

the Front Project

Pre-Budget Submission
Federal Budget 2021-22



the FrontProject

The early years springboard

The Front Project is an independent, national enterprise working to improve quality and create positive change in Australia's early childhood education and care (ECEC) system.

We work with government, business and the early education sector to improve outcomes for children and increase the short and long-term gains for Australia. We find innovative solutions that create impact in all parts of the system so that all children can thrive, regardless of the different challenges they experience.

We know high-quality early education lays foundations for children that can last a lifetime, while providing huge benefits to our society and the future prosperity of Australia. We will see the full benefits when all children can access the quality education they need to overcome vulnerabilities and lead healthy, successful lives.

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EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IS CRITICAL TO OUR NATIONAL COMEBACK



Across our suburbs and our regions, families are struggling with the cost of early childhood education, which can prevent them from getting back into productive employment.

Building on the existing Child Care Subsidy (CCS) in the 2021–22 Federal Budget will give Australian parents more choice and flexibility about returning to work and increasing their hours at work.

The Australian Government can do this by both building on the CCS and guaranteeing that the benefits stay with families, by immediately investigating the possibility of a rigorous and robust system of price controls.

This will deliver a **Back to Work Boost**, which will support families to return to work after they have a child, increasing flexibility and choice.

Further capitalising on the ECEC system

Through this Budget, we can continue to lay the foundations for a high-performing Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) system – one that is high-quality, efficient, equitable, sustainable and outcomes-focussed.

In determining those foundations, we need to listen to families about their needs, expectations, experiences and hopes. In doing so, we can create a system that has real impact.

Australia's ECEC system brings together families, governments, teachers and educators, ECEC providers, business and community. By working together, we can deliver the social and economic benefits of early childhood education.

The Australian Government is in a unique position to bring the system together, as a market steward, and to ensure policy and funding settings enable and create the conditions for a high-performing system.

This Budget presents the opportunity to **further capitalise on the ECEC system** – so it continues to benefit families and children for generations to come.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS:

RECOMMENDATION 1:

Optimise the CCS, lifting the CCS rate to 95 per cent for low-income households and tapering down to 30 per cent, to ensure additional subsidies make ECEC more affordable and reduce disincentives to work for families.

RECOMMENDATION 2:

Commission the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) to investigate ECEC pricing and the market, to make recommendations for developing robust price control measures to ensure ECEC remains affordable for Australian families.

RECOMMENDATION 3:

Update the Child Care Finder website with timely information on hourly rate caps, daily costs and quality of services, to permit families to make informed decisions.

RECOMMENDATION 4:

Fund a new National Partnership for universal access to preschool with a five-year duration, to meet the needs and expectations that Australian families have around quality early learning.

RECOMMENDATION 5:

Retain and extend existing policies that support families who are impacted by external shocks (for example, COVID-19 or natural disasters) to access ECEC, including the Additional Child Care Subsidy and transition payments for service providers.

“These [ECEC] services are vital for so many parents so they can provide for their family, and children need as much familiarity and continuity as we can help provide... It [ECEC Relief Package] means building a bridge for these valuable services to the other side of this virus so they can continue to play their valuable role in our workforce and education systems and so Australia can bounce back strongly.”

– Prime Minister Scott Morrison

RECOMMENDATION 6:

Fund support models of ECEC for children living with significant family stress and social disadvantage through the Inclusion Support Program (ISP) – Inclusion Development Fund Innovative Solutions Stream.

RECOMMENDATION 7:

Fund and implement the action plan underpinning the new National Children’s Education and Care Workforce Strategy to be delivered in mid-2021, to ensure a supply of quality ECEC professionals to the workforce.

“There’s a big economic role that it [ECEC] plays as a sector... We will see these short term indicators come through and the data around income and people struggling but it is the longer term impacts that will then leave if people aren’t accessing early childhood education.”

– Jarrod Ball, Chief Economist at the Committee for Economic Development of Australia (CEDA)

Recommendation 1:

Optimise the CCS, lifting the CCS rate to 95 per cent for low-income households and tapering down to 30 per cent, to ensure additional subsidies make ECEC more affordable and reduce disincentives to work for families.



“Caring for children at home meant we could not actively work from home or study.”

– Parent/carer (The Front Project, 2020)

“I will not make enough money to cover grocery and daycare bills. That is excluding incidentals and mortgage. We will fall seriously behind.”

– Parent/carer (The Front Project, 2020)



The opportunity

An optimised CCS will give parents more choice and flexibility about returning to work and increasing their hours, by making an additional day’s work more worthwhile.

- Independent analysis has highlighted how many Australian families do not benefit from working additional hours, particularly moving from part-time to full-time work (KPMG, 2019; KPMG, 2020; Wood et al., 2020; Stewart, 2018). This is due to the disincentives arising from the loss in CCS, alongside the combined impact of paying income tax, the loss of family payments and extra out-of-pocket ECEC expenses.
- KPMG analysis (2019) highlights that secondary earners – usually working mothers – can lose between three-quarters and 120 per cent of their additional earnings. A mother earning \$100,000 whose spouse also earned \$100,000 would only take home an extra \$5,000 a year if she worked four days rather than three, and go backwards by \$4,200 if she worked five days (KPMG, 2019).
- Analysis also highlights that one in five low-income households and one in four higher-income households have a workforce disincentive rate more than 70 per cent, meaning families retain less than a third of what they earn through an additional day’s work (KPMG, 2020).

Making ECEC more affordable reduces pressure on household budgets and increases spending throughout the economy.

- The Front Project’s survey of families (2020) showed ECEC fees significantly impact household budgets, with almost two-thirds of families saying fees affect their social spending habits and more than half saying fees affect their weekly grocery budget.
- Even for a low-income family, two children in full-time early childhood education costs \$9,000 a year. For a higher-income family earning \$160,000, the cost is about \$26,000 a year (Wood et al., 2020).

The recommended solution

Increasing and smoothing the taper rate for the CCS significantly increases affordability and substantially reduces workforce disincentives. Specifically, we recommend:

- leveraging the existing system to lift the subsidy to 95 per cent for households earning up to \$80,000, with the taper decreasing by one percentage point for every additional \$4,000 of family income, until a floor of 30 per cent subsidy; and
- removing the annual per-child cap.

Estimated costs and benefits of the optimised CCS

This proposal to optimise the CCS is a pragmatic and feasible option, that can be implemented through the current Budget. Key features of the proposal are that:

- Families in the lowest income quintile would receive the highest average amount of CCS.
- All families would receive more than under the current CCS – making ECEC more affordable and accessible.
- The smoother taper rate would significantly reduce the disincentives to take on additional days of work, thereby increasing workforce participation and economic activity.

KPMG has modelled the impact of lifting the subsidy to 95 per cent for households earning up to \$80,000, with the taper decreasing by one percentage point for every additional \$4,000 of family income, until a floor of 30 per cent.

- KPMG estimates that the additional net spend on CCS would be around \$2.5 billion per annum, enabling between 160,000 and 210,000 additional working days per week – equivalent to 30,000 to 40,000 FTE jobs – and a GDP increase of up to \$5.4 billion.

Summary

Making ECEC more affordable makes economic sense in the short and long-term. In the short-term, it will boost Australia's economic recovery by enabling families to continue to work, re-train or study, increase working hours or find work. In the long run, it will ensure we leverage an underutilised workforce, boost economic activity and build the human capital necessary for a thriving economy.

Recommendation 2:

Commission the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) to investigate ECEC pricing and the market, to make recommendations for developing robust price control measures to ensure ECEC remains affordable for Australian families.

Recommendation 3:

Update the Child Care Finder website with timely information on hourly rate caps, daily costs and quality of services, to permit families to make informed decisions.



“[We need] a funding model that meets the need of the sector’s many types of providers. Adequate funding that is reflective of the importance of the first 5 years of life as a foundation for lifelong learning.”

– Centre Director, long day care, TAS. (The Front Project, 2020)

“...we would have it tough sending the two kids to school. Particularly our 3 year old at preschool which costs a bit even when just going a two days a week.”

– Parent/carer (The Front Project, 2020)



The Australian Government must act to prevent excessive fee increases by providers undermining the benefits to families of ECEC and any optimised CCS rate.

- More recently, the average hourly child care fee for all service types (excluding in-home care) reflected an annual increase of 4.4 per cent to March quarter 2020 (DESE, 2020).
- The price of ECEC has increased faster than general price growth over the past 15 years. This reflects growth in the cost of inputs, mainly labour and rent, which make up an average 60 per cent and 15 per cent of ECEC providers’ total costs respectively (Wood et al., 2020)

The recommended solution

In the immediate term, families need to be equipped with timely information on the hourly rate cap, daily costs and quality of services, to inform their decision making around choice in service providers (for example by updating the Child Care Finder website). Families must have access to the information they need to make choices about their children and ECEC – which is an essential feature of an effective mixed-market system.

Over the medium term, we recommend an urgent investigation of ECEC pricing and the market – including into price control measures. This investigation will ensure the implementation of any optimised CCS benefits the intended recipients, through the provision of independent, verified information to families and a market study to ensure informed policy development.

The Government should direct the ACCC to:

- immediately commence monitoring and reporting on the prices, costs and profits across ECEC services to the Government, community and families; and
- undertake a market study and to identify levers available to Government to mitigate longer-term risk of excessive price/fee increases.

Benefits of recommended price control measures

A more comprehensive understanding of ECEC prices is required – i.e. an understanding of what is driving increases in the cost of delivery and whether, where or in what circumstances there are issues in the market structure. The ACCC is ideally placed to undertake this task.

The market study will underpin what the appropriate levers are for the ongoing monitoring and managing of ECEC prices and it will enable the Australian Government to be an effective market steward. Any recommended changes should be implemented in the 2022–23 Federal Budget cycle.

- Government has a range of levers available to it as a market steward. There are explicit levers – such as funding, regulation, eligibility to operate services, or conditions attached to funding – as well as more subtle levers, like setting policy objectives, monitoring supply chains, sharing data, and measuring outcomes.
- Used together and used well, these levers can reap the benefits of a mixed-market approach and achieve the public good (Productivity Commission, 2017).

The recommended approach will provide the Australian Government with the evidence to inform a policy response and means to prevent excessive price/fee increases in ECEC based on the existing system and funding model and proportionate to the identified risk. This could range from light-touch responses (e.g. allowing the market to respond to competitive pressures) to high-intensity responses (e.g. price regulation).

Summary

Government's responsibility for funding the CCS means it must act to ensure that the CCS continues to meet the expectations of families to provide transparent and affordable access to ECEC, rather than to drive market distortions. The ACCC is ideally placed to undertake this task and to make such recommendations for reform as are required.

Recommendation 4:

Fund a new National Partnership for universal access to preschool with a five-year duration, to meet the needs and expectations that Australian families have around quality early learning.



“The most valued aspect of ECEC is that it provides education and development for children.”

– Findings from survey of how families experience ECEC (The Front Project, 2020)



The opportunity

Build on the success of the Universal Access National Partnership Agreement (UANP).

The UANP has seen more children enrolled in preschool in the year before school – with the proportion enrolled for the target of 600 hours increasing from 12 per cent in 2008 to 96 per cent in 2018 (Nous, 2020).

This increase in enrolments is an example of how collaboration across governments with a shared goal; tangible measures of success; joint investment; and flexibility to reflect local contexts, can bring about meaningful outcomes for children in the early years.

Funding for preschool in the year before school is value for money investment.

Through investment in the UANP to date, the Australian Government has been delivering on its dual goals – providing quality early learning for children and enabling workforce participation for families.

This investment in UANP provides both social and economic benefits. The Front Project (TFP) analysis shows that an ECEC program for 15 hours a week delivered by a qualified EC teacher, produces a return on investment of 1:2, boosting educational achievement, workforce participation and tax revenue (The Front Project, 2019).

Benefits of the recommended solution

TFP’s recommendation aligns with the key findings of the *UANP Review: Final Review Report*, prepared by Nous on behalf of the COAG Education Council. It reflects the opportunity to “build on progress, meet the needs of parents and communities, and avoid risks to universal access and quality” (Nous, 2020).

The solution also recognises the role of preschool in children’s outcomes and addressing developmental vulnerability. According to the Australian Early Development Census 2018 (DET, 2019), from 2009 to 2015, the gap between the percentage of developmentally vulnerable children in the most disadvantaged areas, relative to the least disadvantaged areas, widened across all five AEDC domains. The 2018 year has seen this gap start to close in three of the AEDC domains (physical health and wellbeing, social competence and emotional maturity).

A high-quality preschool experience can play a critical role in reducing the gap across all five domains – including language and cognitive skills, and communication skills and general knowledge.

The recommendation also builds in a five-year timeframe to set the foundations for a commitment to ongoing, adequate funding of universal access in the year before school, alongside other critical early childhood reforms, from 2026. This approach creates the opportunity for governments to better embed the early years within the education system in Australia – in line with the recommendations from the *Lifting Our Game* report commissioned by Australian states and territories (Pascoe & Brennan, 2017).

Over the next five years, through effective collaboration across the ECEC system, a number of enhancements can be made to lift quality and enable more equitable access to early learning for families and children, as noted in the related recommendations.

Related recommendations

- Develop a new mechanism that clearly articulates the roles and responsibilities of all governments in relation to the National Quality Framework and reinforce a shared commitment to lifting quality across the ECEC system, in line with the recommendation in the *Review of the Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority* commissioned by COAG (KPMG, 2019).
- Incentivise providers to improve preschool participation of children experiencing disadvantage, through an additional subsidy or access to initiatives designed to lift quality (such as professional learning opportunities for the workforce).
- Collect data on children’s attendance in a program delivered by a qualified early childhood teacher for 600 hours of preschool, by leveraging improved data systems across the ECEC system. An outcomes-focussed data system will improve monitoring and enable evidence-informed policy that can better target services and support.
- In line with TFP Recommendation 1, undertake a market study to better understand the cost drivers, business models and context for delivery of preschools across jurisdictions.
- Commence implementation planning with jurisdictions to progressively implement universal access to preschool in the two years before school and consider funding mechanisms to lift participation of underrepresented cohorts in preschool.
- Review the activity test requirements and the number of Child Care Subsidy-eligible hours against policy intent – to enable families’ workforce participation and children’s access to quality early learning.

Recommendation 5:

Retain and extend existing policies that support families who are impacted by external shocks (for example, COVID-19 or natural disasters) to access ECEC, including the Additional Child Care Subsidy and transition payments for service providers.



“COVID-19 adds new difficulties for families experiencing hardship who are just trying to go about their everyday lives.”

– Early Childhood Educator (The Front Project, 2020)

“It has been very difficult. The area my child needs to work on most are his social skills and since the start of the pandemic, he has missed many days of kinder or was the only child attending.”

– Parent/carer (The Front Project, 2020)



The opportunity

Reliable and affordable early childhood education enables families to get back into work.

Families benefit from having reliable and affordable ECEC arrangements in place when they are offered work – whether that is a return to work, additional hours, extra shifts or new job opportunities – or when they need to study/re-train.

COVID-19 and the economic downturn will increase the proportion of families experiencing reduced hours, increasingly casualised, irregular and insecure work, and unemployment. In this context, it is critical that the cost and availability of early childhood education not be a barrier to taking on work if it is available.

ECEC services are critical and can be protected from external shocks to remain viable.

As Australia continues to manage the risk of COVID-19 and health responses are rolled out across the country, ECEC services are vulnerable to shocks that disrupt attendance and impact financial viability – which in turn impacts families without options to enable workforce participation.

Research commissioned by TFP shows that the early childhood education sector is highly vulnerable to external shocks that impact children’s attendance, and that some services are at risk during an economic downturn, restrictions in response to COVID-19 or natural disasters. Ongoing support from government to keep the services families rely on viable will be essential.

The solution

The policies the Government put in place during the public health lockdown periods and the existing mechanisms for jobseekers and families experiencing financial hardship have been broadly effective and are commended. These should now be maintained or extended in line with the ongoing economic environment. For families, priorities include:

- maintaining the relaxed activity test that provides access to 100 hours of subsidy to COVID-19-affected families.
- continuing to allow services to waive gap fees in areas under public health lockdowns (or other external shocks, such as natural disasters) and maintaining increased allowable absences
- improving access to Additional Child Care Subsidy (Temporary Financial Hardship and Transition to Work), extending eligibility beyond 13 weeks when families continue to be affected
- ensuring the activity test does not restrict access to early childhood education, reflecting the benefits of quality early childhood education for children's learning and well-being.

The Australian Government should also maintain and extend the existing measures designed to ensure ongoing access to early learning and service viability:

- Maintain the transition payment for services experiencing significant declines in occupancy because of restrictions arising from health directives or other external shocks.
- Strengthen the employment guarantee to ensure teacher and educators remain employed and receive a sufficient income.
- Provide bridging support to meet fixed costs for services that are essential for their community but at risk of closing due to economic circumstances.
- Ensure changes are clearly communicated and easy to activate to minimise disruption in the face of any future crisis (i.e. further waves of COVID-19, as well as natural disasters).

Recommendation 6:

Fund support models of ECEC for children living with significant family stress and social disadvantage through the Inclusion Support Program (ISP) – Inclusion Development Fund Innovative Solutions Stream.



“Not much is known about how the most disadvantaged children are going in 2020 because they and their families are not seen.”

– Dr Anne Kennedy (The Front Project, 2020)



The opportunity

High-quality ECEC sets children up to thrive and impacts life-long outcomes.

Increasing access to high-quality ECEC is a critical strategy to address the impact of children’s experiences of disadvantage (The Front Project, 2020). This increased access is particularly important in light of the impact of COVID-19 on families and children.

Early intervention can foster the skills that enable children to thrive and build a better foundation for success later in life, given the cumulative nature of skills development (Sawhill & Karpilow, 2014).

For the Government, early intervention is also a more cost-effective solution – responding to problems before they start or become magnified. The Front Project, in a joint collaboration, identified that Australia spends \$15.2 billion a year on high intensity and crisis support for children experiencing issues that could have been prevented through more effective early support (Teager et al., 2019).

Benefits of the recommended solution

Targeted, high-quality ECEC can change the trajectory of a child and family. An example of how this has been effectively achieved is the Early Years Education Program (EYEP).

EYEP is an innovative Australian centre-based model of education and care designed to meet the particular needs of young children facing significant family stress and social disadvantage.

The dual focus of EYEP is to address the consequences of significant family stress and social disadvantage on children’s development and to redress learning deficiencies. The evidence-informed model features high staff/child ratios, qualified and experienced educators, an infant mental health consultant as a member of the staff, and a rigorous relationship-based curriculum informed by trauma and attachment theories.

EYEP is targeted to children under three in response to the evidence that the earlier the intervention, the more effective it will be. Toxic stress and trauma impact young children’s development and learning and their life trajectories. EYEP has provided a model of ECEC that makes a significant difference to these children’s lives in the present and in their futures – and it builds evidence about how to address these risk factors and redress the harms in practical ways.

An evaluation (Tseng Y.P et al., 2019) of outcomes after 24 months of the EYEP, has highlighted that the program has improved both children’s cognitive and non-cognitive development – primarily their IQ, resilience and social-emotional development with scores for social, emotional and cognitive outcomes similar to the general population.

Related recommendations

While EYEP is a targeted model to transition children into a quality universal ECEC service, broader ISP funding can ensure improvements in children's learning and development gained through the targeted, birth to three program, are sustained.

The ISP provides valuable assistance to children with additional needs and recognises the impact of more intensive support to assist children's learning and well-being. Further enhancements to the program can ensure children's and families' needs are better met and that service providers are equipped to support them.

- Widen eligibility for the Inclusion Support Program, for example, to better support children known to child protection or engaged with child protection services.
- Increase the hours funded by the Inclusion Support Subsidy (ISS) to reflect hours attended by the child.
- Increase the ISS rate to better align with the cost of employing an additional worker.

Recommendation 7:

Fund and implement the action plan underpinning the new National Children’s Education and Care Workforce Strategy to be delivered in mid-2021, to ensure a supply of quality ECEC professionals to the workforce.



“Myself and my wife are not natural teachers and found our children struggle to concentrate on what was asked. A professional influence was needed.”

- Parent/carer (The Front Project, 2020)



The opportunity

The Australian Government can spearhead actions relating to the Workforce Strategy.

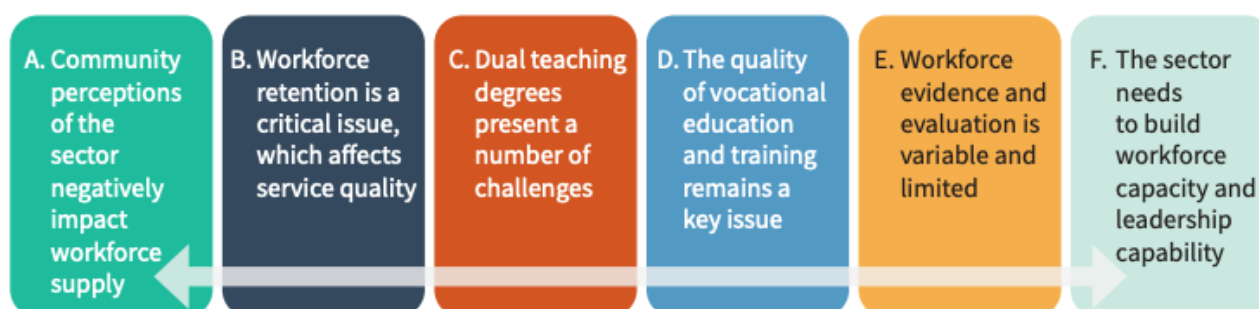
A quality ECEC workforce will drive positive outcomes for children and meet families’ expectations. The Australian Government, working with Australian states and territories governments, and the sector, can jointly create positive impact:

- Supply – Investing in attracting, retaining, and upskilling the ECEC workforce will be critical to meeting demand for the ECEC workforce. According to the National Industry Insights Report (AISC, 2020), demand for early childhood teachers is expected to grow by 22 per cent by 2023, with the overall sector (including Certificate and Diploma qualified educators) is expected to grow by 27,600 jobs by the end of 2020.
- Quality – The quality of the ECEC workforce has both a direct and indirect impact on children’s outcomes through process and structural quality, respectively (Ishimine et al. 2010).

Preliminary work for the Workforce Strategy has identified a number of areas that could be met through government policy responses.

ACECQA’s (2019) preliminary research and analysis to progress a national approach to workforce has identified a number of themes relating to the ECEC workforce, as outlined in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Six themes identified through ACECQA’s research



Source: ACECQA, 2019

Benefits of the recommended solution

TFP anticipates that the Workforce Strategy and associated action plan will be comprehensive, outline clear roles and responsibilities for key players across the ECEC system and propose tangible steps to building the future workforce.

Potential solutions can respond to structural barriers that impact efforts to attract and retain quality staff within the profession. TFP's work through Future Tracks, a social enterprise that enables early childhood teachers, educators and leaders to enhance the quality and impact of their work, sheds light on many of these barriers, and aligns with ACECQA's preliminary findings, specifically:

- **The distinction between education and care** – The critical work of teachers and educators in supporting children's learning and well-being is not broadly recognised. This lack of recognition impacts how early childhood teachers and educators view their role; the industrial conditions governing their employment; and their role within the broader education system.
- **Transition to employment** – Research commissioned by Future Tracks to better understand Early Childhood Teacher (ECT) graduate capabilities has found that there is a misalignment between what employers want and the level of capabilities that new ECT graduates bring to their workplaces.
- **Career pathways** – In 2019, Future Tracks conducted research to better understand the barriers and motivations for diploma-qualified educators in upskilling to become an early childhood teacher. The research found that 84 per cent of educators surveyed had considered upskilling to become ECTs, but said they faced major barriers in doing so. Barriers included the financial burden of upskilling; low awareness about the value/opportunities from an ECT role; concerns about the value of university courses, academic supports and application process; and limited support from the workplace to upskill.
- **Professional development** – Market research commissioned by Future Tracks has identified the many barriers to educators and teachers accessing quality professional development including time (busy and conflicting schedules); lack of access to backfill to undertake professional development; and the cost of external offerings.

Related recommendations

- Accelerate implementation of actions under the strategy to equip the ECEC workforce to address challenges arising from COVID-19 – such as responding to families' with complex needs.
- Invest in evidence-based professional development, targeted at centre leaders in services in disadvantaged communities to significantly lift the capability of the sector to increase and sustain quality and attendance. OECD research shows that changes in preparation and professional development, credentialing and compensation can grow the effectiveness of the ECEC leadership pool (Douglass, A., 2019).

- Incentivise providers to upskill and grow the capability of their workforce. A number of ECEC providers are investing in their workforces to enhance the capability and support mechanisms that teachers and educators need to be most effective in their work, and to address supply shortages. This investment includes providing scholarships, backfill, mentoring and coaching support for diploma-qualified educators to undertake a bachelor's degree.
- Identify opportunities for collaboration across ECEC providers, education providers and students to build a pipeline of talent.

The Front Project is an independent national enterprise working to create positive change in Australia's early childhood education system. thefrontproject.org.au



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