

Upskilling in early childhood education

Opportunities for the current workforce

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About Future Tracks

Future Tracks is a new social enterprise under the umbrella of The Front Project. Future Tracks is committed to attracting and supporting the next generation of teachers and leaders in early childhood education.

About The Front Project

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

About dandolopartners

dandolopartners is a management consulting firm specialising in public policy. It works across a range of projects in education, industry policy, health and human services, research and innovation.

Research conducted by:

dandolopartners

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Executive summary



Early childhood education is critical to laying the foundation children need to succeed in school and beyond.

Early childhood teachers (ECTs) are instrumental to children's development and lifting the quality of early learning environments.

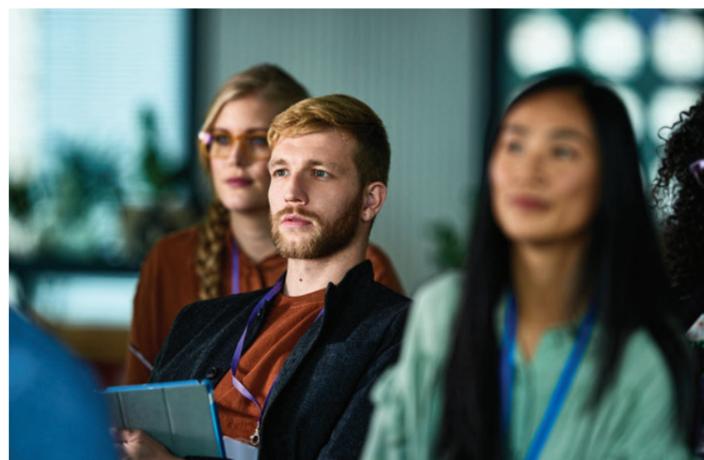
However, Australia has a significant shortage of ECTs and, without intervention, will fail to meet future workforce requirements.

The Australian Government predicts that the sector will need to fill an additional 29,000 ECT jobs in Australia by 2023. If action is not taken soon, one-third of preschool services will not have a trained teacher on staff within four years.

Upskilling the current workforce is one potential strategy to increase the number and quality of bachelor-qualified teachers working in the early years.

Future Tracks commissioned this research to better understand what can be done to support the existing diploma-trained educator workforce to upskill to a bachelor qualification and ECT role. The research focused on identifying the barriers and motivations this cohort of educators experiences in relation to upskilling.

The research found that 84% of educators surveyed had considered upskilling to become ECTs, but said they faced major barriers in doing so. This is reflected in the relatively small number of educators choosing to take advantage of current upskilling opportunities.



The report identifies five key themes (real and perceived) relating to the barriers to educators upskilling to a bachelor's qualification:

-  1 Mixed perceptions and low awareness about the value and opportunities of an ECT role and qualification
-  2 The challenge of managing workload and family commitments with study
-  3 Concerns about the value of university courses, academic supports and application process
-  4 Limited support and challenging conditions within the workplace
-  5 Financial burden and risk of upskilling is too high

The themes are discussed in detail in the body of this report.

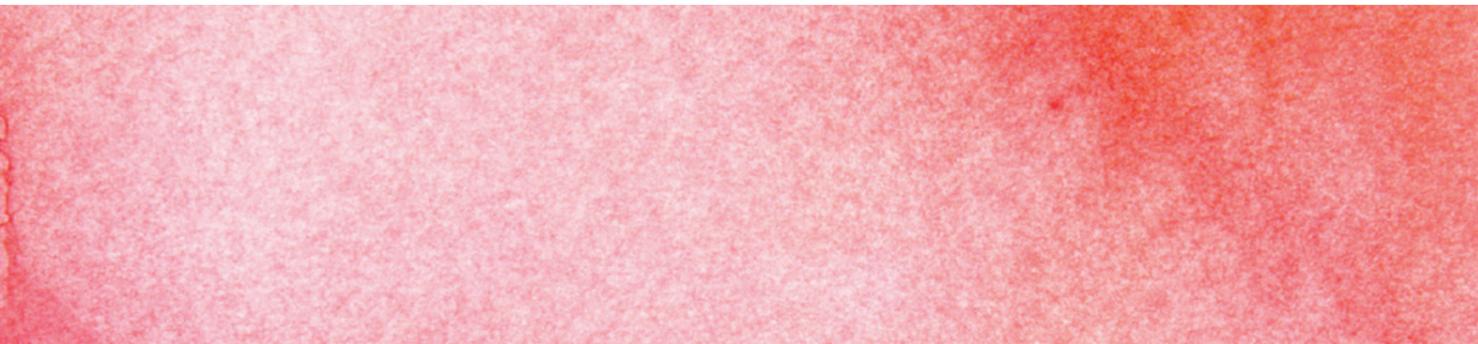
In addition to the barriers, the research also identified three key factors which motivate educators to upskill to ECT roles:

- 1 Easily accessible information on courses and career opportunities
- 2 Financial supports and incentives, for example paid study leave
- 3 Guaranteed jobs as ECTs at the conclusion of their study

Based on the findings, the report offers a series of recommendations about the role that governments, providers, universities and Future Tracks can play in motivating and supporting early childhood educators to upskill to ECT bachelor qualifications.



Introduction



Why early childhood education?

Early childhood education lays the foundations for the social, emotional and cognitive skills that children need to succeed in school and beyond.

Brain development in the early years happens at a speed not seen at any other stage in life. Research shows that children who access quality learning experiences in the early years are more likely to experience more positive lifetime outcomes in a variety of areas, including schooling and education as well as health and wellbeing.

There are clear community benefits from providing children with access to quality early learning. Research commissioned by The Front Project shows that every \$1 invested in early childhood education returns \$2 back to children, parents, government and business over a child's life, in reduced welfare dependence, higher earning capacity, improved health outcomes and reduction in crime.¹

Why early childhood teachers?

Australian and international research consistently demonstrates the significant impact that a high-quality learning environment has on a child's outcomes. The education, qualifications, training and stability of the workforce are the most influential factors affecting the quality of the learning environment.²

There is a direct correlation between the quality of a learning environment in early childhood settings and teacher qualifications.^{3,4} Research also shows that teachers with early childhood specialisations have an even more significant impact on children's learning than those who do not have an early childhood specialisation.⁵

Unfortunately, Australia does not have enough early childhood teachers (ECTs) to meet current and projected demand.

The Australian Government estimates we will need to fill 29,000 ECT jobs in Australia by 2023 to cater for the projected population of preschool age children.⁶ If nothing is done to address the situation, one-third of all preschool centres will not have a trained teacher on staff within four years.⁷

The demand for teachers is underpinned by changes in the policy and regulatory environments across Australia, as well as growing demand from parents for high-quality, teacher-delivered programs.

From 2020, new regulations will require each long day care and preschool service to have at least two degree-qualified ECTs⁸ in all services where 60 or more children are in attendance.⁹ Additionally, Victoria and the Australian Capital Territory are rolling out three-year-old kindergarten programs, which will require more bachelor-trained preschool teachers.

The early childhood sector is predominantly comprised of Certificate III and diploma-trained staff, with 72% of the workforce citing a vocational qualification as their highest academic achievement.¹⁰ There are many Certificate III and diploma-qualified educators with extensive experience and commitment to the sector who deliver quality programs for children.

Tapping into the skills and commitment of these educators is one strategy to address the increased demand for ECTs. With the right support, educators can successfully upskill and increase the number of bachelor-qualified teachers working in the early years. However, current numbers of diploma-trained educators upskilling to bachelor qualifications are small.

1:2 

\$1 invested in early childhood education returns \$2 back over a child's life

29,000

Number of ECT jobs required in Australia by 2023.



72% 

Number of people in the workforce citing a vocational qualification as their highest academic achievement.

This research was commissioned to understand why this is the case, and what can be done to address the barriers and increase enrolment and completion in undergraduate ECT programs.

While there is significant literature on Australia's early learning sector and the challenges faced by its workforce, research on motivations and barriers to upskilling is limited.

To that end, Future Tracks engaged dandolopartners to conduct a research project.

The research sought to answer three key questions:

What are the motivations and barriers for educators looking to upskill to an ECT role?

What can be done to reduce barriers and / or maximise existing opportunities to upskill?

How can Future Tracks better support educators, the wider sector and governments to realise such opportunities?



Methodology

The research used a mixed methods approach to arrive at key findings.

The project methodology included:

Literature review



This included a comprehensive review of existing research on the value of early childhood education and challenges associated with upskilling. It is important to note that while there is vast literature on the early childhood workforce as it relates to learner outcomes and work conditions, there is limited evidence on upskilling as a specific pathway or career opportunity.

Qualitative research



This included six national online and face-to-face focus groups. Focus groups were held with diploma-qualified educators, educators currently studying to be an ECT, and current ECTs. The project also included a series of interviews with key stakeholders.

Quantitative research



This included a cost-benefit analysis of the costs for an educator to upskill and the potential financial benefits from doing so. A national survey of 400 educators was also conducted.

The current workforce

The early childhood education workforce is large and varied. Educators (certificate or diploma-qualified staff) and ECTs work across different settings in Australia, including preschools, long day care, family day care, in-home care, occasional care, vacation care and outside school hours care.

Educators and ECTs are the two major professions responsible for delivering early childhood education services. Both make important contributions to the delivery of high-quality services to children. However, there are distinct differences between them.

Educators create a healthy and stimulating environment for children

Educators are Certificate III or diploma-trained staff. Qualifications have been obtained through VET providers.

Educators support children through:

- Planning and leading daily activities
- Actively contributing to education programs for children
- Addressing emotional, cognitive, social, intellectual and physical learning needs of children

ECTs significantly impact a child's development through high-quality learning experiences

ECTs are bachelor-qualified teachers. They have a four-year tertiary qualification in early childhood teaching or a dual qualification in early childhood and primary teaching.

ECTs working in early learning services:

- Support children by delivering high-quality learning using a variety of approaches, including play-based and intentional learning pedagogies
- Have a deep and concentrated understanding about cognitive, social and emotional development in the first five years of a child's life
- Promote children's learning through developing and delivering learning experiences that increase their positive sense of identity, wellbeing and sense of place in community
- Offer situated learning opportunities that allow children to transition to primary school with confidence and a thorough foundation for learning

Quick facts on the workforce¹¹

91%

of the early childhood workforce identify as female

2%

of the workforce identify as Indigenous

11.9%

of the early childhood workforce have a bachelor degree or above

55%

of the early childhood workforce are employed in long day care services



Despite growing need, enrolments and interest in early childhood undergraduate qualifications are decreasing.

Across Australia there are around 4,000 students enrolled in early childhood education teaching degrees per year.¹² Research has shown the completion rates across Australia for initial teacher training undergraduate degrees in early learning are as little as 20%.¹³

The data points to a forecast of graduating teachers far below predicted demand of 29,000 ECTs by 2023.



Existing research



There is a wealth of evidence that explores the value of early education and workforce challenges. However, there is little published research on upskilling the current workforce.

This summary of the existing research on upskilling is divided into two parts:

Qualification – what are the major barriers to educators completing a Bachelor of Education in Early Childhood?

Role – what are the major barriers to educators wanting to become an ECT?

Barriers to obtaining a bachelor's degree in early childhood teaching

Many educators do not see themselves as 'ready' for university.

Those who do are generally motivated to become primary or secondary school teachers.¹⁴ Another perceived hurdle for many educators is navigating university entry and eligibility requirements.

Educators need to balance their existing work schedule with study.

There are a variety of modes of university study, including part-time and off-campus study for initial teacher education undergraduate programs. Educators find navigating the options confusing and many courses offer no additional support for mature-aged students returning to study.

Recognition of prior learning is inconsistent.

Each university offers different processes and outcomes for recognition of previous study and experience (recognition of prior learning). Many processes to recognise prior learning are not initiated until after a student has enrolled, which means students don't know how much credit they will get until after they have enrolled, making it hard to compare different courses.

Support for upskilling varies between workplaces.

Workplaces, centre directors and employers have significant influence in educators' decisions to upskill. By creating a culture of professional development and learning they can encourage educators to do further study.

They can also support educators to upskill in many practical ways, from giving them time off to support their studies to offering work experience placement leave and financial incentives to enrol and complete courses.

The lack of this kind of support is a significant barrier to educators. Providing this support is especially difficult in small services due to financial constraints and in regional or remote areas where services are short-staffed.

Barriers to educators wanting to become ECTs

Educators consider other teacher settings more attractive than ECT. This attitude is based on real and perceived salary, working conditions and professional status.

Educators do not perceive the pay and status differential between educator and ECT significant enough to spend time and money on upskilling. Educators considered the cost of studying too high compared with the benefits of ECT role.

Educators may already be experiencing burnout and stress, with limited mentoring and skill development support.

Workplaces lack career progression opportunities once educators are bachelor qualified.

Educators are reluctant to commit to a career in early childhood due to structural conditions.

Early childhood educators are not upskilling to become teachers

Early childhood educators are a large workforce – many have the potential to upskill to an ECT role

The majority of the early education workforce (72%) are educators with vocational qualifications at either Certificate III (current minimum standard for working in the sector) or diploma level.¹⁵

Only 11.9% of the early education workforce hold a bachelor degree.¹⁶ There is a large untapped cohort of educators who have worked in the sector, dedicated themselves to the work, know the challenges of the profession and are working with loyalty and commitment. They are an obvious place to start addressing the impending teacher shortage.



Thinking about the potential to upskill, we know that:

- Many educators are high-performing and assume leadership roles as centre directors, room or educational leaders and other educational responsibilities without an ECT qualification¹⁷
- Overall, retention in the sector is low, yet around 30% of early childhood educators have over 10+ years of experience¹⁸
- Early education is a diverse work environment with a range of different skillsets and settings
- There are specific university courses that cater to educators looking to upskill through recognised prior learning, reducing the time and number of placements required to obtain a bachelor's degree
- Diploma-qualified educators upskilling to become ECTs would be able to practice as ECTs sooner than school-leavers or career-change cohorts

Our research shows that 84% of educators surveyed have considered upskilling, but they report major barriers in five areas.



Why aren't educators upskilling to become teachers?

The research identified five major barriers for educators upskilling to an ECT role.



Barrier 1: There are mixed perceptions and low awareness about the value and opportunities of an ECT role and qualification

Educators identified that the benefits of upskilling are not always clear. Different wage and working conditions between the two roles are not always transparent to educators.

Research found that many educators had no idea about what an ECT is paid, and whether an ECT had extra planning time or different working conditions to themselves. Only half the educators surveyed noted that a higher wage is one of three major differences between their role and that of an ECT.

'I'm not sure what an ECT gets paid' – educator

Some educators had outdated information about ECT job availability and prospects. Many educators and some ECTs indicated little to no awareness of the shortfall of ECTs in the sector. Some educators had heard about educators who upskilled but did not find an ECT role in the past.

This creates apprehension around upskilling and reduces the appeal, especially considering the financial and personal investment required.

Educators believe more could be done to promote and clarify job prospects, both at a workplace and university level.

Many educators describe the ECT role as high-stress and high-burden. Research revealed a tendency for some educators to associate the ECT role with extra paperwork and responsibility, rather than with high-quality teaching and learning opportunities for children.

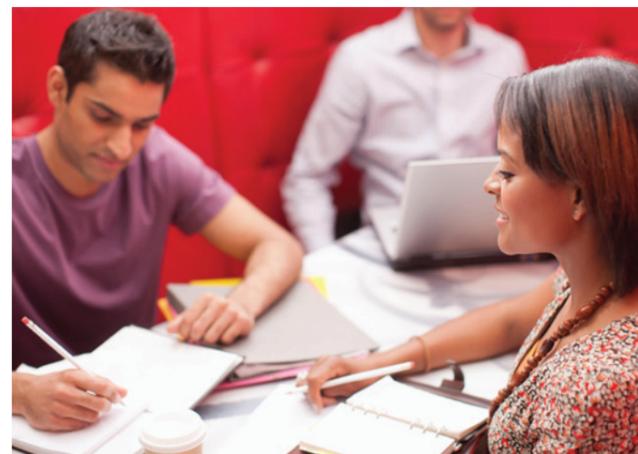
Forty-six per cent of educators surveyed identified this as one of three major differences between their role and an ECT role.

'The biggest challenges I think within an ECT role is all the paperwork that is not necessarily required but is expected of you' – educator

This suggests there is a need for increased clarity, visibility, communication and recognition of what an ECT does, and how it is complementary but different to the role of an educator. Greater emphasis on the value of early childhood teaching within the workforce as it relates to children's outcomes and career progression is a vital next step.

In summary, educators who are unaware of specific benefits of becoming an ECT do not see upskilling as an attractive or compelling opportunity.

'At this point in time I would not upskill unless I would be given a job at my current service' – educator



Barrier 2: The challenge of managing workload and family commitments with study

Educators said they already felt stressed, time-poor and worked long hours in current roles. Educators commonly receive two hours of planning time per week, which they consider too low. The research found that many educators took work home to complete their work requirements. Educators said they felt hesitant to add study to their workload, especially those who also said that they did not have a clear view of what studying at university would be like.

'I would need to prioritise finishing my work over study' – educator

Similarly, some educators found it difficult to juggle long hours with personal commitments in their current roles. They indicated that this would be exacerbated if also studying at university. Approximately 70% of educators said they avoided upskilling because of the pressures of work and home life.

'I am aware that it is a pathway from diploma, but I wouldn't want to do ECT due to family commitments' – educator

Educators who were currently upskilling and ECTs who had completed an upskill pathway agreed that time management is the most challenging aspect of upskilling due to the current structures of work hours and university requirements.

Educators felt that there was a significant knowledge gap pertaining to the time university study would take out of their already full schedules. While accepting that an online course would allow for the flexibility they would need to complete study, educators felt that the potential isolation and lack of support in this mode of study meant there was a significant risk they would not complete the course.

'Time management is a real challenge trying to balance work, home life and studies' – educator who is upskilling

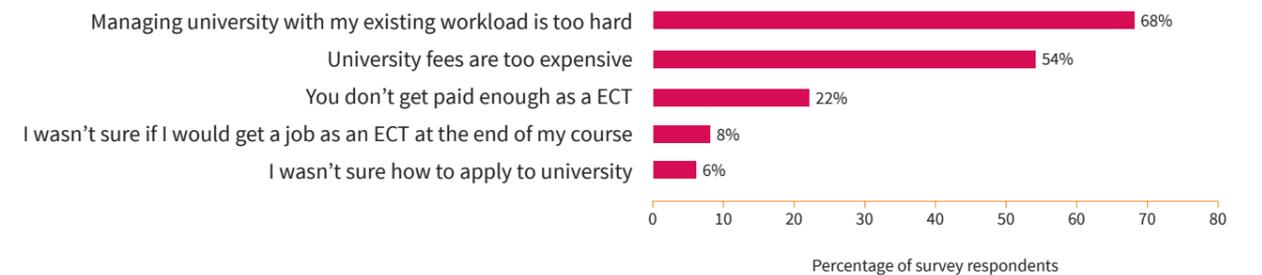


Figure 1: Educator views on what prevented them from upskilling to an ECT role¹⁹

‘Low course completion rates demonstrate the importance of providing educators with guidance around course options before they commence study’



Barrier 3: Concerns about the value of university courses, academic supports and application process

There are a range of factors about the variety and quality of university qualifications that impacted the decision for educators to enrol in early childhood teaching degrees.

Some educators felt anxiety about their capacity to undertake academic study. Thirty per cent of educators said they are not confident in their ability to study at university²⁰.

Australian and international research has found that capability and confidence to learn affects student engagement, resilience and motivation while studying at university.

The lack of confidence is a significant barrier for educators, many of whom do not see themselves as ‘ready’ for study because of a lack of familiarity with university structures and standards, writing essays, and navigating academic readings.

‘I wonder if I am good enough and I am worried about all the extra work that you have to do and the responsibilities’

– educator

Educators upskilling and ECTs revealed that their level of confidence generally depended on the academic supports available:

- Some ECTs felt that their initial concerns around confidence and capability did not play out in reality. These ECTs mentioned positive academic support from staff and mentors at university, and a growing confidence to complete the work over the duration of the course
- Others found studying difficult because of limited support and unclear guidance about coursework and structure

‘My main concerns were originally doubting that I would have the skills again to be an academic, but it seems that I am managing better than I had expected’ – educator upskilling

There is a perception that universities don’t appropriately recognise prior work experience in the sector. Work experience in the early childhood education sector is not always acknowledged or valued in the ECT qualification.

The research indicated a significant knowledge gap for some educators around the depth and concentrated application of knowledge that is acquired as part of an initial teacher education undergraduate degree. Because of this, educators felt their knowledge and experience were not significantly less than that of a bachelor-qualified teacher.

This, coupled with a knowledge gap on the different ways that credit is assessed in vocational education compared to the higher education sector, meant that educators felt the credit arrangements offered by universities were inadequate.

Educators’ beliefs around lack of recognition of experience focused on three main aspects:

Adequacy: Educators felt that the content covered in the undergraduate courses was equivalent to what they had already experienced in their vocational studies, which led some educators to feel the degree was a ‘waste of time’.

Consistency: Educators felt that their qualifications and experience was not properly recognised. There is no consistent standard among universities for attributing credit for prior learning and work experience to reduce course duration.

Certainty: Educators were uncertain of how much credit they would be given for prior learning. Most university processes do not assess and apply credit arrangements until after a course application has been accepted. This means that educators do not know how long it will take to get their qualification until after they have been accepted into the Bachelor program.

‘Other people with a bachelor’s degree can do one year of study and instantly become more senior than us even though we’ve worked in the industry for over 12 years’ – educator

Given this, some educators are frustrated and feel that it is not ‘worth’ going to university because of the time required to learn skills they believe they have already gained from vocational study and years of experience.

Anecdotal evidence suggests this perception may be influenced in part by educators placing a lower value on formal education, seeing on-the-job experience as the most beneficial type of learning.

Research also suggests that these views will reinforce the belief that university is ‘not for them’, or that they already have skills needed to be successful in a more senior role.

It’s difficult to find the right course. Some educators indicated that it is difficult to navigate university courses because of:

- Inconsistent information available on course offerings
- Variation between courses in terms of mode of study and year-levels taught (birth to five, or birth to eight etc).
- Inconsistent admission processes
- Lack of guidance around where to find, and how to select, the right course

Similarly, some educators believe applying for university is burdensome due to application fees and navigating the paperwork.

‘I don’t really know where to look or how to find the best course on the uni websites’ – educator

In addition to the barriers outlined above, research suggests that some educators who enrol in Bachelor qualifications struggle to complete the degree.

There are low rates of course retention and completion. Many educators start upskill programs, but do not complete them. In 2016, only 16% of undergraduates who enrolled in initial early education bachelor degree courses completed the degree in a four-year period.²¹

While the data does not explain the reasons for this, anecdotal evidence suggests it is driven by students transferring into dual, primary or secondary teaching degrees or other university degrees, going part time to work or withdrawing from university.

This is in comparison to the 56% four-year completion rate for primary and secondary initial teaching undergraduate degrees.²²

Without the right supports, research suggests that the educator workforce may be at risk of low completion rates because of:

- High staff turnover within services, particularly in regional centres. This creates an insecure environment for study as workplace conditions and study support may not be comparable across services²³
- Financial insecurity and pressure. This particularly affects low socio-economic students, whose retention, success at, and completion of, university degrees has decreased since 2010²⁴
- Mode of study. Educators generally continue working as they study, and people who study part-time or off-campus have a higher risk of not completing bachelor degrees²⁵

Educators who have taken a break or only completed some units at university also face barriers to completing their degrees. Those who withdrew or took a break said they felt like they ‘wasted their money’, but did not know how to re-enrol and obtain course credits for previous study in a new university setting.

‘I have a half-finished degree, it’s hard to know where I would end up at another uni if I wanted to finish it’ – educator

The low course completion rates demonstrate the importance of providing educators with guidance around course options before they commence study.

‘Concerns about financial security represented the most significant barrier, particularly whether the investment (in upskilling) would be worthwhile’



Barrier 4: There may be limited support and challenging conditions within the workplace to support upskilling

Workplaces may contribute to negative attitudes about upskilling. Employers might inadvertently disincentivise staff to upskill because of a lack of investment in professional development, high turnover of staff or limited resources to release employees to study.²⁶

‘My manager said to me: “Why would you do that? You don’t need to do that” – educator

Thirty-four per cent of educators said they were unsure whether their workplace would support them to study.²⁷ When asked about the potential for support, 43% of educators said they would be more inclined to study if their workplace offered paid study leave. Others remarked on the need for more encouragement and positive role models and mentors.

‘I had wonderful role models and mentors over the course of my early childhood career, who always encouraged me to continue to study and upskill’ – educator currently upskilling

While some early childhood education providers have established programs to support educators (such as scholarships), the research shows that educators were unaware of these opportunities, or did not think the support provided was sufficient to ensure they could successfully complete the degree.

The early childhood education sector is considered to have low salaries and poor working conditions. Many of the challenges of working in an educator role are seen to be the same as or exacerbated for ECTs.

For example:

- There may be less time to do more work and limited planning hours
- ECTs may face isolation from other peers due to the limited number of ECTs in the workplace
- There may be minimal mentoring and career progression opportunities

This highlights the lack of awareness and information on the benefits of an ECT role. Many educators do not have a clear understanding of the differences in working conditions between educators and ECTs, including the different industrial awards.

Further, there is limited information available on the career opportunities, both within services and the sector more broadly, available to ECTs. Some educators even reported that upskilling would reduce their career opportunities.

‘Before I became an ECT, I have heard numerous stories about how busy and possibly emotionally challenging the role is. However, I wish I knew that the paperwork is beyond what I could ever imagine. The number of hours given to finish the task is way too little’ – early childhood teacher



Barrier 5: The financial burden and risk of upskilling is too high

Concerns about financial security represented the most significant barrier, particularly whether the investment would be worthwhile.

Educators felt:

- The upfront cost of paying for the ECT qualification is too expensive. A 2017 report found that more than 40% of early childhood education employees who were not currently studying stated that the cost of studying was too high²⁸
- Their income reduces their capacity to pay for extra study, particularly for low-income families (e.g. educator is the breadwinner) or for educators who may not qualify for commonwealth support (HECS-HELP place) based on citizenship
- The opportunity cost of studying is high. Missing paid days of employment to study is not sustainable in terms of financial security

The financial investment is not proportionate to the increase in pay. Sixty six per cent of educators surveyed said the increased pay rate of an ECT did not make the investment in study worthwhile.²⁹

This presents a very significant barrier.

Conversely, the survey results also showed that financial considerations rated highly as possible factors to motivate upskilling, alongside guaranteed employment.



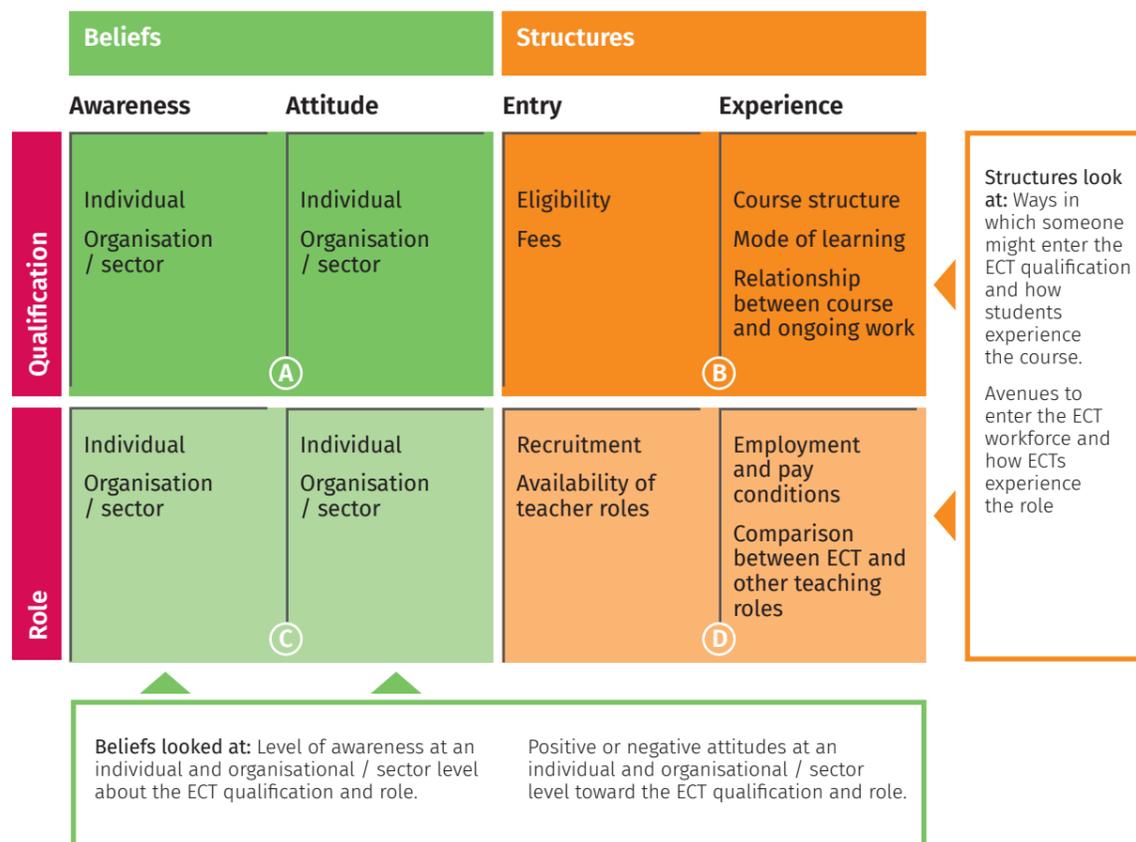
Approach to research

The research arrived at findings through three steps.

1. Conceptual framework

A conceptual framework was designed to help organise the research. The framework allowed analysis of barriers and opportunities for upskilling, and clearly identified priority areas.

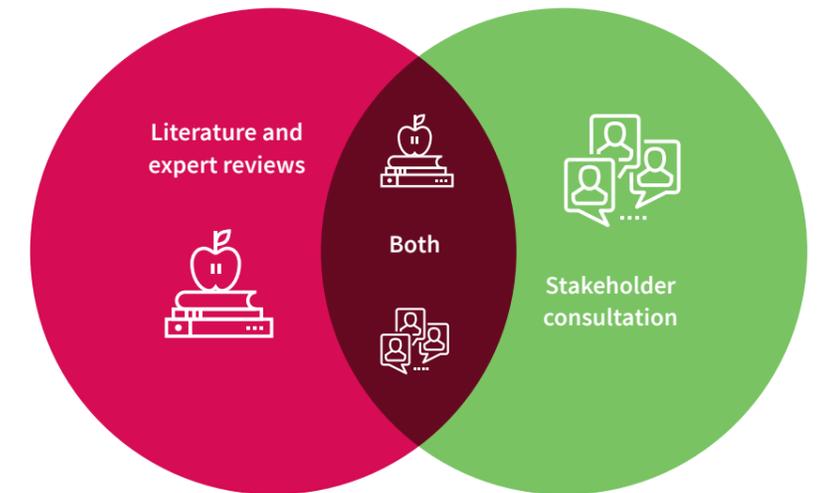
The framework was organised around an upskill journey in four stages:



2. Mapping findings

Second, through a literature review and stakeholder consultation, findings were mapped against the conceptual framework. Stakeholder consultation included interviews, face-to-face and online focus groups, and a survey of 400 educators.

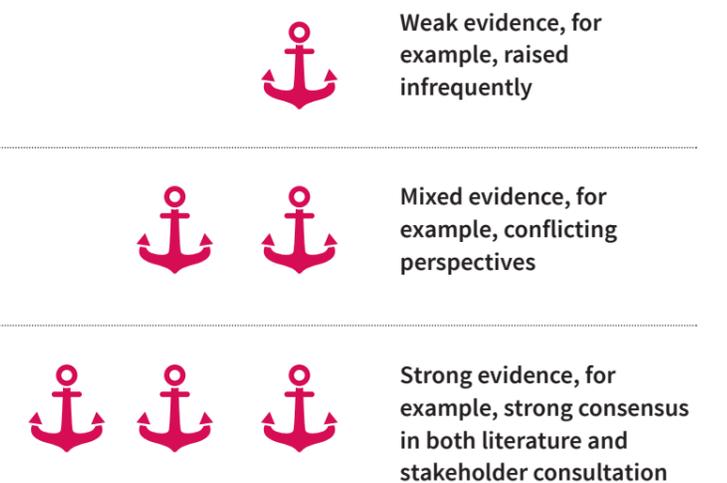
Findings were attributed to each source of research:



3. Weighing evidence

Finally, the research attempted to 'weight' evidence based on consistency and frequency. The table below represents a weighted perception of views.

Most major themes presented here represent the strongest evidence base available in this project, however some evidence is mixed, which is evident in the diversity of themes captured.



Cost Benefit Analysis

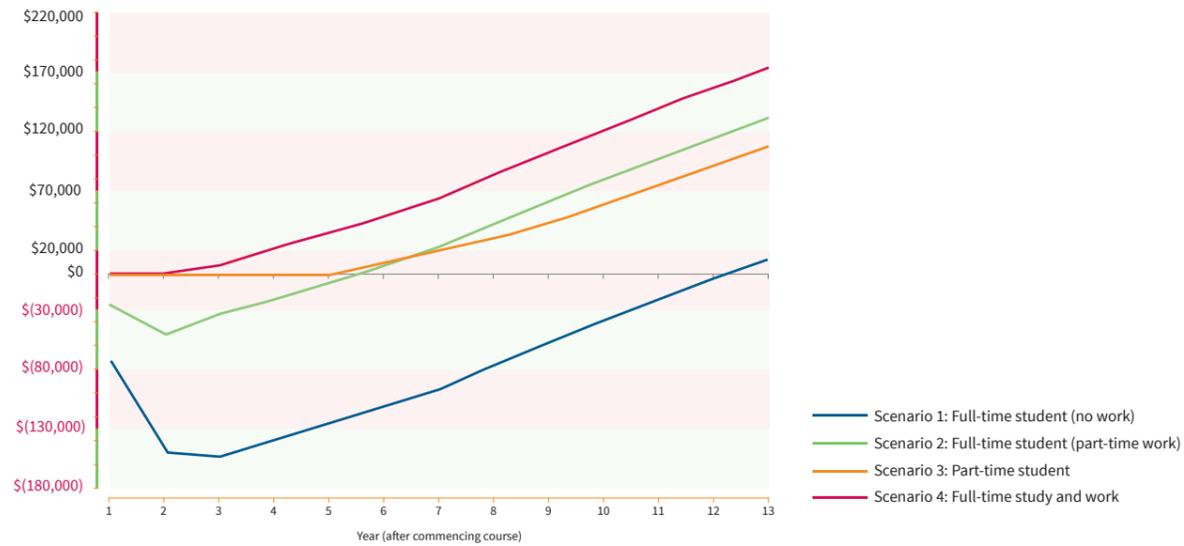


Figure 2: Cost-benefit analysis for upskilling to an ECT role

To better understand the financial risk for an educator considering upskilling, a cost-benefit analysis was undertaken as part of this project. The cost-benefit analysis explored four different upskilling scenarios and potential implications for educators.

The following assumptions were made:

University degree: Educators attain a Bachelor of Early Childhood Education at La Trobe University

Recognition of prior learning: Educators are able to shorten the course length to 2.5 years with credits obtained from a diploma. Educators who opt to do a part-time degree complete the course in 5 years.

Student loan: Educators receive a HELP loan. Loan repayment rates are based on the 2019-20 income year.

Income: Educators' and teachers' salaries are based on the latest contractual agreements (Victorian Early Childhood Teachers and Educators Agreement 2017 and Victoria Government Schools Agreement 2018).

Employment: Upon degree completion, educators are immediately upgraded and employed at an early childhood service or primary school.

Discount rate: A discount rate of 3% is applied to the potential income gains / benefits. The discount rate reflects the time-value of money and makes it possible to compare costs or payments (cash flows) over time. In an education model, the discount rate puts less weight on benefits far in the future.

The cost benefit analysis shows that the value from switching to an early childhood teacher (from diploma-qualified educator income) is highest for those who continue to receive full-time pay while studying full time (Scenario 4) as they continue to receive the same salary while studying.

Educators who choose to do a part-time degree stand to attain lower financial benefits of over a 10-year period as they will start work as a teacher later compared to those who do a full-time degree (Scenario 3).

While financially beneficial, working and studying full time is unlikely without support from employers in the form of paid leave.

The four scenarios are explored through four different educators:

Sophie (Scenario 1) leaves employment to study full-time.

Sanjeev (Scenario 2) decides to study full-time and reduce his workload to part-time.

Mai Lin (Scenario 3) decides to study part-time and keep working full-time.

Marta (Scenario 4) studies full-time and works full-time.

Sophie: Scenario 1



Sophie is 42 years old and runs her own family a day care business. She obtained a diploma in 2010 after the introduction of the National Quality Framework.

While she loves running her own business, she now wants the flexibility to work in a kindergarten setting. Sophie decides to go back to university full time.

Because of the demands of running a small business, she closes her family day care.

While Sophie is able to become a teacher in 2.5 years, the lost wages mean that she doesn't recoup her costs until 12 years after she commences study.

She will not be better off in 10 years' time, and will still be \$40,925 behind due to lost income while studying.

Sanjeev: Scenario 2



Sanjeev is 22 years old and currently working for a local government run long day care. He obtained a diploma straight out of school and has been working for two years. He always wanted to go to university, but wanted to earn some money first.

He has been mentored by one of the ECTs at his service for the past 12 months and is now confident that he has what it takes to succeed at university.

Wanting to make the most of the university experience, he decides to study full time and reduce his hours at work from 38 to 20 per week.

By studying full time, Sanjeev is able to complete his qualification in 2.5 years and gets a job as an ECT straight away. Six years after commencing his study, he has recouped his costs. By studying full time, he also starts earning a higher income faster, and over a 10-year period earns an additional \$80,341 (compared to what he would have earned as an educator).

Mai Lin: Scenario 3



Mai Lin is a 38-year-old educator currently working for a large long day care provider. She loves working with children and always wanted to work in an early years setting. She obtained her Certificate III through the VET in schools program and then completed her diploma at a large TAFE.

She has been working in the industry for 20 years now. Despite not seeing herself as a 'university' person, Mai Lin's employer successfully encourages her to enrol in an early childhood teaching degree, citing

her excellent practice and the growing demand for people with this qualification.

On advice from colleagues, Mai Lin decides to study part time and work full time. It will take Mai Lin five years to complete her degree. Mai Lin will incur financial costs while she is studying, including enrolment fees, books and materials, and course fees (deferred to a Commonwealth supported HELP loan). Based on this scenario, Mai Lin will recoup the costs of her degree in six years (see Figure 3) and make an additional \$60,628 over 10 years.

Marta: Scenario 4



Marta is 50 and has been working in the sector for the past five years. She works for a for-profit long day care provider. After her children started high school, she made the decision to focus on her own career.

She first obtained a Certificate III and then worked her way through a diploma. With the support of her employer, she decides to obtain a bachelor's degree.

Marta wants to get her degree as quickly as possible, but also needs to keep working to support her family. She decides to continue working full time and to pursue full time study.

By earning a full-time salary while she studies, Marta will be able to recoup her costs within 6 months of finishing her degree. Over a 10-year period, she'll earn an additional \$122,782.



Figure 3: Cost-benefit analysis ECTs and primary school teachers

— Early childhood teacher
— Primary school teacher

Primary teaching can be a more attractive pathway for educators who upskill

Many undergraduate teacher qualifications at university combine early childhood and primary specialisations, which mean that graduates are qualified to teach in early childhood and primary school settings.

These courses have benefits for graduating teachers, but they are also problematic for a variety of reasons, one of which is examined here.

Forty-one per cent of educators identify a major difference between their role and an ECT role as an ECT's capacity to work in primary school settings.

Many educators consider it more valuable to upskill into another education setting (e.g. primary or secondary) or different sector because of:

- Better pay and conditions
- Greater professional status
- Improved career progression.

The research considered the impacts of upskilling into an ECT role compared to a primary teacher.³⁰ Analysis identified that primary school and early childhood teachers take about the same time to break even in a cost-benefit analysis, but that over a career, primary school teachers earn higher salaries.

For example, over a 10-year period, the total gains from upskilling to a primary school qualification* are between \$80,000 and \$160,000 (across scenarios 2–4).

This gain is around 20% higher than if the educator upskilled to be an ECT.

* Diploma-qualified educators may not receive the same amount of credit towards a dual (early childhood and primary) degree.

Motivations

In addition to barriers, the research also identified three key factors which motivate educators to upskill to ECT roles:

1. Easily accessible information on courses and career opportunities
2. Financial supports and incentives, for example paid study leave
3. Guaranteed jobs as ECTs at the conclusion of their study

Research showed that there is a high preference for financial relief to motivate upskilling. The graph below shows that paid study leave, higher pay as an ECT (compared to Diploma), and lower university fees are the most attractive incentives for upskilling.

In addition to the financial supports, educators also expressed a need for more information on upskilling opportunities, guidance on how to navigate university (from enrolment and acceptance to assignments and online learning platforms) and ongoing mentoring and support.

They also expressed a desire for greater information on career opportunities within their organisations. This could be achieved by centralising information about upskilling and ensuring there is easy-to-access and understand guidance to inform decisions.

By addressing the barriers facing educators, these motivations can be leveraged by providers, governments, universities and Future Tracks to ensure that educators are able to successfully obtain a bachelor's qualification in early education.

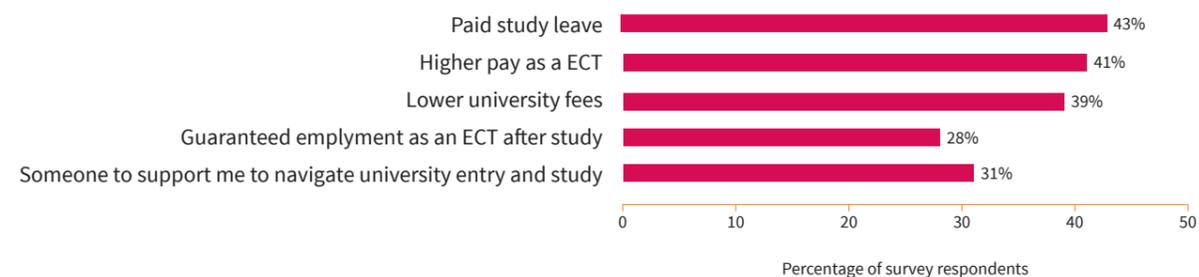


Figure 4: Educator views on what would motivate them to upskill to an ECT role³¹

Conclusion and recommendations

Upskilling the current workforce is critical to ensuring that Australia is able to meet the growing demand for quality, bachelor-qualified early childhood teachers.

Meeting this demand and ensuring a qualified, quality early childhood workforce is in the best interests of all stakeholders and the broader community, especially children and families.

Qualifications are a key contributor to quality learning environments for children in the early years and increasing the number of teachers with early childhood teaching specialisations provides an opportunity to improve quality across Australian early learning services.

Yet, as the research notes, the barriers to upskilling and gaining this specialist qualification for educators are significant. Addressing and reducing these barriers to ensure that all educators have the opportunity to advance their education and practice requires the collaboration of all stakeholders.

To that end, this report recommends actions for the following groups of stakeholders.

Early childhood education providers

Early childhood education providers are uniquely placed to support educators through upskilling.

A skilled and stable workforce is the most important factor in delivering quality learning outcomes for children. Investing in your workforce is a key strategy for improving retention, loyalty and effectiveness.

Invest in specific incentives to motivate upskilling.

This could include providing a combination of paid study and placement leave, bursaries or scholarships to cover university course fees, access to flexible working arrangements and mentoring and coaching.

Consider how you may be able to take advantage of federal or state government scholarships and funding to support your workforce.

Provide transparent information on career pathways and salaries.

Help educators to understand the opportunities available to them within your organisation by sharing information on ECT salaries, working conditions and available jobs.

The research demonstrates that if educators are aware of the potential salary gains and employment opportunities, they will be more likely to upskill.

Collaborate with other organisations to facilitate placement swaps for educators.

Taking leave to undertake university placements is one of the most significant barriers for educators considering upskilling. Offering placement swaps between providers and paying placement leave is one potential strategy to alleviate this burden.

Create a culture of learning.

Learning does not stop with children. Lack of confidence is one of the greatest initial barriers to upskilling, with many educators not perceiving themselves as 'ready' for university.

As an employer you have a role in promoting the confidence of your workforce by articulating their strengths and sense of professional identity. Educators with employers who actively support their study and value professional development are more likely to succeed.

Talk it up.

Talk about the benefits of becoming an ECT and the value they bring to your service and organisation. By highlighting the impact they have, you will be more likely to inspire educators to upskill.

Universities

Increasing the number of professionals within early childhood education sector with university qualifications is the most effective way to improve the quality.

Universities have a critical role in increasing the size and quality of the early childhood teaching workforce through providing clear enrolment information and recognising multiple pathways to entry to a university qualification, including work experience.

Universities can also provide continuous academic or financial support to assist students throughout their studies, especially for those who are working part time.

Strengthen academic support and pathway programs for those who need it. Ensure that these programs are easy to access, and that information is circulated to those who might need it most. A smooth transition to university can increase the chances of success for educators commencing study.

Provide upfront advice on recognition of prior learning and how to access it. Research shows that the lack of concrete information on recognition of prior learning is a disincentive to enrolling at university. Educators will be more likely to commence study if their TAFE qualifications are recognised for credit towards the degree.

Ensure study options are flexible to meet the needs of educators who are working. For students who are working and studying, flexibility is essential. While studying online is often the preference for students, it is important to provide opportunities for students to meet face-to-face and build communities of practice where possible. Provide easily accessible information on degree options, study placement and course structure up front.

Governments

State, Territory and Federal governments have a central role to play in setting the future policy direction of the early childhood sector. Supporting educators to enhance their qualifications and skills will ensure governments are able to meet the growing demand for quality teachers.

Policies should be focused on providing opportunities for educators to increase their own educational attainment, enabling them to earn a higher income, progress their careers and enhance the quality of education they deliver.

Develop centralised, easily accessible information on course options in your state or territory. Provide easily accessible information on study options, employment opportunities and financial incentives available to early childhood educators. Promote the profession and study opportunities in the same way as other priority industries.

Promote recognition of the importance of the early education sector. Ensure that early childhood teaching is promoted alongside primary and secondary teaching as a specialisation.

Create incentive programs to encourage people into the profession. Financial incentives can go a long way to removing barriers to upskilling. Ensure incentive programs (financial or otherwise) are structured to meet the needs of different cohorts, including educators who are upskilling.

For example, if providing scholarships to cover course costs, ensure that payments are provided at the same time as course costs are accrued. Also consider funding wrap around supports including transition support and mentoring to increase the chances of success.

Incentivise the professional development of the current workforce. Ensure that funding agreements adequately support the professional development of the early childhood workforce, including educators and teachers.

Ensure that upskilling the current workforce is a priority in a national, state and territory workforce development strategies. Upskilling the current workforce is a key strategy for meeting the growing demand for quality teachers and improving the quality of early childhood education services across the country.

Workforce strategies should promote the upskilling of the current workforce and provide funding to enhance professional development opportunities.

The role for Future Tracks

Future Tracks is in a unique position to address a number of barriers and motivations identified in this research.

There are opportunities for Future Tracks to address some of the barriers to upskilling in the short, medium and long term. Future Tracks can immediately address the barriers related to low awareness of the value and benefits of attaining a tertiary degree by working with the sector to provide educators with accurate and timely information to inform upskilling decisions.

Future Tracks can do this through targeted awareness raising and the creation of resources that promote the value of ECTs in early education, opportunities to upskill, and information and advice on upskilling and financial incentives.

In addition to awareness raising, Future Tracks has identified the need to develop and launch a new program that provides wraparound supports for educators looking to upskill.

The program will be informed by consideration of the key challenges at each stage of the upskill journey, from awareness to university course completion, and will tailor support to meet individual needs.

Broadly, and in collaboration with early childhood education providers and university partners, the Future Tracks upskill program will provide:

- Easily accessible information on upskilling opportunities
- Pre-enrolment support through webinars and information sessions
- Transition to university support including study skills sessions
- Access to a quality, trained, early childhood teacher mentor
- Access to communities of practice
- Leadership and professional development opportunities

In the medium and long term, Future Tracks should continue to collaborate with the early childhood sector, governments and universities to elevate the status of early childhood teaching as a rewarding and important career.

More information on upskilling initiatives can be found on the Future Tracks website.



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