

Growing together: A future universal early childhood education and care system for Australia ^[1]

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Executive Summary

The momentum to realise a universal early childhood education and care (ECEC) system in Australia is significant. With a number of expert reviews into ECEC and preschool reforms being rolled out across jurisdictions, the vision of universal ECEC is being shaped up and advanced. Consistent with the Prime Minister's commitment, a high-quality universal system is both desirable and possible. There is currently a historic opportunity for reform to ECEC and the creation of a high-quality truly universal ECEC system in Australia. While Australia's ECEC system has many strengths, there are numerous challenges with the current system that prevent Australia from delivering an affordable, low-cost, high-quality universal system. The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission's (ACCC) final report from its childcare inquiry shows that the current approach does not - and will never - fully meet governments' objectives for the system. ECEC is an essential social good that delivers benefits to children, families, government and society. However, many families face affordability and accessibility challenges and the children who need it the most are missing out. In this paper, CPD offers a long-term vision for what a reformed ECEC system could look like that:

- ensures that all children and families, regardless of background or financial status, can utilise high quality ECEC services;
- ensures an equitable start for all children by increasing attendance and addressing needs early, especially for those experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage;
- alleviates the cost of living for families by significantly reducing out-of-pocket expenses for ECEC, contributing to household financial stability;
- advances gender equality and improves workforce participation, by facilitating work-family balance for women and improving wages in the female dominated early childhood sector;
- boosts economic growth and tax revenue, through increases in workforce participation and reduced government spending on welfare, health, justice and other social service systems.

These reforms were developed with the Commonwealth Government's stated objective in mind - "making access to high-quality, equitable and affordable early childhood education and care universal".¹ They reposition the system to be like schooling or Medicare where all children have access and those who need greater support receive it.

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Related link: Free or cheap child care for all families: New report recommends major overhaul ^[4]

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