employment targets can be achieved within a disparate sector comprised largely of small, local provider agencies. An initial budget submission could propose targets and funding for 2009-10 to enable implementation to commence while this detailed planning occurs.

The biggest gap at this stage seems to be between the Skilling Australia funding and policies and the skill needs that would connect plans for early childhood education and care and Closing the Gap. There is no apparent focus on the development of specific targets and links to employment to support Indigenous involvement in vocational education and training, nor incidentally in tertiary education. A process needs to be established to ensure that both VET and higher education sectors develop specific implementation plans to support the necessary skills development needed for the wider Indigenous policy framework.

While the COAG working parties are working together there is no clear structure within DEEWR itself to provide the links between early childhood and Closing the Gap developments and the VET and higher education sectors, to ensure that those sectors implement policies which support these strategies. One solution might be the creation of a Deputy Secretary position responsible for coordination of Closing the Gap policies and strategies.

Introduction

At long last there is a commitment to a national agenda for early childhood education and care in Australia. Improving access and better coordinating early childhood education and care has formed part of the focus on developing Australia's 'human capital' in the National Reform Agenda framework endorsed by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) in February 2006.¹ There have been changes in the structures of early childhood education and care in a number of states as a result. Change at the national level was limited by the Howard government's insistence that preschool education was a state responsibility.

The election of the Rudd government means that this newly developing agenda includes a federal commitment to the development of a coordinated national framework for early childhood education and care, including federal funding to ensure universal access to at least one year of early childhood education.

The commitments relating to early childhood education and care include a specific commitment to ensure access to quality early childhood education for all Indigenous children living in remote communities within five years.

There are thus strong interconnections between the Government's early childhood agenda, the Closing the Gap policies and the need to ensure access to higher education and vocational education and training systems for an expanding workforce with upgraded qualifications. This means, too, that there are a range of players involved in the implementation of the overall agenda as it impacts on the opportunities and wellbeing of young Indigenous children and their families and communities. Frameworks are still being established and details and pathways are in many areas as yet unclear. It seems however that things are moving quickly and there seems a genuine desire to consult on a range of issues.

There are enormous challenges in developing a more integrated system of early childhood education and care. As both the 2001 OECD report on Australia and the 2004 Independent National Inquiry into Preschool noted, Australia's early childhood education and care is characterised by fragmentation, varying degrees of quality, inequitable access and inconsistency.²

Historically, early childhood education and care in the years before school has been divided into childcare and preschool education, with different funding models, structures, staffing and qualification requirements and regulatory arrangements. Each state and territory has developed its own structures for each sector, leading to a plethora of models and subsequent difficulty even in collecting national data. The complexity has grown as the edges of the divisions have become more blurred and new models have developed, often without seriously addressing the fundamental structural differences between each part of the early childhood sector. Complex relationships between Commonwealth and state funding and conditions have added to the difficulties.

Where in Australia children happen to live has in itself been a significant factor in determining their level of access to high quality services, or even any services at all. The reality is that in both metropolitan and regional/remote areas, many Indigenous children face gross inequity in their access to high quality, culturally appropriate early childhood services. There are a range of barriers that will need to be addressed if Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are to be guaranteed their right to quality education and care. Access to culturally appropriate services, including access to Indigenous teachers and other early childhood staff, is an important aspect.

Australia has fallen badly behind other countries in ensuring that all children have access to high quality early childhood education and care. Australia has been spending 0.1% of GDP on

pre-primary education, compared to an OECD average of 0.4% and an EU average of 0.5%.³ Funding is a central element of what is needed, but there is much more to be done.

Countries such as the United Kingdom and New Zealand are already far ahead of us in committing substantial additional resources to ensure their children have access to high quality, free early childhood education. They are providing two years of early childhood education and care in the years before school, and integrating these with other services, such as wrap-around childcare and a focus on the 0-3 years. Both countries have developed detailed strategies for expanding their workforces and upgrading the qualifications of existing early childhood workers.

There is also a need to ensure that early childhood education and care services are connected to other services that help to ensure the wellbeing of our children, including health and community services. Given the emphasis on 3 and 4 year old children, the needs of younger children and their families must also receive adequate attention. (Children in the year before school are aged from 3-5 years, but the majority are 4 years old and this is generally used as the shorthand term for this year.)

It is also important to recognise that the early years encompass birth to 8 years. The links between pre-school services and primary schools are critical if children are to make successful transitions and do well in their schooling. The objective must be to achieve a more seamless continuum that encompasses all of a child's early experiences. There is an opportunity here to influence positively the relationship that schools have with their communities and with other early childhood services.

There are challenges to be faced, but there are also enormous opportunities. The underlying objective now is to create an early childhood and care sector that ensures that every child has equitable access to high quality, culturally appropriate early learning experiences. Central to this is the objective of ensuring that every Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child, wherever they live, is given that same opportunity, one which recognises, respects and builds on the skills and knowledge that they bring with them and which builds strong relationships with Indigenous families and communities.

It is clear that many elements of the government's agenda are still being worked through. Much of it of course has to be negotiated with the states and territories. The Network has the opportunity to help shape the implementation processes and the structures of the sector as a whole.

The current reality

Access to early learning

There is now almost universal recognition of the critical importance of early childhood education in providing children with the best start to life. This is particularly true for children whose families face socio-economic or educational disadvantage.

While work has progressed on the development of the National Minimum Data Set by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare and a revised Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Childhood Education and Learning survey, at this stage available national data remains limited in its scope and reliability.⁴ And, of course, there is the complexity of the many different types of children's services that exist across the country. Yet what is clear is that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are badly under-represented in early childhood education and care services.

Preschool education

In 2006-07, an estimated 220,827 children, or 87.2% of Australian children aged 4 years were enrolled at State and Territory government funded and/or provided preschool in the year immediately before they commenced school.⁵ More than 32,000 children are missing out on a preschool experience before attending school.

Preschool education is offered in a range of settings including stand-alone preschools, schools, and long day care centres. In 2006, 52% of long day care services offered in-house preschool programs run by a qualified early childhood education teacher and/or took children to the local preschool.⁶

In addition some 27,345 younger children, or 10.7% of children aged 3 years, attended preschool in some states and territories.

In every state but Tasmania, some or all Indigenous children are entitled to participate in preschool education for two years, from the age of 3 years old. Participation rates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children remain significantly lower than those for the population as a whole.

In 2006, there were 9,275 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children enrolled in preschool education, an increase of 6.2% since 2002 and 24.8% since 2001.⁷ An AEU analysis of data from the 2004 *National Report to Parliament* indicates that an estimated 56.4% of 4-5 year old Indigenous children attend preschool. The participation rate for 3 year old Indigenous children was only around 18.7%.⁸

While the Federal Government's commitment is to ensuring universal access to preschool education in the year before school, the states and territories through the Ministerial Council on Education, Training, Employment and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) have endorsed –and recently reaffirmed – an objective of two years of early childhood education for Indigenous children.⁹

Data from the 2006 Census indicates that 11,023 Indigenous children – or 49.2% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander three and four year olds – were not enrolled in preschool education in 2006. Overall participation by 3 and 4 year old Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children was lower in the Northern Territory than any other system with the exception of Tasmania. In Tasmania, 3 year olds are not able to enrol.¹⁰

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander preschool enrolments in 2006-07 ranged from 28% in metropolitan areas, 40% in provincial areas and 32% in remote areas. More than half of

Indigenous students (53%) were enrolled in government preschools compared to 23% of non-Indigenous students.¹¹

Childcare centres

In 2006-7, approximately 528,446 children, or 40.3% of all children aged 0–5 years attended Australian Government approved childcare. While Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are 4.4% of all children aged 0-5 years, they represented only 1.8% of the children aged 0-5 years in child care, or a little over 9500 children.¹²

In 2006, Long Day Care services had 5568 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children enrolled, who represented 1% of total enrolments. There were 1061 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children enrolled in Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Services, or 83% of all enrolments.¹³

Barriers to participation

There are many barriers which can prevent participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in early childhood education and care and which must be addressed if we are to achieve the goal of universal participation.

Access is the major barrier in some areas; a lack of services, differing policies on access for younger children, lack of places and lack of transport. Funding and resources are also factors, including cost to families, lack of access to support resources/services and insufficient language and cultural resources.

There can be structural barriers, including structures that do not meet community needs, lack of links between services, lack of supports for parents and inappropriate spaces and equipment. A lack of cultural sensitivity and language awareness and support can be a barrier, as can a lack of community involvement or sense of ownership. The *Little Children are Sacred* report in the Northern Territory raised significant concerns about the barriers created in relation to language and culture. The report argues that teaching in English alone develops 'a failure syndrome' for many students – not understanding concepts, not remembering what was taught in what is, after all, a foreign language.¹⁴

The 2005-06 consultations with Indigenous communities in relation to childcare identified many of these and other barriers.¹⁵ The need to provide culturally strong programs was one of the key themes of the consultations: inclusion of Elders and families; recognition and incorporation of cultural practices; bilingualism; and a holistic approach were all part of what communities discussed as important.

The 2007 report for The Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth by the Centre for Social Research at Edith Cowan University summarised what works as:

*Successful programs and services include those which emphasise the importance of Indigenous history and culture, Indigenous community control, and respectful supportive relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in order to provide quality, holistic early learning and care programs and services.*¹⁶

They identify culturally safe programs and services as ones characterised by:

- The employment of Indigenous staff
- Reflexive non-Indigenous practitioners
- Acknowledgment of the importance of relationships to successful programs
- Inclusion of shared care by extended family
- Provision of transport to and from services
- Incorporation of Indigenous ways of knowing and being in the world

- The role of history –acknowledging the past and learning together
- Holism – ‘joined up services’ addressing all aspects of health and wellbeing.¹⁷

Indigenous employment in early childhood education and care

The 2004 National Children’s Services Workforce Study estimated that there were 92,121 staff in management or direct contact with children in licensed services in 2004, expecting this number to rise to 97,574 by 2008. However that study includes only licensed services, and thus excludes early education services provided through education departments and not licensed. This would have been the case for all states other than Victoria and NSW (where preschools attached to schools through the Department of Education and Training would also have been excluded).¹⁸

On an unchanged policy basis, that report estimated a net shortfall of 7,320 staff by 2013. The estimated shortfall for long day care services was 6,490 staff while licensed preschools were projected to have an oversupply of 1,075 staff.¹⁹ This estimate excludes consideration of the government preschool services. Certainly there are already teacher shortages reported in some places, notably Victoria where anecdotal reports suggest that early childhood trained teachers prefer to seek work in primary schools. In addition, preschool education participation rates have been increasing in recent years. Population projections are likely to have changed given the recent surge of births in Australia. Moreover, an aging workforce, at least in the education sector, will in itself require succession-planning strategies.

Demand for early childhood teachers is strong in most jurisdictions. With the changes in policy directions, particularly the commitment to universal early childhood education offered by degree qualified teachers, it is clear that the need for additional staff, and for mechanisms to enable existing staff to upgrade their qualifications, will be vital to the success of the program.

The Productivity Agenda Working Group has identified some of the key barriers to expanding the early childhood workforce and upgrading qualification levels in the sector. They include: the level of remuneration; existing shortages, which are higher among qualified staff; high turnover of child care staff; and falling enrolments in Diploma child care courses.²⁰ To this one would add the disparity of working conditions between various parts of the early childhood education and care sectors.

Many reports have acknowledged the vital importance of Indigenous teachers and staff to the educational wellbeing and success of Indigenous children and to the involvement and support of their families and communities.²¹ Early childhood education and care programs must recognise and value Indigenous knowledge, skills, language, culture, and ways of learning.

Cultural safety is best assured by employment of Indigenous staff and, where possible, family members.²²

Indigenous presence, whether it is created through staff and other Indigenous involvement in the preschool, or an environment that is rich with Indigenous culture, is fundamental to providing a place where Indigenous children learn and want to keep learning. It is a vital factor in making an Indigenous child feel welcomed and valued in formal education.²³

The report to MCEETYA on Australian Directions in Indigenous Education identified the issue of increasing the number of Indigenous teachers as one requiring attention.²⁴ In addition, non-Indigenous staff must be adequately trained in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies in initial teacher/staff training and/or through professional development programs.

There are far too few Indigenous teachers and staff currently working in the sector and this is a significant barrier to increasing the participation and educational wellbeing of Indigenous children.²⁵ The new policy directions will make this situation even more urgent.

Indigenous employment in preschool settings

In non-Indigenous controlled preschools receiving Indigenous Education Program (IEP) funding, 6.9% of their staff were Indigenous in 2006. In Indigenous controlled preschools, 64.5% of staff were Indigenous. Access to the funding is provided where preschools have five or more Indigenous students enrolled.

In the preschools receiving IEP funding there were:

- 60 Indigenous teachers with a 3-4 year degree qualification;
- 57 Indigenous teachers who were non-degree qualified;
- 297 Aboriginal and Islander Education workers or equivalent; and 105 'other' staff who were Indigenous.²⁶

In 2005, there were 27 Indigenous graduates of early childhood education courses, or 1.4% of all such graduates.²⁷ Across the education sector as a whole, 1.4% of persons employed identified as Indigenous in 2001.²⁸

Indigenous employment in childcare settings

Occupation data from the 2006 Census indicates that there were 1424 Indigenous childcare workers, or 2.4% of all childcare workers. In addition, 2.2%, or 562, of 'other child carers' identified as Indigenous. There were 178 Indigenous childcare centre and welfare centre managers or 1.9% of all such workers.²⁹

Future needs

If all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children currently enrolled in preschool education were to have access to Indigenous teachers and assistants, approximately 500 Indigenous teachers and 500 Indigenous assistants would be required.

If all 3 and 4 year old Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children participated in early childhood education programs offered by a degree-qualified teacher and were given access to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff, then some 1000 Indigenous teachers and 1000 other Indigenous staff would be required.

This gives some idea of the approximate scope of the possible targets to be set. Of course non-Indigenous children should also be given access to Indigenous staff as part of a highly qualified and culturally diverse workforce. The reality is of course that early childhood groups often include both Indigenous and non-Indigenous children, and children will experience both Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff, which is why workforce planning must also cater for mandatory Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies for all non-Indigenous staff.

Both the NSW and Queensland governments have committed to ensuring that teachers receive adequate training as a condition of their employment to ensure that they are able to work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, families and communities.³⁰ Victoria's Education Strategy for Koorie students, *Wannik*,³¹ provides for intensive cultural awareness training for teachers and support staff, and supports for pre-service and in-service training for teachers in the history and contemporary culture of Victoria's Koorie community. AEU Early Childhood Education policy calls for mandatory pre-service Aboriginal studies and Torres Strait Islander studies as well as professional development for existing workers.³²

The federal agenda

Policy areas

There are two key policy areas which impact most directly on the development of early education and care services for Indigenous children. They are:

- Early childhood education and care
- Closing the Gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

In addition, the Skilling Australia policy in relation to vocational education and training is of particular relevance to the sector, since implementation of the policy directions for early childhood education and care, and for the wider Closing the Gap framework, will require significant attention to education and training.

While not addressed here, health and community services are also relevant to the achievement of a better start for children and will also need to become part of the overall framing of early childhood policies and services.

Budget decisions reflect the policies of the ALP in the lead up to the federal election and are specifically linked to those commitments. Current plans are also underpinned by the directions set by COAG under the National Reform Agenda since 2006, particularly in the areas of early childhood education and care and Indigenous reform. The reality is that reform of early childhood education and care frameworks can only occur with the cooperation of the states and territories since they are responsible for licensing, partial funding and, in some cases, providing these services.

Previously agreed policies such as *Australian Directions in Indigenous Education 2005-2008*, which was reconfirmed by the Ministerial Council on Education, Training, Employment and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) in April 2008³³, are also still part of the new framework.

Commonwealth budget commitments³⁴

Early childhood education and care

Universal access in the year before school

All children are to have access to 15 hours per week of high quality early childhood education programs offered by degree-qualified early childhood teachers, for 40 weeks of the year. Initially the measure will focus on targeted access programs and development of preschool standards, with full implementation by 2013. There is a specific commitment to ensure access to quality early childhood education for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander four year olds living in remote communities within five years.³⁵

Funding (\$10m) was allocated in the first half of 2008 for a range of state and territory government projects that aim to work towards this goal. They include, for example, increased funding to 35 NSW preschools to reduce or remove barriers to preschool access for Indigenous families; a professional development program for teaching English as a Second Language to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children living in remote Queensland communities; and 25 scholarships to attract Victorian early childhood teachers to take up employment for three years in long day care centres located in disadvantaged areas.³⁶

Additional childcare centres

The Government will provide \$114.5 million over four years to establish 38 new childcare centres in areas of child care shortages. They will be operational by 2010 and will include six early intervention centres for children with autism.

The Government has committed to establishing 260 centres, to be located on school, TAFE and other community sites. A National Partnership Agreement will be negotiated by COAG in relation to the other 222 centres, with priority is to be given to locations where early childhood services are not currently available or are insufficient to meet demand.

Workforce Strategy — removal of TAFE fees and 50 per cent HECS-HELP remission for eligible early childhood education teachers

The Ministerial Statement accompanying the Budget notes that there are some 100,000 people in the early childhood education and care workforce, with ongoing shortages of childcare workers and, in some regions, preschool teachers. The Statement recognises the need to train and retain more education and care professionals, particularly in remote and disadvantaged areas. The Early Childhood Workforce Strategy will provide incentives and opportunities for child care workers to improve their qualifications and develop expertise in early learning and care and increase the level of qualified staff in preschool and child care services, particularly in areas of high need.

The Government has committed:

- To support around 8000 child care workers to gain a qualification by removing TAFE fees for child care diplomas and advanced diplomas from 2009;
- To create additional university places for early childhood teachers starting with 500 places in 2009 and rising to 1500 places by 2011; and
- To reduce to around half the HECS-HELP debts for early childhood teachers who work in regional and high-disadvantage areas.³⁷

Early Years Learning Framework

The Government will fund the development of an Early Years Learning Framework in consultation with States and Territories and early childhood experts and educators. The Framework will provide nationally consistent standards for the delivery of quality early childhood learning that emphasises play-based learning and pre-literacy and pre-numeracy skills.

This measure delivers on the Government's election commitment.

Quality Standards in Child Care

The Government will provide \$22.2 million over four years to develop new national quality standards in child care, including the development of a five category quality rating system. The system will be used to accredit childcare services, and will build on the current Child Care Quality Assurance system.

Other early childhood education and care-related measures include:

- An increase in the Child Care Tax Rebate for out-of-pocket childcare expenses from 30 per cent to 50 per cent, with maximum expenses claimable to increase from \$4,354 to \$7,500 per child per year.
- Extension of the Australian Early Development Index across Australia to assess every starting primary school student.
- To provide through the Brotherhood of St Laurence for the rollout of the *Home Interaction Program* for disadvantaged children aged 3-5 years. The funding will provide for home tutors, books and associated educational resources to help parents improve children's school readiness in support of around 3,000 families and 8,000 children across 50 disadvantaged communities.
- To extend assistance under the Jobs, Education and Training child care fee assistance program for eligible parents for up to two years of study.

In addition, the government has now committed \$22m to ensure that ABC Learning centres remain open at least until the end of the year.³⁸

Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR)

Early Childhood Education	2007-08 \$m	2008-09 \$m	2009-10 \$m	2010-11 \$m	2011-12 \$m	Total \$m
Additional child care places	-	44.9	26.1	12.7	13.1	96.8
Australian Early Development Index — national rollout	3.0	4.3	4.3	4.3	4.3	20.2
Child Care Tax Rebate — increase from 30 per cent to 50 per cent	-	340.3	376.0	410.2	444.5	1,571.0
Early Childhood Education Workforce Strategy — 50 per cent HECS-HELP remission for early childhood education teachers with a HECS-HELP debt working in eligible regions	-	-	3.0	4.0	5.4	12.4
Early Years Learning Framework	-	2.5	-	-	-	2.5
Helping Parents Prepare their Children for School — Home Interaction Program	-	3.1	5.8	8.3	9.9	27.1
Jobs, Education and Training child care fee assistance — additional funding	-	7.7	6.9	4.6	4.7	23.9
Strong Quality Standards in Child Care	-	5.7	5.4	5.6	5.5	22.2
Workforce Strategy — additional university places for early childhood education	-	2.2	8.2	17.2	26.4	53.9
Workforce Strategy — removal of TAFE fees	-	8.9	16.3	17.4	17.7	60.3
Universal access	13.5	40.0	80.0	100.0	300.0	533.5

Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA)

Early Childhood Education	2007-08 \$m	2008-09 \$m	2009-10 \$m	2010-11 \$m	2011-12 \$m	Total \$m
Additional child care places	-	1.4	5.4	5.5	5.6	17.8
Australian Early Development Index — national rollout	-0.7	-1.0	-1.2	-	-	-2.8

Closing the Gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians

The Ministerial Statement on *Closing the Gap* indicates that funding is provided across eight portfolios, but will be spent as part of an integrated whole-of-government strategy.³⁹ It builds on the frameworks agreed by COAG and is built on a number of strategic areas that need to be addressed. These are: healthy homes; safe communities; health; early childhood; schooling; economic participation; and governance and leadership.

The measures include funding to improve access for Indigenous adults living in the Northern Territory to skills development and jobs through additional employment and pre-employment programs, as well as measures to increase employment and retention of Indigenous employees across the Australian Public Service.

In the election context, we made a commitment to an overarching Indigenous Economic Development Strategy (IEDS).

One of the central aims of the strategy will be to increase employment for Indigenous Australians, particularly young people, providing meaningful work with career progression.

The IEDS will harness new and existing infrastructure, Indigenous financial assets, land reform, the native title system, education and training, health and employment services and business development programs, together with networks across government and the private sector. It will include the development of stronger partnerships with industry aimed at getting more jobs for Indigenous people.⁴⁰

There are few specific measures of immediate relevance to the early childhood education and care sector outside those dealt with in the DEEWR budget.

In February the Government committed \$101.5 million over five years to 2010-11 for *New Directions: An equal start in life for Indigenous children – child and maternal health services*, which provides for more comprehensive child and maternal health services and wider access to home-visiting programs.

In addition, the Government committed to provision of 200 teachers for Northern Territory schools over five years, for the education of children of compulsory school age. (Preschool education is provided in schools but is not addressed by this commitment).

Commitments for the Northern Territory in the 2008-09 Budget as part of the Northern Territory Emergency Response include:

- \$3.4 million in 2008-09 for the continuation of early childhood development services, five playgroups and ten crèches established in the first year of the NTER.
- \$19.1 million in 2008-09 in building a quality education workforce, providing additional classrooms and expanding literacy and numeracy programs to deal with the chronic education deficits in the remote NT.

'This initiative will focus particularly on developing local Indigenous people already working in schools who are more likely to stay in communities and contribute to their development. Local Indigenous education workers will be supported to achieve higher qualifications, equipping them to play a greater role in the schools where they work.'⁴¹

In July, Minister Macklin announced funding of \$5m for 20 specialised playgroups to be established in regional and remote Indigenous communities across Australia.⁴² It is unclear whether this was new money.

Skilling Australia

630,000 additional training places over five years

The Government will provide funding for:

- Up to 238,000 additional vocational education and training places to individuals outside the workforce. The training will target the literacy, numeracy and general skills necessary for people to re-enter the workforce and qualifications that meet industry skills needs;
- Up to 392,000 new training places for people currently in the workforce who need to retrain or upgrade their skills to better meet the needs of industry and employers. These places will be delivered in cooperation with States, Territories and employers;
- Up to 85,000 new Australian Apprenticeship places over five years for continuing workers and re-entrants to the workforce

In October, the Government announced an additional 56,000 new training places this year, as part of the \$10.3 billion Economic Security Strategy to deal with the global financial crisis. This will effectively double the Productivity Places Program from 57,000 to 113,000. The new places will be available at Certificate II, III and IV levels, with 10,000 places to be allocated as 'Structural Adjustment Places' to provide specific retraining opportunities and targeted support to displaced workers. The total Productivity Places Program will increase to more than \$2 billion with more than 700,000 new training places created over five years.⁴³

Minister Macklin's Budget statement indicates that 'continued Indigenous participation in vocational education and training will be **encouraged and monitored** under the plan for 450,000 additional training places.'⁴⁴ (my emphasis)

The government has supported the Australian Employment Covenant (AEC), which is a private sector plan initiated by the Chief Executive Officer of Fortescue Metals Group, Mr Andrew Forrest, to create 50,000 jobs for Indigenous Australians. The AEC are 'encouraging Australian employers to join with Australian Government and Indigenous Leaders in addressing Indigenous unemployment with real jobs' by developing corporate and philanthropic partnerships with Indigenous communities. The Federal government will provide resources to coordinate and facilitate training to the appropriate job standards in the relevant industry, involve employment services in referral, placement and support services and also facilitate post-placement and mentor support.⁴⁵

Other Budget measures include:

- Establishment of Skills Australia as a statutory body which will advise the Government on current and future demand for skills and training in the Australian economy;
- Strengthened Industry Skills Councils to provide the Government with integrated industry intelligence and advice on workforce skills development, training products, offer employers advice about skills needs, match skills needs with training and provide advice on the allocation of new training places for continuing workers;
- Skills and Training Information Centres to provide a one-stop advisory service to employers, prospective students and training providers; and
- Grants of up to \$10,000 to schools to enable Year 9-12 students engaged in vocational education and training, to participate in on-the-job training one day a week for 20 weeks a year. Schools will be able to use the funding to employ a community coordinator to establish relationships with local employers and connect students with local businesses.

Skilling Australia	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12	Total
	\$m	\$m	\$m	\$m	\$m	\$m
School grants for on-the-job training	-	14.0	28.0	28.0	27.9	98.1
Skilling Australia for the Future	33.3	232.6	412.2	620.3	620.3	1,918.6
Skills Australia	2.6	3.0	4.0	5.0	5.0	19.6

Higher Education — Scholarships for a Competitive Future

In addition, the number of higher education scholarships will increase from 44,000 to 88,000 by 2012. The National Priority Scholarship will be available for students enrolled in undergraduate degrees in identified priority areas such as nursing, teaching, science and engineering; and the National Accommodation Scholarship will be made available for students who have to relocate interstate to study specialist courses not available in their home state.

The role of COAG

Overview

COAG is now playing a much stronger and more central role in the development of policy directions, the overseeing and coordination of implementation plans and the approval of intergovernmental agreements. Seven working parties have been established to further the federal agenda, including the Productivity Agenda Working Group that covers early childhood education and care, and the Working Group on Indigenous Reform. These are discussed below under COAG structures.

The Rudd government commitments to provide the resourcing for the reform of early childhood education and care and for Indigenous reform have created a new base for COAG decisions since the election. COAG has acknowledged that the Commonwealth should be responsible for its election commitments.⁴⁶ Although the budget was brought down in May, COAG decisions since December 2007 have reflected the policy directions and commitments of the Rudd government.

COAG decisions are underpinned by an agreement to reform Commonwealth - State financial arrangements by the end of 2008. Almost 100 Special Purpose Payments will be reduced to five or six new national agreements for delivery of core government services – health, affordable housing, early childhood and schools, vocational education and training, and disability services. The new agreements will focus on agreed outputs and outcomes, enabling states and territories to determine how the resources will be allocated. In addition National Partnership Agreements will be developed to provide incentives for reform, for specific projects, and in areas of joint responsibility. These reforms will consolidate the central role played by COAG since allocation of resources will be subject to agreement on outcomes and performance indicators.

The Budget Statement by Minister Macklin says that the Agreements will have ‘an emphasis on delivering improved outcomes for disadvantaged and other vulnerable groups.’

Further, she said:

A concerted effort across government to identify and remove barriers to access to mainstream services is also underway. This will improve engagement with and outcomes for Indigenous people, including through ensuring that Indigenous-specific and mainstream services in urban and regional centres are complementary and together deliver the best possible mix of services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.⁴⁷

Policy frameworks have been endorsed at COAG level and include the early education and care policy framework and the objectives and framework for *Closing the Gap*. An intergovernmental agreement was also endorsed in October 2008.⁴⁸

COAG is providing the main conduit for the development of policy and action frameworks linked to the overall federal agenda and to the budget decisions. Ministerial Councils are providing a supporting role. Commonwealth and state and territory departments are working on the proposals that are being considered by COAG.

Early childhood education and care

The Rudd Government came to office with a clear commitment to early childhood education and care reform, with the major commitment being to the achievement of universal early childhood education in the year before school, with specific mention of Indigenous children in remote communities.

In December 2007 COAG agreed to 'pursue substantial reform in the areas of education, skills and early childhood development, to deliver significant improvements in human capital outcomes for all Australians.' COAG acknowledged that this will involve collaboration across the public and private sectors and 'a genuine partnership involving parents, children, students, employers and all levels of government.'⁴⁹ COAG agreed that Commonwealth-State agreements on Schools, Vocational Education and Training and Indigenous Education would be considered during 2008.

In March 2008 COAG agreed to a set of objectives, outcomes, progress measures and future policy directions in the key areas of early childhood, as well as some strategies to strengthen early childhood education and care.⁵⁰ The policy framework in full is an attachment to the MCEETYA meeting outcomes.

The agreed outcomes are:

- Children are born healthy
- Children acquire the basic skills for life and learning
- Children will benefit from better social inclusion and reduced disadvantage, especially Indigenous children
- All children have access to affordable, quality early childhood education in the year before formal schooling
- Quality early childhood education and care supports the workforce participation choices of parents with children in the years before formal schooling.⁵¹

The Productivity Agenda Working Group, which is responsible for developing the early childhood agenda, has agreed to five key policy directions. They are:

- Improving antenatal care
- Strengthening the health, development and learning of 0-5 year olds
- Improving the quality and sustainability of the early years learning workforce
- Enhancing and integrating the provision of early childhood education and care services
- Boosting the participation of parents in the learning and development of their children.

The Productivity Agenda Working Group will also work in partnership with the COAG Indigenous Reform and Health Working Groups to achieve two further related targets:

- To halve the gap in mortality rates for Indigenous children under five years old within a decade; and
- To ensure all Indigenous four year olds in remote Indigenous communities have access to a quality early childhood education program within five years.

The July meeting of COAG agreed in principle on a proposed National Partnership framework to address the needs of young Indigenous children, within the Indigenous Reform agenda.⁵² This was subsequently endorsed in October.

The Productivity Agenda Working Group has prepared a discussion paper on the development of a national quality framework, a rating system and an Early Learning Framework that has provided the basis of consultations and has sought submissions until mid September. The aim is to provide a draft quality framework for consultation later in 2008. The project is overseen and administered by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR).

A consortium led by Charles Sturt University has been commissioned to draft the Early Learning framework. Consultations have occurred on the first draft and the second draft has now been released.⁵³

The Workforce Working Party will develop a National Early Years Workforce Strategy by the end of 2008. The strategy will build on the 2006 *National Children's Workforce Study* and 'will

provide a long term blueprint to improve recruitment and retention of the early childhood workforce, develop pathways that reward and support the best workers, and raise the level of qualifications'.⁵⁴

Indigenous reform: Closing the Gap

The December 2007 meeting of COAG agreed to a partnership between all levels of government to work with Indigenous communities to achieve the target of closing the gap on Indigenous disadvantage. COAG committed to:

- closing the life expectancy gap within a generation;
- halving the mortality gap for children under five within a decade; and
- halving the gap in reading, writing and numeracy within a decade.

COAG recognised the pathway to closing the gap is inextricably linked to economic development and improved education outcomes and agreed to ensure that the implementation of other Commonwealth election commitments in health, education and housing address Indigenous disadvantage where appropriate.⁵⁵ The Working Group on Indigenous Reform was tasked with identifying further joint reforms and implementation timetables by the end of 2008, including in relation to early childhood development interventions.

The March 2008 COAG meeting reaffirmed its commitment to close the gap on Indigenous disadvantage and agreed to a new national target for its reform agenda - halving the gap in Indigenous employment outcomes within a decade. The Indigenous Reform Working Group was to develop a reform proposal on Indigenous Early Childhood Development for July and by October to develop sustainable reform proposals on a range of matters including remote service delivery and workforce planning.⁵⁶

In July 2008, COAG agreed to sustained engagement and effort by all governments over the next decade and beyond to achieve the Closing the Gap targets for Indigenous people. A National Partnership with joint funding of around \$547.2 million over six years to address the needs of Indigenous children in their early years was agreed in principle. In addition, the Working Group was asked, together with the other groups, to report in December 2008 on how COAG's broader reform agenda will deliver an integrated strategy on closing the gap for all Indigenous people.⁵⁷

The October 2008 meeting of COAG agreed to six targets for closing the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians across urban, rural and remote areas:

- to close the gap in life expectancy within a generation;
- to halve the gap in mortality rates for Indigenous children under five within a decade;
- to ensure all Indigenous four years olds in remote communities have access to early childhood education within five years;
- to halve the gap in reading, writing and numeracy achievements for Indigenous children within a decade;
- to halve the gap for Indigenous students in year 12 attainment or equivalent attainment rates by 2020; and
- to halve the gap in employment outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians within a decade.⁵⁸

A summary of objectives, performance indicators, policy directions, and priority targets was tabled at the October COAG meeting. It was developed jointly by the relevant Working Groups. One of the 'possible policy directions' and 'priority reform areas' highlighted in relation to participation in early childhood education and care is the 'development of a sustainable Indigenous workforce and a culturally competent non-Indigenous workforce'.⁵⁹ This is a significant statement in the context of plans to develop a Workforce Strategy. In addition, one of

the performance indicators to be used is an increased proportion of Indigenous three and four year olds (i.e. not just four year olds) participating in quality early childhood education and development and care services.

A meeting will be held in 2009 to agree on strategies for achieving those targets.

COAG also signed the first National Partnership, on Indigenous Early Childhood Development, with an initial focus from birth to three years. Bilateral plans for implementing the reforms have been developed between each jurisdiction and the Commonwealth.⁶⁰

The Agreement contains \$564 million of joint funding over six years to address the needs of Indigenous children in their early years. As part of the initiative, 35 Children and Family Centres are to be established across Australia to deliver integrated services that offer early learning, child care and family support programs. The funding will also increase access to ante-natal care, teenage reproductive and sexual health services, and child and maternal health services.⁶¹ A link to the Agreement is provided in the footnote.

The Agreement itself notes that consultations regarding delivery are fundamental and should include Indigenous communities, non-government providers and industry peak bodies etc. These are to be initiated by state and territory governments and outcomes should become part of work plans.

Skilling Australia

The December 2007 COAG meeting committed to improving and expanding vocational and technical education by developing future management arrangements for the Australian Technical Colleges and creating an additional 450,000 training places over the next four years.⁶²

The COAG meeting in July 2008 affirmed the need for governments to work together in ensuring that 'all Australians have access to the quality education, training and support they need to be equipped for a life of success in learning and employment.' COAG endorsed the need for further national reform in relation to competition, contestability, regulation, quality assurance and consumer information in vocational education and training for consideration in October. (In the context of global financial difficulties, this was not discussed in the October COAG Communiqué.)

In addition, COAG accepted advice from Skills Australia to allocate up to 50,000 additional vocational education and training places over three years for national priority health occupations under the Productivity Places Program. The Commonwealth agreed to fully fund the government contributions to these positions to December 2008, with this to be recognised in the financial arrangements for the new agreement from 1 January 2009. COAG noted the commitment by all jurisdictions to work towards the full implementation of the Productivity Places Program over the four years from 1 January 2009 as a part of the negotiation of the new national agreement on vocational education and training.⁶³

▼ Reform structures

COAG structures

COAG has established seven working groups to further the Reform Agenda. Their role is to develop policy and implementation frameworks and also to propose national partnership (intergovernmental) agreements.⁶⁴

The Productivity Agenda Working Group, chaired by Minister Gillard, has three sub-groups: Early Childhood Development; Schooling; and Workforce Development (skills and training). The Early Childhood Development sub-group has four working parties, on Quality; Workforce; Data; and the Early Years Learning Framework. It also has an Expert Advisory Panel.⁶⁵

There is also a Working Group for Indigenous Reform that is working on measures related to Closing the Gap. The Working Group is chaired by Minister Macklin and has set up five sub-groups. These are: Building Blocks; Evidence Base; Passive Welfare/Economic Independence; Alcohol and Substance Abuse; and Optimising Service Delivery.⁶⁶

The structure of the COAG working groups, as outlined in the Productivity Agenda Working Group discussion paper⁶⁷, is:



Membership of these working groups and working parties has not been made public. It has not been the usual practice to list membership of such workgroups on websites. They consist of senior officers from relevant state and territory departments. The Expert Panel consists of early childhood experts and practitioners but again they have not been named.

The Productivity Agenda Working Group appears to consist of two Departmental Heads per state, probably from Premiers and Cabinet and from Education in each jurisdiction.

The Early Childhood Development sub-group is likely to include Deputy Secretary of Children's Services units within education departments, or equivalent; it is unclear who else may be included (e.g. from departments of Community Services).

Departmental Heads are also working with Minister Macklin on the Working Group for Indigenous Reform, most probably Premiers and Cabinet and Community Services or the department responsible for Indigenous Affairs.

The COAG Unit in the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet provides secretariat support for COAG.

Ministerial Councils

Ministerial Councils are also engaged in the development of directions and implementation plans within the framework set by COAG, but their relationship with the COAG working groups is at this stage not altogether clear. According to their websites, both the Ministerial Council on Education, Training, Employment and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) and the Ministerial Council for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs (MCASTIA) have met once this year, in April and July respectively.

The COAG Working Groups are the focus of the work on policy development and implementation plans. It seems likely that existing Ministerial Council working groups have been tasked with the role of developing the detailed policy frameworks and implementation plans through the various COAG sub-groups in conjunction with the relevant federal department.

For example, the MCEETYA meeting in April 2008 affirmed the COAG early childhood commitments and agreed to hold satellite meetings to 'harness the collaboration required at all levels'.⁶⁸ The Communiqué reported on the framework that has guided the work of the Productivity Agenda Working Group, and a proposed policy framework that was subsequently reported to the July meeting of COAG. In addition, the meeting reaffirmed the need to fully implement the *Australian Directions in Indigenous Education 2005-2008* policy. Ministers agreed to develop a new four-year action plan to support the delivery of the COAG targets.

The endorsed recommendations in the *Directions* policy include a commitment to progress towards providing all Indigenous children with access to two years of high quality early childhood education prior to participation in the first year of formal schooling. While not a formal recommendation, the conclusion of the document indicated that other matters requiring attention include a need to increase the number of Indigenous teachers.

The Western Australian Department is the leading agency for developing implementation plans in relation to Indigenous early childhood services and has been the lead agency for MCEETYA's work on Indigenous education.

The lead agency for MCEETYA's work on early childhood education and care has been the South Australian Department. However Victoria has taken a strong leadership role in relation to the early childhood component of the National Reform Agenda and the respective role of the two states is at this stage unclear. These contacts should be followed up.

The Ministerial Council for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs (MCASTIA) met on 15 July and welcomed COAG decisions but gave no indication of undertaking any work in relation to Indigenous Early Childhood issues.⁶⁹

Department of Education, Employment, and Workplace Relations (DEEWR)

Julia Gillard is the Minister for Education, for Employment & Workplace Relations, and for Social Inclusion. Brendan O'Connor is the Minister for Employment Participation and Maxine McKew is the Parliamentary Secretary for Early Childhood Education and Child Care.

The Office of Early Childhood Education and Child Care has been established within DEEWR and brings together the functions of the former Children's Group from the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs and the Early Childhood Education functions from the former Department of Education, Science and Training.

It is responsible for 'delivering the Government's key commitments on early childhood education and child care, as well as guiding major national policy reform'.⁷⁰ Part of this responsibility is the development of processes and agreed initial implementation plans for working with state and territory governments on the COAG agenda.⁷¹

DEEWR provides support for the Early Childhood Development sub-group of COAG and reported to COAG on early childhood issues and other relevant matters. It also administers the allocation of funding for various related projects, such as the \$10m for project funding in 2007-8 under the universal access project.

There is an **Early Childhood Education Reform** unit, headed by Dr. Russell Ayres, which appears to be playing a coordinating and conduit role and has been involved in organising stakeholder consultations. There is an **Early Childhood Education and Workforce** section as well as an **Employment and Indigenous** section in the Office. The latter is headed by Ms Susan Bennett and has carriage of Indigenous workforce issues in the sector.

While work on some of the specific components, notably the Early Years Learning and Quality Frameworks, has been publicised, there is no public indication anywhere of progress in relation to the development of a national Early Years Workforce Strategy. This is both because it is in development but also because this issue – as with a range of others- is the subject of negotiation with the states and territories. Discussions with DEEWR officers make clear that the need to address the early childhood workforce for Indigenous children and to support Indigenous employment in the sector are both seen as major items on the Workforce Strategy agenda. Other major issues are those of remote delivery and culturally appropriate programs. There is recognition that fair and consistent but flexible delivery will be needed. DEEWR have indicated a desire to hear Network views on these issues.

There is a meeting of COAG in December that will see further progress in setting directions and the proposed 2009 special meeting of COAG on Indigenous issues is seen as a major timeline target.

DEEWR of course has wider responsibilities in relation to the COAG agenda, including schools and vocational education and training, employment participation and social inclusion. Minister Gillard chairs the Productivity Agenda Working Group.

Department Secretary Lisa Paul represents DEEWR at COAG, Cabinet and Portfolio Secretaries' meetings.

The recently released Annual Report for 2007-08 appears to be out of date in relation to senior personnel and their roles. The organisation chart current in September indicated that Deputy Secretary Michelle Bruniges is Director of the Office of Early Childhood Education and Care. Deputy Secretary Bill Burmester is responsible for Schooling and COAG and Deputy Secretary Jim Davidson leads tertiary youth and international, which includes both vocational education and training and higher education. This Division has a section on Workforce Development but no specific section on Indigenous issues. Deputy Secretary Graham Carters oversees employment and strategic policy. This Division includes sections on Indigenous policy, Social Inclusion, Economic, labour market and education analysis and Labour Supply and Skills.⁷² A link to the full organisational chart is available in that end note.

Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA)

Jenny Macklin is the Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs.

FaHCSIA is responsible for Indigenous issues, including the development of a policy framework for achieving the Closing the Gap targets in relation to families, housing and community services. The department works with others such as DEEWR to coordinate measures related to the Northern Territory Emergency response and has been responsible for overseeing the review of the Emergency response. The Department administers the Indigenous Children's Program

(ICP), the Responding Early Assisting Children (REACH) Program and Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP).

The Office of Indigenous policy coordination is responsible for coordinating a whole of government approach to programs and services for Indigenous Australians, and has a central role in the Australian Government's arrangements in Indigenous Affairs.⁷³

One important current issue for which FaHCSIA is responsible is overseeing the consultations on the issue of developing a new national Indigenous representative body.

Dr Jeff Harmer is the Department Secretary.

Deputy Secretary Bernie Yates is responsible for the Office of Indigenous Policy Coordination, Indigenous Leadership and Engagement and the NT Emergency Response.⁷⁴ The link to the organisational structure is in the end note but it does not include the names of personnel below the rank of Deputy Secretary.

Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (DPMC)

In addition to supporting the work of the Prime Minister and Cabinet the Department provides policy advice. Secretary of the Department is Terry Moran.

Within the Domestic Policy group, the **Social Policy Division** provides a whole-of government perspective on social matters, including identifying emerging issues and undertaking or responding to major reviews and reports. This includes Indigenous policy and employment, education and skills. The Division consults other departments and undertakes its own research to ensure that the Prime Minister is fully briefed.⁷⁵

The Office of Work and Family has been newly established to ensure coordination across government and to brief the Prime Minister on relevant issues, including early childhood development.

The Office supports a **Commonwealth Secretaries' Steering Committee on Early Childhood Development**, chaired by DPMC Secretary Terry Moran, which has been established to develop a broad early childhood development strategy and provide guidance to the various processes currently underway in the early childhood area.⁷⁶

In addition, there is an Indigenous Affairs Committee of Cabinet, chaired by the Prime Minister. The Committee is assisted by the **Secretaries' Group on Indigenous Affairs** that ensures coherent direction across government agencies in policy development and program implementation.⁷⁷

A link to the Department's organisational chart is provided in this footnote.⁷⁸

Skills Australia

Skills Australia is an independent statutory body, providing advice to the Minister for Education, Employment and Workplace Relations on Australia's current, emerging and future workforce skills needs and workforce development needs.

Its stated objectives are to:

- Identify training priorities to respond to those needs;
- Increase workforce participation;
- Improve productivity and competitiveness;
- Identify and address skills shortages; and

- Promote the development of a highly skilled workforce.⁷⁹

There is no specific reference in its objectives or functions in relation to ensuring more equitable access to employment opportunities generally or, more specifically, to assisting the development of strategies to close the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

However, the objectives are broad enough to provide a vehicle for encouraging Skills Australia to address these issues, particularly in relation to the expansion of the early childhood education and care sector. A precedent could be said to have been created by the proposal, endorsed by COAG, to allocate 50,000 of the Priority Program Places to the health sector.

Membership is Mr Keith Spence, Ms Marie Persson, Dr Michael Keating AC, Mrs Heather Ridout, Mr Philip Bullock (Chair), Ms Sharan Burrow and Professor Gerald Burke.

Skills Australia is currently consulting on a new governance structure for the National Training System. The timeline for submissions has just closed.

Industry Skills Councils

The role of the Industry Skills Councils (ISCs) has been expanded. The ISCs have a key role in ensuring the relevance of training to industry needs and will be responsible for diagnosing the training needs of employers and brokering new training places, identifying suitable training providers and working with Employment Service Providers to provide training to people re-entering the workforce.⁸⁰

During this year ISC forums were held by Skills Australia but they 'did not produce sufficient quantitative data to provide a basis for Skills Australia's use in advising the Australian Government on the appropriate allocation of the current round of PPP places to commence on 1 January 2009'.⁸¹ The environmental scans were however undertaken. Within the Community Services & Health Industry Skills Council forum, a Diploma in Children's Services was one of the priorities qualifications.⁸²

The Community Services & Health Industry Skills Council is the most relevant to the work of the Network since it covers Children's Services qualifications.⁸³ The Innovation and Business Council, however, covers the (minimum) Training and Assessment qualifications for vocational education and training teachers and assessors.⁸⁴

The Australian Council of Deans of Education

The Council is the peak association of the deans of faculties of education and heads of schools of education in Australian universities and other higher education institutions and advocates on higher education issues, particularly in relation to initial and post-initial teacher education.⁸⁵

ACDE is an important link in relation to issues of Aboriginal Studies and Torres Strait Islander studies in initial teacher education programs as well as in relation to profession development for current teachers.

▼ Early childhood structures in the states and territories

Departmental structures and responsibilities

In general terms, the states and territories are responsible for providing and/or funding as well as regulating preschool education. In addition they are responsible for regulating and licensing childcare services. In some cases they also fund some childcare services. They are responsible for planning issues and for supporting providers. They are also responsible for providing curriculum support and advice, including early learning frameworks.⁸⁶

Early childhood education and care structures in Australia have historically been fragmented and divided, either between education and care services or between services for children of school age and younger. Even the names of particular services are confusing, and age of entry requirements also varies. In recent years a number of states have moved to develop more integrated structures by bringing all education and care services under the umbrella of one department. This is not however the case for all jurisdictions.

These differences will need to be addressed in developing inter-governmental agreements. There has been some uncertainty about whether the Rudd government commitment to universal early childhood education will be fully funded or made 'affordable'. The reality seems to be that it will depend on the structures in each state. As Maxine McKew said:

*In many states, pre-school is free, it's treated in exactly the same way as the first year of primary and it's terrific. In other states- and New South Wales is a case here, Queensland as well – we want to work with our state colleagues to make those, the pre-school environment as affordable as possible. That's a big goal and we've put huge money into this.*⁸⁷

NSW

The vast majority of preschool and childcare centres are the responsibility of the Department of Community Services (DOCS), which funds, licenses and regulates those services. There are now also 100 preschools attached to government schools and these are fully funded and staffed by the Department of Education and Training (DET) but they are now also licensed by DOCS.

All children are able to attend preschool services aged 3-5 years, i.e. for two years, if parents are able to afford the costs. One of the NSW recommendations for the early childhood reform agenda was that the Commonwealth provide 'free, high quality ECEC services for all three and four year old children'.⁸⁸

A new NSW funding model was introduced in June 2008, which aims to provide similar funding support to services in similar circumstances. The funding per child is differentiated by need and higher per capita rates are provided for target groups, including significantly higher support for Indigenous children.⁸⁹ This follows on from an injection of funding in 2006 to ensure the viability of some 400 services under financial pressure and to make preschool access more affordable particularly for disadvantaged children. An additional 10,500 subsidised preschool places are planned for the 2008-9 year.⁹⁰

All early childhood education and care services in NSW operate under one set of regulations, which include a requirement to have a qualified early childhood teacher in any service that has 30 or more children enrolled.⁹¹ This means that both preschool and child care services which are smaller are not required to have a qualified teacher.

In NSW, 68.3% of childcare services are private, 28.9% are community managed and only 2.8% are government managed. In relation to preschool centres, 80.7% are community managed,

8.7% are private and 10.7% are government-managed services. With the exception of the DET preschools, other early childhood education services are subsidised rather than fully funded and costs to parents are higher in NSW than in other systems.

The NSW Department of Education and Training has an Aboriginal Human Resource Development Plan 2006-2008, aimed to increase levels of Indigenous employment within education services. There is no indication of a similar plan for DOCS supported services.

Victoria

Preschool education in Victoria is provided by community, local government and private providers, including long day care centres supported by government funding. Fees have not been as high as those in NSW but higher than other states where preschool is part of the public education system and essentially free. All centres running a funded preschool program must meet the requirements set out in the regulations, including a requirement for such a program to be offered by a qualified early childhood education teacher.

Until 2007, children were not able to access a funded program for more than one year (except in very exceptional circumstances). Three year old programs have been run in a growing number of centres but are fully funded by parents, without government support.

The 2007 State budget announced provision of 10 hours per week of free preschool education for all 3 year old Aboriginal children whose parents hold concession cards. Additionally, provision was made for three centres to help Aboriginal parents prepare their children for preschool through home-based early childhood programs. Funding was provided to increase the number of pre-school assistants working with Aboriginal children through the Koori Early Childhood Education Program.⁹²

The 2007 State budget increased the preschool fee subsidy to all parents with concession cards, from \$320 to \$730, making preschool education effectively free for children from families with health care cards. Funding was provided to enable childcare centres to establish preschool programs and preschools to expand their hours.⁹³

In August 2007 the Victorian government announced the creation of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, moving the Office of Children's Services from the Department of Community Services. The Government's aim is to provide an integrated approach to education from birth to adulthood. In September 2007, the Government announced its *Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development*.⁹⁴

The *Blueprint* commits to greater integration and co-location of services within the 0-8 framework. Schools and other children's centres will operate as community hubs, and multi-function centres will be established on or near school sites where possible and partnerships will operate in other areas. Transition plans will be developed for all children and an Early Years Learning and Development Framework is also being developed. Local government will be given a leadership role in improving early childhood services.

A Victorian early childhood workforce strategy is being developed as part of the *Blueprint* and proposes that all centres employ a four year trained teacher and that the goal would be that all new early childhood education and care staff hold at least a post-secondary early childhood qualification by 2016. This is being considered in a review of the Victorian regulations.

Wannik, the 2008 Victorian Education Strategy for Koorie students,⁹⁵ provides for intensive cultural awareness training for teachers and support staff, and supports for pre-service and in-service training for teachers in the history and contemporary culture of Victoria's Koorie community. Ready-for-school or pre-school Koorie programs are to be developed in

collaboration with Early Childhood Field Officers in all areas where there are high numbers of Koorie families.

Wannik pledges to provide internships and scholarships to increase the number of Koorie teachers, employ more Koorie support staff, and integrate the Koorie support workforce with regional support staff and functions linked to the Department's broader early childhood and school improvement strategy. In addition, a professional learning package that supports the specific induction and professional learning needs of Koorie workers will be developed. The subsequent 2008 State Budget provided for the expansion and redesign of the Koorie workforce.⁹⁶ In relation to preschool education, the number of preschool assistants involved in the Koori Early Childhood Education Program was increased by the 2007 State budget.⁹⁷

Queensland

Queensland early childhood education and care services were until recently provided both via preschools integrated into government primary schools and –primarily for younger children – by Crèche & Kindergarten centres and long day care centres.

Queensland has now transformed its part-time or sessional preschool year in schools into a full time preparatory year and part time preschool services for the year before prep. are no longer provided in schools.

The Queensland Department of Education, Training and the Arts has provided funding to support community kindergartens affiliated with or approved by the Crèche and Kindergarten Association of Queensland (C&K) to supply recognised early education programs for children between the ages of 3.5 - 4.5 years. This is a pre-prep (preschool) program offered by early childhood teachers and it is unclear whether funding responsibility remains within that department or has been transferred to the Department of Communities.

The Queensland Department of Education, Training and the Arts is funding the provision of pre-prep education programs for children aged three-and-a-half to four-and-a-half living in discrete Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Funding has been provided for 35 communities.⁹⁸

Child care services are licensed and regulated by the Department of Communities (DOCS), which is also responsible for coordinating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander policy, engagement and service delivery. Since 2007 this includes licensing and monitoring of affiliated kindergartens previously licensed and monitored by the Crèche and Kindergarten Association.

Under the Best Start strategy, DOCS has purchased a number of off-site preschools to enable early childhood education and care services to be located on or near state schools, including two for the use of the Crèche and Kindergarten Association.

The Queensland government is establishing Early Years Services Centres via DOCS. These will offer services including childcare, early childhood education and care, health screening and assessment, parenting programs, playgroups, toy libraries and information and advice on a range of early childhood issues.⁹⁹

DOCS is working with the Department of Education, Training and the Arts to implement the *Children's Services Skilling Plan 2006–2009*, to ensure the availability of skilled staff in the children's services industry. Of the 825 staff who gained a qualification, 32 were Indigenous students.¹⁰⁰ The Queensland Department of Education, Training and the Arts also has an employment strategy for Indigenous workers.

South Australia

The South Australian Department of Education and Children's Services is responsible for providing, funding and regulating children's services. Public preschool education in South Australia is fully funded and staffed by the Department and provided by stand-alone centres and by schools (where they are called child parent centres). Aboriginal children are able to enrol at the age of three for two years. In term two of 2007, 65% of all 3 year old Aboriginal children were enrolled in preschool in South Australia.¹⁰¹

The South Australian Government commissioned an inquiry into early childhood services and the 2005 report, *The Virtual Village: Raising a Child in the New Millennium*¹⁰², began the process of building an integrated early childhood education and care services for children aged 0-8 years.

The South Australian government has commenced establishing 20 Child and Family Centres for Early Childhood Development and Parenting, which provide a mix of services for children aged 0-8 years and their families, including education, care, playgroups and play activities, early intervention and family support. The Centres are located on or adjacent to schools. Three will operate in areas with high Indigenous populations. There are also Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Services in South Australia.

The Department provides support for Integrated Centres providing both DECS preschool and childcare and is also trialling the delivery of DECS preschool in three childcare centres and providing family day care in some rural and remote preschools.¹⁰³

The Department has an employment strategy that targets increased Indigenous employment in teaching, childcare and the department itself. The Department provides scholarships to Indigenous trainees and also offers, for example, a Certificate III in Children's Services on-line for the family day care program.

Tasmania

In Tasmania the Department of Education is responsible for preschools, which are fully integrated into primary schools, and for childcare, including licensing and other provisions.

Children in Tasmania access one year of preschool education (kindergarten) in the year before entering the prep year of school. No preschool programs are provided for younger children. Some schools have child-parent sessions and playgroups and a growing number of schools are now involved in the *Launching into Learning* program. These schools are implementing strategies and programs to support early literacy and school readiness and seeking to engage and form relationships with families in the early years.¹⁰⁴

The Tasmanian government has encouraged and supported the move of childcare services onto school sites. In 2007-08 there were 28 long day care centres located on government and non-government schools sites, as well as after school hours care, occasional care and other care services.¹⁰⁵

The Department of Education complies with the cross-government *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Employment and Career Development Strategy*.

Western Australia

Preschool programs are integrated into primary schools in Western Australia and are staffed and funded as part of the primary school. All children can access a preschool year before entering pre-primary. Aboriginal children can enrol in preschool programs for two years. There are 28 Aboriginal kindergartens and 42 remote community schools that 'provide educational

programs to assist Aboriginal children in their transition from home to school'. These programs 'are inclusive of their Aboriginality, culture, language and learning styles'.¹⁰⁶ Non-Aboriginal children aged 3 years are able to enrol in these programs in remote community schools if they still have a vacancy at the start of term 2.

Childcare services are licensed and regulated by the Department for Communities, which was established in 2007. The Department provides a range of programs for young Aboriginal children, including Best Start services, including playgroups, workshops etc; Early Years Support services for Indigenous families with children aged 0-3 years; and a range of early intervention and prevention services. An across- government Early Years Strategy aims to provide programs that improve the wellbeing of children aged 0-8 years.¹⁰⁷

Culture Strong, Career Proud: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Employment Strategy 2008-2010 is the Department of Education and Training employment strategy for Indigenous peoples.¹⁰⁸

The Department for Communities has an employment policy for positions within the department but there is no indication of a policy aimed at funded organisations.

ACT

Preschool education is funded and staffed by the ACT Department of Education and Training. Sessions are either in a long day configuration (2 x 6 hour days) or a short day configuration (3 x 4 hour days). From the start of the 2008 school year, all public preschools were amalgamated with a primary school, the primary principal taking on an administrative role for the preschool.

There are five Koori preschools and the Koori preschool program is managed by the Early Childhood Education branch of the Department.¹⁰⁹ Early entry is provided for Indigenous children. The five centres offer children eight hours in total (accessed with parents by the 0-3 year olds) and in addition children access preschool from five years old. Children can thus access 20 hours per week.¹¹⁰

Four new early childhood schools will open in 2009, offering a 0-8 framework. In addition to offering preschool to year 2 classes, the schools are intended to become regional hubs and offer a range of services to meet community needs. These could include childcare, family support services and services that support children with special needs.¹¹¹

Children's services other than preschool are regulated by the Department of Disability, Housing and Community Services. The Children's Policy and Regulation Unit regulates and licences services and provides funding to support services. It also advises on the planning and establishment of new services, provides advisory services to families, providers and community on childcare, and training and support for children's services programs. The Department also operate two Child and Family Centres.¹¹²

Northern Territory

In the Northern Territory, preschool education is integrated into primary schools. Indigenous children in non-metropolitan areas can access preschool at the age of three if an adult accompanies them. However schools are required to have 12 preschool aged enrolments in order to seek a staffed preschool program and approval is not guaranteed. Schools in the Northern Territory are staffed on attendance rather than on enrolment.

In 2004, NT Ministers signed off on an early years framework for the 0-8 years that supported a more integrated system of services and a whole of government approach, based on the recommendations of the Education Advisory Council.¹¹³ The Northern Territory has a small number of centres that integrate early childhood education and care.

The Department of Health and Families was responsible for providing financial support, assistant and regulation of children's services other than preschool until July 2008, when the Children's Service Unit was transferred to the Department of Education and Training.¹¹⁴ The new division of Early Childhood Services 'will be responsible for integrated early childhood services, child care licensing, new children's services regulations, community engagement about early childhood and parenting, preschools, mobile preschools, play groups and the early years of school'.¹¹⁵ In consequence, the Northern Territory now has a Minister for Children and Families.

The NT government has been expanding mobile preschool services and playgroups to provide increased access in remote areas. (The 1999 Learning Lessons report called for guaranteed access to play centres and preschools and said that mobile services were an interim solution). The Combined Aboriginal Organisations of the Northern Territory have estimated that 94% of remote communities do not have a preschool.¹¹⁶ Three new mobile services were established in 2007-08 and a further one is planned for 2008-09 under the Closing the Gap policies.¹¹⁷ The NT government announced an investigation, to be undertaken with the Commonwealth, of the establishment of early learning and development centres to provide health care and education for children in remote communities.¹¹⁸ The federal budget has provided for continued funding for five playgroups and ten crèches established in the first year of the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER).

Next steps

Challenges and opportunities

The policy frameworks established by the Federal Government and COAG represent a major and positive step forward for the development of a national framework for universal early childhood education and care, for Closing the Gap and for improving Australia's skills base. However, the speed at which things are happening and the complexities of the structures make it difficult to keep abreast of events and decisions. Much work is going on behind the scenes, partly because of these factors but also because implementation requires negotiation with all jurisdictions. And there are gaps between some of the policy frameworks that must be addressed.

DEEWR has indicated a willingness to update the Network and a desire to have Network input in the development of plans for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander access to early childhood education and care and the workforce strategy. These offers should be welcomed but there is a need for an ongoing structure and or process to ensure that the views of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stakeholders are heard and engaged. The Network is well positioned to seek ongoing consultation with and input to DEEWR and should also consider approaches to develop closer links to the Productivity Agenda Working Group and other relevant COAG structures. The Network should request the Productivity Agenda Working Group to ensure that there is expertise on Indigenous early childhood issues on all working parties and panels. Consultations about the early childhood agenda are also occurring at the state and territory level and the Network should ensure participation in these processes.

The COAG Workforce Working Party has been asked to develop an early childhood education and care workforce strategy by the end of 2008. While discussions with DEEWR indicate recognition that such a strategy must include consideration of both the requirements for a workforce that meets the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities and support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers in the sector, there is as yet nothing on the table to indicate what aspects are under consideration. The Indigenous workforce requirements of the sector need specific attention and support. The Network already has a draft proposal for a national strategy plan for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early childhood workforce and this could be the basis for further development and intervention by the Network. It is worth noting that the Indigenous Healthcare *Blueprint for Action* was undertaken with the assistance and support of the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing.¹¹⁹

It is unlikely that a detailed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early childhood education and care workforce strategy can be developed in the space of a month or two. As the draft Network workforce strategy paper makes clear, there are a large number of issues which need to be addressed, including the establishment of Indigenous training targets for both the VET and higher education sectors; strategies to provide access to training for existing and new workers, particularly in remote areas; financial and other supports required; recognition of Indigenous knowledge and inclusion in qualifications; and qualification structures and requirements.

There should also be mandatory Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander units for all early childhood workers, whether training via VET or higher education. In addition, a framework needs to be established for recognising and supporting the Recognition of Prior Learning and Current Competencies for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers that includes recognition of Indigenous knowledge.

Existing state and territory Indigenous workforce strategies must also be taken into account although they seem to exist largely in the education sector rather than in relation to child care. In addition, workforce planning must factor in the position of the states and territories in relation

to access by three year olds since two years of early childhood education would require additional staff. Importantly, the workforce strategy must be an employment as well as a training strategy and measures need to be developed to ensure that employment targets can be achieved within a disparate sector comprised largely of small, local provider agencies.

An initial budget submission could propose targets and funding for 2009-10 to enable implementation to commence while this detailed planning occurs. Such targets would include specific training targets for both VET and higher education and the necessary financial and other supports to assist Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. Places need to be adequately funded so that they can be locally targeted to education providers that have experience in meeting the needs of communities, including provision of training in remote communities where this best meets local needs.

The biggest gap at this stage seems to be the one between the Skilling Australia policies and the plans for early childhood education and care and for Closing the Gap. Within the Skilling Australia framework there are generalised statements about the need to support Indigenous involvement in vocational education and training but no apparent focus on the development of specific targets and links to employment. Much of what has been said about the early childhood workforce applies across the workforce as a whole and there needs to be a process established to ensure that both VET and higher education sectors develop specific implementation plans to support the wider Indigenous policy framework. Skills Australia and Skills Councils should be directed to develop detailed Indigenous training strategies that complement COAG's Indigenous agenda. There is a need to ensure a capacity to undertake Indigenous workforce planning, including training needs, that will be needed for implementation of Closing the Gap, probably through a focused unit in DEEWR.

While the COAG working parties are working together there is no clear structure within DEEWR itself to provide the links between early childhood and Closing the Gap developments and the VET and higher education sectors, to ensure that those sectors implement policies which support these strategies. As Eva Cox has suggested, higher level coordination of Closing the Gap policies within DEEWR could be facilitated by the creation of a Deputy Secretary position responsible for coordination of Closing the Gap policies and strategies. This is a matter that the Network could raise with the Deputy Prime Minister and the Productivity Agenda Working Group.

It will also be necessary to consider the possible avenues of funding and support to maintain and extend the Network, to enable it to undertake projects such as the development of an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early childhood workforce strategy and to work with local and state groups to develop local training and workforce plans.



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