

2021-22 PRE-BUDGET SUBMISSION



TOPICS

- **Childcare**
- **Early Childhood Education**
- **Job Services and Programs**
- **Primary and Secondary Schools**
- **National Child Protection Policy**
- **Labour Market Policy**
- **Productivity**
- **Women's Policy**



This budget submission proposes that:

1 Early childhood learning becomes a National Cabinet priority. The Commonwealth Government leads States and territories in developing a shared vision and implementing an initial 3-year plan towards creating a world-leading early childhood learning system by 2030

2 The Commonwealth Government take steps towards a revitalised early childhood learning system in Australia, by

2.1 Enhancing Preschool:

- 3-Year-Old Preschool: Make high-quality 3-year-old Preschool accessible in all Australian states.
- 4-Year-Old Preschool: The Commonwealth Government enter into a 5 Year National Agreement with State and Territories; with a set percentage of funding being incentive-based for measurable improvements in service quality; attendance for vulnerable and disadvantaged children; with a focus on regional and remote areas.

2.2 Affordability and Workforce Productivity: Improve childcare access and affordability to improve workforce participation and ensure Australia fully recovers from the COVID-19 crisis (see specific recommendations page 9).

2.3 Early Childhood Workforce: Make a significant financial commitment to the soon to be released National Early Childhood Education and Care Workforce Strategy, with the Commonwealth Government matching new State and Territory contributions for the Strategy.

The Morrison Government has the opportunity to build on its important reforms of the early childhood learning system such as the Jobs and Families and COVID Childcare Relief packages to create a world-leading early childhood learning system. Doing this would positively impact each of the three drivers of economic growth, population, productivity, and participation.

Australia has the potential for every family with a young child to access high-quality parenting advice, childcare, early years education, child health services and playgroups, from pregnancy to the first day of school, all in their neighbourhood and delivered by friendly, well-trained staff that they know.¹ This description is what a future world-class early childhood learning system could be in Australia.

Australia would be a leader in early childhood development by 2030 if the Commonwealth Government, partnering with the States and Territories, builds on its policy initiatives to create a world leading early childhood learning system. It is within our grasp.

The benefits of a significant budget commitment would be far reaching. It would optimise the health, wealth, and wellbeing of future citizens. It would improve economic growth and productivity by enhancing the capability of our workforce. The Australian community would welcome:

- building better futures for their children through improved educational achievement;
- giving parents, particularly women, the choice to work and pursue careers leading to improved productivity; and
- making childcare more accessible and reducing costs.

The evidence base built over the last two decades clearly demonstrates that the early years are critical to children's development. A universal, high-quality early childhood learning system would build better futures for children, leading to improved learning, development, and wellbeing. International economic analysis has demonstrated that comprehensive, high-quality, birth-to-five, programs can have a 7-13% annual return on investment.²

However, Australia's early learning system needs to be enhanced. One in five children is developmentally vulnerable when they start school inhibiting the economy and driving inequality. For example, Aboriginal children are more than twice as likely to be developmentally vulnerable when they start school than non-Aboriginal children.

Further, recent changes in Australian society and the tax and transfer systems have shown that childcare's access and affordability discourage many parents from participating fully in the workforce. In particular, it creates a disincentive for parents to work additional hours, disproportionately impacting women's choices and is a significant drag on economic productivity.³

The Minderoo Foundation has reviewed credible research, reports and reviews from a range of sources including the Australian Government (Education Council), State and Territory Governments, Productivity Commission, Australian Early Childhood Education and Care Quality Authority (AECECQA), Grattan Institute, Mitchell Institute, Institute of Public Affairs, and the OECD in compiling this budget submission.

The Morrison Government has shown its commitment to children and through the Jobs and Families and COVID Childcare Relief packages. There is now an opportunity to build on these initiatives to create a world-leading early childhood learning system. Through the creation of the National Cabinet, The Morrison Government has the mechanism to lead States and Territories to do this and leave a lasting legacy for future Australians.

Section 1

Building a Universal, High-Quality Early Learning System by 2030

The 2021/22 Budget provides an opportunity for the Australian Government to establish a vision for a world-leading universal, high-quality early childhood learning system and set out policies for the next term of Government that can be delivered by 2030. Children would have the very best start to life; families would receive high-quality support for raising their children and have flexible work choices. It would provide a foundation for the nation's future productivity.

The early childhood learning system includes services and supports such as childcare, Preschool, early childhood education, child and maternal health services, parenting information and support services, and playgroups.

Why now? Emerging from the COVID-19 crisis, Australia needs to improve its productivity. Without foreign workers, maximising the productivity of our existing workforce will be central to economic growth. Secondly, the COVID-19 crisis has shown some fragility in our early learning and care system, which must be updated to meet families' needs in a post-COVID (and post-vaccinated) Australia.

The good news is that the 'frame' for a world-class early childhood system is already in place. Australia has many high-quality early childhood learning and childcare (ELC) services, 95% of children attend 4-year-old Preschool, and there are parenting services and playgroups in most suburbs and towns.

The challenge is that the early childhood sector is poorly integrated, inefficient, and often not accessible to vulnerable families. Although there are many good services and systems, there is no overarching 'vision' or 'plan' for Australia's early childhood learning system. Responsibilities are divided and overlapping between the Commonwealth, State, and Local governments. This results in policy settings that are unnecessarily complex and, for families, a system that is difficult to navigate.

Further, there is a need to improve data collection and economic analysis to better inform the monitoring and accountability of early childhood learning in Australia. Without this, it is challenging to monitor early childhood learning provision and ensure accountability between the Commonwealth, State, and Territory governments. The Minderoo Foundation is willing to support this task through funding credible research and policy organisations to work with governments to enhance data and measurement systems or complete economic analyses.

Through its establishment and leadership of the National Cabinet, the Commonwealth Government has the mechanism to lead States and Territories in taking the next step to create a world-class early childhood learning system. Implementation would require the Commonwealth designating early childhood learning as a National Cabinet priority; National Cabinet setting a vision and outcomes to be achieved by an early childhood learning system; and all governments working in partnership over the term of the next Parliament to review and streamline funding, regulatory and delivery methods.

The Morrison Government has contracted the Australian Institute of Family Studies to undertake an independent evaluation of the childcare package, which will report in March 2021.⁴ This evaluation would provide information to underpin the review of policies by the National Cabinet with the objective of creating a world-class early childhood learning system.

A significant announcement in the Budget of the Morrison Governments' intent to prioritise early childhood learning over the next Parliament term would be a worthy investment in Australia's future. Minderoo believes that this would be the most significant educational, social, and economic reform of our era.

RECOMMENDATION:

Early childhood learning is designated a National Cabinet priority. The Commonwealth Government leads States and Territories to develop a shared vision and implement an initial 3-year plan to create a world-leading early childhood learning system by 2030.



Section 2

There is a need to take steps immediately towards a revitalised early childhood learning system in Australia to ensure that children, families, and the economy emerge strongly from the COVID-19 pandemic. These steps are enhancing Preschool, improving access and the affordability of childcare, and building a capable and skilled early childhood workforce.

2.1 Preschool

Ensuring that all Australian children can benefit from affordable, quality Preschool has been a significant success in the last decade. It is a testament to what can be achieved with purposeful leadership by the Commonwealth Government. The proportion of children enrolled for 600 hours in [4-year-old] Preschool has increased from 12 per cent in 2008 to 96 per cent in 2018.⁵ This outcome has been achieved through the Universal Access National Partnership (UANP) entered into by all Australian Governments; establishing a national system, while preserving State and Territory autonomy to meet local needs.

The Commonwealth Government can now build on this success in the 2021/22 budget by taking measures to make 3-Year-Old Preschool accessible across Australia, and improving the quality and attendance, in 4-year-old Preschool; with a focus on Aboriginal and disadvantaged children and those living in regional areas.

There are quantified returns for governments from investing in Preschool. A 2019 Report by The Front Project (completed by PWC) identified approximately \$2 of benefits for every \$1 spent on early childhood education [Preschool]. Expressed differently, this is a return on investment (ROI) of 103%. The study demonstrate[d] that expenditure on early childhood education can be viewed as a strong long-term investment with quantifiable financial returns.⁶ Further, the How Australia can Invest in Children and Return More Report completed last year by the Minderoo Foundation and partners found that Australia spends \$15.2bn every year because children and young people experience serious issues that require crisis services. It stated that early intervention [most often in early childhood] could improve the lives of children and young people while reducing pressure on government budgets.⁷

2.1.1 3-Year-Old Preschool

Two years of Preschool has a much more positive impact than one, especially for the children most likely to be developmentally vulnerable. Evidence shows that providing access to high-quality 3-year-old preschool programs lays the foundation for enduring success at school and in a range of outcomes that matter for future prosperity, including literacy, numeracy, and social and emotional wellbeing.⁸

In their Report on 3-year-old Preschool, The Mitchell Institute found that Australia has laid the groundwork for delivering two years of high-quality, universal preschool programs. Currently, two-thirds of 3-year-olds are already attending early education and care, and we have achieved near-universal enrolment in Preschool for 4-year-olds. But the children missing out are the ones who would benefit most from access to a preschool program, and not all children are receiving the amount of high-quality early education needed to maximise their potential.⁹

The Mitchell Institute also noted that internationally, there is a move towards public investment in two years of Preschool, with early education being framed as an investment in human capital. A number of European countries have provided universal Preschool for 3- and 4-year-olds since the 1960s; and, more recently, countries like the United Kingdom and New Zealand have introduced free or heavily subsidised Preschool for 3- and 4-year-olds.

Further, high-performing East Asian countries such as Japan and Singapore are making significant investments in early childhood learning.¹⁰ Japan has passed legislation to make preschool education free for all children aged between three and five years of age, with free long daycare services also to be provided for children up to two years of age from low-income families.¹¹ In 2020, Singapore increased its subsidy for childcare and Preschool across all income groups, but with a focus on low-income families.¹²

The Victorian Government has recently committed almost \$5 billion over ten years so that every 3-year-old child in the State will have access to a preschool program.¹³ The New South Wales Government has announced funding for free 3-year-old Preschool for the estimated 44,000 children attending community and mobile preschools in 2021.¹⁴ However, not all states have taken steps to facilitate 3-year-old Preschool. This difference between States and Territories creates a situation where Preschool access is increasingly uneven for 3-year-olds across Australia.

There is an opportunity for the Commonwealth to lead the provision universal, high-quality 3-year-old Preschool in all of Australian States and Territories in a manner that ensures equity and cost-sharing between governments. The Commonwealth Government can do this by providing new funding to correct a current inequity between states in the amount of funding that the Commonwealth contributes to each State and Territory for the provision of 4-year-old Preschool; and agreeing with States and Territories that each State and Territory will use the new funding to rollout 3-year-old Preschool.

To explain this, the report titled 'UANP Review: Final Review Report to the COAG Education Council'¹⁵ found that jurisdictions with a higher prevalence of Centre Based Day Care preschool enrolments appear to invest less in the YBFS [4-year-old Preschool]¹⁶ than States and Territories where Preschool is delivered all or partly through the school system. I went onto state that further analysis was required but recommended that Governments should consider how to achieve more equitable levels of investment [across jurisdictions] going forward.¹⁷ This is supported by the Report on Government Services 2020 that demonstrates the inequity in contributions from States and Territories in their contributions to Preschool.¹⁸

The Commonwealth Government can lead the rollout of 3-year-old Preschool across Australia by entering into a National Agreement with States and Territories to:

- ensure there is a comparable subsidy from the Commonwealth to each State and Territory;
- all State and Territory government contribute to offering preschool programs to 3-year-olds and 4-year-olds; and
- there is an initial focus on the provision of 3-Year-Old Preschool for disadvantaged children.

The Commonwealth would share costs with States and Territories, who would 'opt-in' to the agreement by committing that new funding received would be used to facilitate 3-year-old Preschool.

The Minderoo Foundation estimates that this would cost the Commonwealth Government an additional \$350-\$400million annually (noting that this has been calculated from data on Commonwealth, State and Territory contributions to Preschool reported in the Report on Government Services - ROGS 2020). Minderoo Foundation can provide it to the Commonwealth Department of Treasury for analysis.¹⁹ This action would facilitate the rollout of 3-Year-Old Preschool and funding equity between states and territories. Additional to the benefits for children, this initiative would create many new jobs.

Key performance indicators should include:

- Quality Ratings (National Quality Framework Regulatory system) for Preschool service providers (a measure of the quality of service delivery)
- Enrolment and attendance of children preschool (new monitoring systems may need to be developed).
- Improving the quality of services (see above) and attendance of disadvantaged children in Preschool, focusing on regional areas and services; and services attended predominantly by Aboriginal children.

RECOMMENDATION:

The Commonwealth Government make high-quality 3-year-old Preschool accessible in all Australian states.

Estimated cost - \$350 - \$400 million per annum.



2.1.2 4-Year-Old Preschool (Universal Access National Partnership)

Quality 4-year-old preschool makes a significant, long-term difference in children's development and learning outcomes. While all children benefit, increasing preschool participation for children experiencing vulnerability or disadvantage delivers higher returns. There are also significant benefits to the Government. A recent economic analysis showed that the UANP contributes to increased workforce participation and tax revenues, and reduces pressure on education, health, and justice budgets.²⁰

However, a review of the Universal Access National Partnership²¹ for 4-year-old preschool identified both operational and administrative issues that required attention.

• **Operational:**

Key priorities include lifting attendance and quality of services, developing robust measures of attendance and child development outcomes, modelling the efficient cost of Preschool provision in different settings and contexts, and addressing looming workforce shortages.²²

• **Administrative:**

The Review recommended that the immediate successor agreement to the current UANP (i.e., from 2021) should be a National Partnership of five years' duration.

Minderoo Foundation recommends that these issues should be prioritised and addressed urgently.

a) **Attendance:**

Government reports have shown that children from a non-English speaking backgrounds, Indigenous children, children with a disability, children from remote areas and children residing in the most disadvantaged areas are all less likely to be enrolled [in Preschool] than the general population.²³ Improving enrolment and attendance, particularly for children experiencing vulnerability or disadvantage requires reform by each State to establish whole jurisdiction monitoring, enrolment, and attendance systems so that every child and family is contacted, encouraged, and supported to enrol and attend Preschool. Achieving this should be the focus of incentive-based funding in a National Agreement.

b) **Quality of Service Delivery:**

Regulatory visits conducted by ACECQA to Early Childhood Education and Care service providers shows that services in regional areas on average have lower quality ratings than state and national averages,²⁴ with services in areas classified remoted being significantly lower again. Improving the quality-of-service delivery for all services, but focusing on regional and remote areas, and services attended predominantly by Aboriginal children is a priority.

c) **5 Year Agreement:**

The Review found that funding uncertainty [because of the short-term nature of recent National Partnership agreements] had hampered innovation and led to operational difficulties such as short-term funding contracts for providers and critical staff. The review recommended that the immediate successor agreement to the current UANP (i.e., from 2021) should be a National Partnership of 5 years' duration.²⁵ Minderoo recommends that annual reviews and incentive payments are included in the National Agreement to ensure accountability.

To address these issues, the Minderoo Foundation recommends that the Commonwealth Government enter into a 5 Year National Agreement with State and Territories; with a set percentage of funding being incentive-based for measurable improvements in service quality, attendance for vulnerable and disadvantaged children with a focus on regional and remote areas.

RECOMMENDATION:

The Commonwealth Government commit to a 5-year term for a Universal Access National Agreement.

Note: The Minderoo Foundation was not able to estimate a cost for this commitment. However, the current fiscal climate provides a rationale to put funding for a 5-year National Agreement in the forward estimates to enhance child learning and workforce productivity.

2.2 Childcare Access and Productivity

Before COVID-19 hit, childcare in Australia was difficult to access and costs were increasing, with parents reporting that a critical reason for them not working more was childcare affordability.²⁶ Cost have been rising over a number of years. A 2018 review by the Institute of Public Affairs found that while wages have risen by just 90 per cent over the past two decades, the cost of childcare had increased by 310 per cent.²⁷

The Grattan Institute completed a comprehensive review of childcare costs in a report titled 'Cheaper Childcare: A Practical Plan to Boost Female Workforce Participation' in August 2020.²⁸ The report found that:

- The most significant financial barrier to women (primary carers) working more is the high cost of childcare.
- A combination of tax, welfare settings, and childcare costs is creating a disincentive for the primary carer in a family, most often women, to take on extra work, particularly beyond 2-3 days in a week: and
- The Commonwealth Government should boost the Child Care Subsidy and improve its design so that second-income earners take home more pay from additional hours of work; recommending that the Child Care Subsidy increase from 85 to 95 per cent for low-income households, gradually tapering for families with incomes above \$68,000.

They noted that doing this would provide a triple dividend by supporting children's access to early learning, putting more money back into family budgets and supporting economic recovery.²⁹ The Government's estimated cost would be \$5billion, but that would boost GDP by about \$11billion a year immediately when implemented. This is on par with the estimated economic benefit from cutting the company tax rate to 25%.³⁰

If childcare costs remain high in the next 1-2 years, it will inhibit Australia's recovery from the COVID-19 crisis. Using the existing Child Care Subsidy arrangements to increase families' subsidy rates is the best way to quickly support access to early learning for children, parents' workforce participation, and economic recovery.

The Minderoo Foundation supports the Grattan Institute's recommendations to address childcare affordability and improve workforce participation.

RECOMMENDATIONS ARE TO:

- **Boost the childcare subsidy for low-income families from 85 per cent to 95 per cent, flatten and simplify the taper, and remove the annual cap.**
- **Review the hourly rate cap.**
- **Ask the ACCC to do a market study of the sector to identify areas where lack of competition is putting upward pressure on fees, focusing on regional areas.**

Cost - Estimated \$5billion.³¹

2.3 Early Childhood Workforce

In 2020 The Mitchell Institute reviewed the Early Childhood Education and Care Workforce in Australia. They stated that:

"the early childhood education and care workforce are essential to Australia's economic and social prosperity. The day-to-day work of early childhood educators enhances young children's learning and development and supports the productivity and wellbeing of Australian families. A coherent national approach to ECEC workforce development is necessary to ensure that every Australian child and family has access to quality early learning".³²

The impact on the quality of services by children's service providers' capacity to attract and retain suitably qualified staff is marked. To illustrate this, the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) in its 2019/20 Sector Performance Report noted that one in ten long daycare provider holds a staffing waiver from regulatory authorities because they cannot attract suitably qualified staff; and that services in regional and remote areas continue to have the highest proportion of staffing waivers.³³

Australia does not have a current national strategy for the ECEC workforce. The previous Early Years Workforce Strategy expired in 2016 (Standing Council on School Education and Early Childhood [SCSEEC], 2012), leaving many challenges unresolved. In December 2019, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) Education Council agreed to a new The Early Years Workforce Strategy for Early Childhood Education and Care. Ministers endorsed the development of a new children's education and care national workforce strategy to support the recruitment, retention, sustainability, and quality of the early childhood services workforce. Education Council in early 2020 agreed on the scope of a new national strategy, which would be developed as a joint partnership between all governments, the early childhood services sector, and other key stakeholders. All Governments have agreed on the urgent need to enhance the early childhood education and care workforce strategy.

Providing sufficient funding for implementing The Early Years Workforce Strategy for Early Childhood Education and Care is critical. Both governments and employers have responsibilities to make this investment so that a skilled, well-remunerated workforce serves Australian children and families. Additional to the benefits for children, this initiative would create many jobs.

Key issues to be addressed in a workforce strategy are³⁴:

- Attracting and retaining capable people to careers in the ECEC sector.
- Incentives to work in hard-to-staff locations – Regional and Remote.
- Improving the quality and consistency of training programs (University, VET) for ECEC
- Scholarships for ECEC qualifications at all levels.
- Developing and maintaining a national ECEC workforce data set.

RECOMMENDATION:

The Commonwealth, and State and Governments make a significant financial commitment to a National Early Childhood Education and Care Workforce Strategy. The Commonwealth match any new funding from State and territories for the Strategy.

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