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Project

Opportunities for system stewardship in early childhood education and care

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The earlier *What is system stewardship?* section outlined general aspects of system stewardship and explored the conditions required for a stewardship model to be successful. This paper presents findings from the literature review, case studies and consultations conducted with stakeholders across the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) system. It presents considerations for how those findings may be applied within the ECEC system in Australia.

The pathway towards system stewardship for ECEC in Australia

Some elements of system stewardship are already evident within Australia's ECEC system, such as rules and minimum standards, national partnerships, forums for coordination and cooperation, and mechanisms for feedback. Within several states and territories, tenets of stewardship have been formally adopted under the guise, and using the language, of system stewardship.

The movement towards system stewardship can be conceptualised as a process that leverages these solid foundations and discrete stewardship approaches into a cohesive and national journey. This could galvanise all system actors under a common goal and vision. A system stewardship model would require all actors to define their stewardship responsibilities in relation to each other – working to optimise roles collectively.

There is potential for the elements of stewardship to be increased within current system structures, and gains to be made across the challenges and opportunities outlined above. However, system stewardship presents a more fundamental shift, and requires a reimagining and redefining of the roles, relationships and rules across all elements of the system.

The two phases of the enquiry process

The process that informed these papers occurred in two phases. First, a robust review of existing evidence about systems stewardship was undertaken. This included Australian and international evidence in academic journals and grey literature.

Second, 46 stakeholders with expertise in systems thinking, governance reform and ECEC were consulted to provide their views on the potential of system stewardship as an opportunity for the Australian ECEC system. The stakeholders consulted included representatives from industry bodies, private ECEC service providers, advocacy groups, academia and government. This resource combines findings from published evidence and consultees' views about the opportunity to adopt a system stewardship model for the ECEC system.

Individuals consulted for this work were consistently advocates of ECEC and recognised the crucial role ECEC plays in Australia. Quality, access and workforce were the three most raised topics. Many consultees spoke about the deficits of the market-based ECEC model, fragmentation across both governance and service delivery, the impact of the complex system on child and family experiences, and the ability to enact reform.

Across the consultations, there was consensus on many of the challenges facing ECEC and the limitations of the current mixed-market model of provision. In response to this, system stewardship was generally seen as an opportunity to unite system participants through a common vision and support sustainable positive change. In this context, movement towards a system stewardship approach – to the extent this is characterised by a united vision, a cohesive decision-making environment and a clear articulation of how actors are expected to work together – may help to mitigate these ECEC system challenges.

Reactions to system stewardship

Many consultees reflected an appetite for wholesale system change within ECEC and reported a shift in conversations within the sector, with increasing attention being paid to the future of the sector. Several stakeholders suggested there is a sector-wide sentiment for change that is reminiscent of the periods of transformative reform in 2008–09. This mood was reflected in the high level of engagement and interest in this research by consultees.

Some representatives from the sector reflected on the critical risks of inaction, with fears the status quo may lead to instability or even a collapse of parts of the ECEC system.

The language and concept of system stewardship resonated strongly with most consultees. Many viewed themselves as playing a stewardship role already or recognised where the system had benefited from stewardship in the past.

While there was appetite for wholesale system change, caution was raised by several consultees on the risks that this carried, including the potential to damage areas of the system that are currently working well. Consultees largely agreed that incremental change towards a system stewardship model would be most effective. This would reduce the apparent magnitude of the task and allow measured, iterative change, which may better leverage existing strengths and respond to unintended consequences.

Opportunities for system stewardship

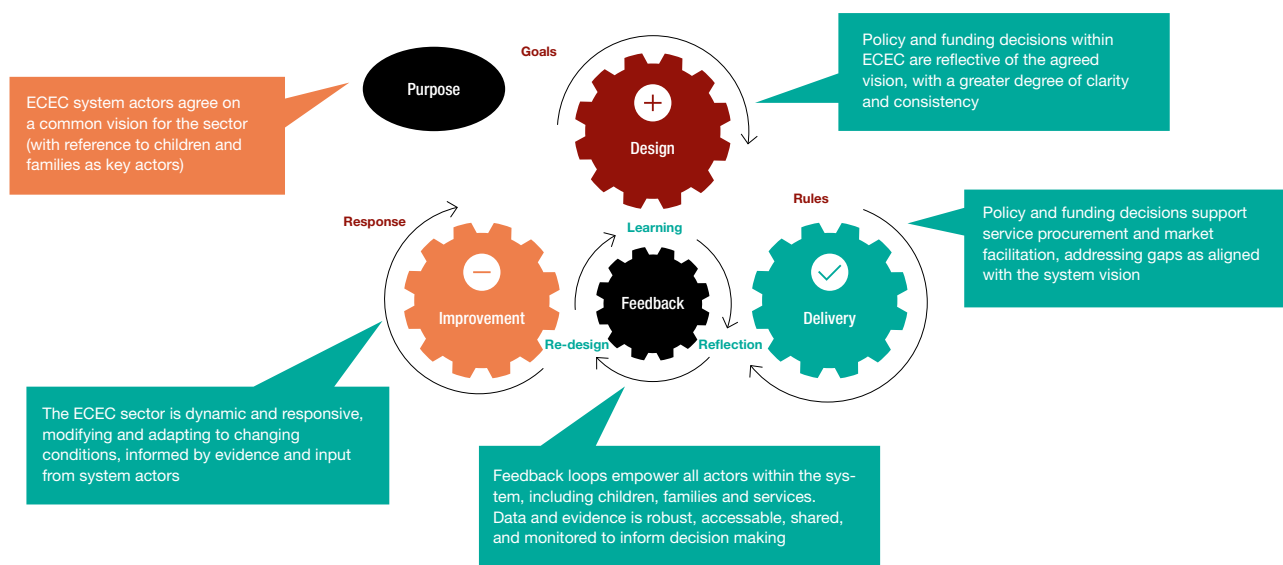
Consultees reported a sense of building momentum for change in the ECEC sector, with a window of opportunity currently open. Through consultation and reviewing published evidence, six components of system stewardship consistently emerged as important and the most likely to strengthen the ECEC system.



The below diagram shows how these six components can set the foundation for a system stewardship framework when viewed holistically and as intersecting components.

A stewardship framework

Figure 1: A stewardship framework



The following sections interrogate each of these six components and integrate findings from the evidence and consultations.

Leadership and vision

There was some uncertainty among consultees about the definition of the ECEC system. It was felt there is a need to clearly define the parameters of the ECEC system and how this sits in the continua of care and education services for children and families.

Consultees also raised the need for:

- the creation of a clear and collectively endorsed vision for the ECEC system, resulting in the impetus and roadmap for reform, as system settings are reoriented towards this vision
- consistent policy objectives, governance arrangements and strategic alignment across levels of government, which would support a more effective system delivery and reform environment
- clarity on the responsibility of the system to meet child and family needs that would create clear benchmarks and parameters for intervention, where objectives are not being met
- re-establishing a point of connection and pride for system participants, reducing fragmentation and uniting momentum towards a common goal.

One clear tension regarding the definition of the ECEC system was whether it should be viewed from a **delivery perspective**, or whether the system should be defined from the view of the **consumers of the system** (children and their families).

In the latter case, a child-centred model is likely to broaden beyond ECEC and include a suite of child development actors and activities. These would create a significant opportunity for early identification and intervention in a child's life, although a wider scope may pose challenges for system stewardship. This may include the challenge of defining and articulating a sufficiently targeted and unifying vision, and managing the coordination and integration of a much larger number of actors.

If the definition of the system was to extend into the early years of primary school, the challenge of ECEC workers leaving the sector to work in early primary education would change from being one of workers exiting the system to one of movement within the system. This would likely change the perception and actions of a system steward or stewards.

The diversity of the ECEC sector supports simultaneously realising three objectives of:

- children's learning and development
- workforce participation (particularly female workforce participation)
- socioeconomic equity through reducing the impact of vulnerability on a child's development, education and subsequent life outcomes.

However, the extent to which one objective is prioritised above another holds significant implications for system settings. For example, the activity test that is required to be met to access the Child Care Subsidy can be viewed as favouring workforce participation objectives above child development or social equity objectives. Conversely, the often shortened hours of sessional kindergarten may be incompatible with some forms of workforce participation.

Movement towards a system stewardship model would require a clear and unified vision for what the ECEC system should be striving for – including where the priorities across these objectives lie. This would help lessen tensions between the different objectives and orient the system towards a common goal.

Practically, creating such a vision could result in:

- a clear vision and framework for system reform by establishing system objectives and supporting strategic alignment within the sector and across levels of government
- clear guidance for the market on what is required from service delivery, which could reduce tensions in the mixed-market model (where these are caused by differing objectives)
- a collective and co-designed vision forming a point of connection and pride for system participants. This could reduce fragmentation and help to unite the energy and innovation of system actors towards a common goal.

Data and evidence

Consultees highlighted the need to have increased **data and information sharing** to strengthen decision-making, practice and behaviours across the system. They also observed there is a need within the system for greater transparency and utilisation of data on:

- demand and supply
- access and participation
- practice and quality
- service operational models and cost structures
- child outcomes.

A system steward would facilitate this as a key part of their role in ensuring the capture, analysis and sharing of data, as well as monitoring and responding in service of system objectives. Under a system stewardship model, data and evidence are made available to all participants, in a valid and accessible way, in efforts to empower all actors to contribute to continual improvement.

For the sector to work effectively, evidence must be generated and shared so it can inform decisions at all levels. Consultees provided many examples where they felt increased availability of data and information would have significant benefits on system functioning, enabling evidence-driven decision-making and informing nuanced policy development.

Specific examples included:

- the nature of demand and unmet demand
- the service delivery supply pipeline
- cohorts that are not accessing or engaging as desired with ECEC services
- understanding and measuring quality
- child outcomes, including over time.

Consultees raised the central importance of data being monitored and responded to, with clear lines of oversight and responsibility required. This is applicable both in local contexts and across the system more broadly. Both top-down and bottom-up approaches are likely to be needed.

Example of data collection and the role of system stewards

Data collection on participation may identify that a particular demographic of children is not participating in ECEC within a local geography. A local service provider may notice that their cohort of enrolled children is not representative of the community, or that some children who are enrolled are less regularly attending the service.

A system steward would be responsible for monitoring these data and identifying the gap, taking steps to investigate why it is the case, and determining how it could be best addressed. Local input would be critical in both the identification of the problem and contributing to its solution in a place-based, contextually informed way. Data should also be considered from a broader perspective (for example, statewide or nationally) to identify more structural challenges and solutions.

Market facilitation

The ability for a steward to steer the market effectively relies on having clear goals and expectations around what the system should deliver. It is also necessary to understand where markets are likely to fail to provide adequate service and be able to intervene accordingly. Consultees identified a range of limitations and challenges within the current market-based model for ECEC that could be addressed with the introduction of a system stewardship approach. These include:

- **Family ‘choice’** – constraints on the supply of ECEC, having limited information about services and/or the benefits of ECEC, and being limited by practical requirements (such as proximity and affordability), often mean that families cannot fully exercise choice.
- **Information limitations** – there is a high degree of difficulty in precisely understanding, measuring and sharing information relating to service quality or outcomes for children and families. This leads to a limited ability for these considerations to influence choice. Complicating this further are the facts that the purchaser of the service (typically parents) is not the recipient (the child), the service is not repeatable and the costs of switching services can be high.
- **Access in a demand-driven context** – the structure of ECEC subsidies is aligned with demand, not the cost of supply. This can create disincentives to service young children and children with higher needs, for whom there are higher ratios. Most service delivery models require the service to be operating at close to capacity to remain sustainable, meaning unmet demand is common. This creates a tension between the demand-driven market and known benefits of ECEC participation.
- **Provision in thin markets** – due to the need for many services to operate at or close to capacity, there is limited incentive to operate in thin markets, reducing access for some families.
- **Infrastructure and workforce constraints** – currently, there is a lack of infrastructure or workforce for ECEC, creating challenges for service delivery.

Intervention could range from adjustments to market settings, such as policy guidance or the funding model, to altering procurement processes to ensure greater alignment with system objectives or direct delivery.

Both the research and consultees highlighted that some of the tensions within the mixed-market provision should dissipate if:

- the vision, objectives and expectations of ECEC were made clearer through system stewardship
- the system settings were geared towards these outcomes
- system contributions and outcomes were clearly monitored.

Workforce and capability

The quality of ECEC is directly proportional to the quality and distribution of its workforce. Consultees agreed that the current market model is failing to address enduring challenges within the ECEC workforce, with concerns about wages and conditions, retention, attraction and training.

Wages in the ECEC workforce are low relative to other sectors, with average weekly earnings for early childhood teachers at 10 per cent less than the national weekly average (ABS, 2022). Wages and conditions are seen as a barrier to attracting and retaining staff.

The inability to retain workers in the long term also has implications for quality. High workforce turnover and a lack of retention of skilled and experienced ECEC teachers and educators was cited as a key barrier to services exceeding the National Quality Framework (NQF) and maintaining an excellent rating. This acknowledges the vital importance of educator-child relationships and experience. Research shows that high-quality adult-child interactions, determined in part by the quality of these relationships, is vitally important to children's social and academic development (Tayler et al, 2016).

Given the natural relationship between quality delivery and workforce, the consequences of poor wages and conditions have impacts across the whole system, making them a clear focus for stewardship.

A system stewardship approach could help to improve workforce challenges through several means, including:

- clarity in the vision for the sector that may help to better define workforce needs
- achieving coordination in the system overall, facilitated by the system steward, which is important to finding shared solutions
- greater accountability within the sector, which would increase the impetus to find solutions, with clear responsibilities for creating change.

Accountability and empowerment

For the system to consistently achieve its objectives, there must be clear lines of responsibility across the diverse range of system participants, and a reframing of the relationship between government and service providers, to emphasise trust, support and empowerment.

Particular facets include that:

- fragmented and complex governance within the current system means it can be difficult to identify which actor or combination of actors is responsible for system outcomes, and whether they have the levers to influence change
- there is a potential to lift quality through a shared responsibility for system outcomes between funders and service providers, and empowering relationships (rather than transactional or hierarchical) that allow for flexibility and responsiveness in service delivery.

Leadership does not need to equate to higher-order power or a hierarchical approach. Leadership is the responsibility to ensure the stewardship model and functioning system operates in accordance with the system vision. Many consultees noted that effective system stewardship would require an upending of the notion that provision of funding is equal to policy influence and decision-making power. This would be a fundamental and challenging shift for the sector.

The tenets of system stewardship include a degree of devolution of power. For system actors, including governments, this may be a challenging move towards greater power sharing and less control. For a successful model of stewardship, trust, support and empowerment must be central. However, this must be balanced with accountability and power devolved in a way that ensures minimum safety and standards are always met.

Local and community-based delivery

The ECEC system is both diverse and complex, combining many small, local markets under a single system. The demand for certain services is dependent on context, with needs changing across locations and communities.

A steward has the responsibility of ensuring system flexibility so that place-based approaches can be adapted to meet specific local needs, without sacrificing regulatory quality standards.

Tailoring services to meet local requirements requires flexibility in the system and trust in local providers. Stewardship was viewed by many consultees to promote this approach, rather than a more rigid, one-size-fits-all approach. Flexibility would allow for adaptation and learning, and support approaches and service types that most effectively meet the needs of the child and their families and communities.

An effective system is underpinned by successful relationships between system actors, structured around a joint knowledge of what constitutes system success.

Some consultees voiced concerns about past governments attempting to roll out consistent approaches that worked in one community to a broader network of communities. It was suggested that any place-based approach should include extensive community consultation and be flexible to changes in line with that community's needs. The challenges inherent in this approach lie in achieving flexibility without sacrificing minimum regulatory quality standards.

The possibility for integrated service hubs was also raised as an example of various local actors coming together to support children and families. These combined education with other health and family supports, such as maternal health, allied health and employment support, as well as offering services that are culturally appropriate.

The Maari Ma Health Aboriginal Corporation provides an example of a place-based approach that integrates health with the delivery of ECEC to support families. A focus on building trust and relationships with families in the region has contributed to greater participation in preschool programs and broader health, wellbeing and educational outcomes.

Case study – Maari Ma Health Aboriginal Corporation: intensive supported playgroups

Maari Ma is a community-controlled organisation operating two culturally sustaining and culturally safe playgroups for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families in far western New South Wales. Maari Ma provides holistic support to families, and has achieved positive outcomes in health, wellbeing and education, including preschool enrolment.

A majority (70 per cent) of Maari Ma employees are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The local Aboriginal language, Barkindji, is used throughout the day, and all new staff have a cultural orientation, with non-Indigenous staff buddied up and mentored (SNAICC, 2021).

A range of health professionals are integrated into the program, including a social worker, nurses, a mental health professional, a dietitian and a dental assistant. These staff, along with ECEC staff, build trust and positive relationships with families. This means that in addition to providing services, they act as navigators for other services, including addressing misconceptions about preschool, and increasing enrolments and attendance.

From 2006 to 2016, the percentage of Maari Ma region's Aboriginal children attending preschool increased by 17 per cent (Sumithra et al, 2019). Further data on the success of the program is not publicly available, and more engagement with local providers should be considered to explore their learnings in delivering innovative multidisciplinary and cross-sectoral ECEC more deeply.

A model of stewardship for the sector

A move towards stewardship is centred in a shared vision and mutual responsibility for the system objectives across all system stakeholders. Articulating a shared vision will support the coordination and cohesiveness of an incredibly diverse sector with a range of motivations, capabilities, service models and histories. However, the challenge of uniting all parties is not to be underestimated and this needs to be considered in any movements toward a system stewardship model.

There is not yet consensus on who would be best placed to be a steward – the process will take time, and require significant investment, patience and a willingness to influence perspectives and ways of working across all stakeholders. This may require incremental and cumulative shifts to build capacity and retain engagement. Given the critical role that the ECEC system plays as a foundational pillar for Australian society, and the potential for transformative change if appropriately implemented, there is a clear case for movement towards system stewardship.

Conversations on the topic of how a stewardship model could look yielded vastly differing, and often contradictory, suggestions. Several key considerations for the pathway towards system stewardship in ECEC are outlined below.

An aspirational and unifying vision

In discussions held for this research, the immediate priorities for stewardship in ECEC have differed, considering both the attributes of system stewardship being adopted, and the challenges within the sector that might warrant early attention.

What does not differ, however, is the requirement to start a movement towards system stewardship through the development and adoption of an aspirational and unifying vision of the ECEC system. The vision forms the foundation for system settings and provides a necessary point of connection between system participants. These are preconditions for the strength of system relationships that will be required to develop and implement a system stewardship model.

This step is an opportunity to clearly define the boundaries of the ECEC system, and for all actors within the system to come together to help build shared aspirations, mutual recognition and understanding, as well as strengthening relationships within the system.

Once this vision has been established, the model of stewardship for the sector must be decided, including the roles and responsibilities of all actors, their expected contributions to the system vision, and how these are to be maintained and improved over time.

Stewardship is different to reform. It is a mindset, achieved through the thousands of small decisions made each day.

An achievable pathway to the vision is critical. Any paradigm shift must be staged and gradual, with adequate time for consultation and capacity building. There is a risk of the sector disengaging with the concept of system stewardship if the task of transitioning appears too challenging. Having clear, incremental and cumulative shifts towards system stewardship is likely to be met with greater success.

System stewardship requirements

System stewardship must allow long-term thinking, iteration, and a balance between leadership and the devolution of power.

A key challenge for system stewardship within ECEC will be balancing a degree of devolution in decision-making that allows experimentation and local autonomy with the need to have strict controls in domains of safety and inclusion. System strengths must be leveraged (that is, quality reforms and sector diversity must be maintained) and protected through transformation.

Within this, there must be agreement to learn and develop together – for such a complex and paradigm shifting transition, there are likely to be setbacks and mistakes along the way. The process of vision setting is seen as a powerful tool. The more engaged and invested system actors are in the journey towards stewardship, the more likely they are to forgive setbacks and remain committed, feeling shared responsibility for success.

System stewardship must be able to rise above politics and decision-making, with an ability to harness long-term vision and aligned incentives. This poses a particular challenge where decision-making may be tied to budget processes or election cycles, and key stakeholders can have high turnover (for example, government ministers). In this environment, statutory authorities or sector and community stakeholders may have the capacity for championing longer-term objectives.

Potential options for stewards in the ECEC sector

Consultees proposed several different models for system stewardship within the ECEC sector. These included:

- the Commonwealth Government acting as steward, with any other model viewed as a neglect of its ultimate responsibility. For some aspects of ECEC, such as minimum standards, having a national approach is important, and coordination is well aligned to the Commonwealth Government's remit and powers
- state and territory governments being best placed to steward the system, within a model more aligned to the approach to the schooling system. States and territories were seen to 'live and breathe' the system, placing them in a good position to steward ECEC and potentially elevate outcomes through increased integration with schooling
- that the attempt of any one single government (or individual entity) to act as steward would be arrogant and foolhardy. The system is complex and has a long history of involvement by governments, alongside various national, state and territory bodies responsible for parts of the system (for example, regulation). In this sense, stewardship would need to be guided by a collaborative approach across all levels of government
- localised models of stewardship run in international jurisdictions could be a potential option for Australia's ECEC system, suggested one consultee. However, they noted the capacity is not presently there for this to be achieved in most states and territories
- that for some consultees, especially those reflecting a First Nations perspective, any act that increases power at a distance from children, families and communities (that is, through government), would be counter to the objectives of the model and potentially a further act of violence (understood as an act of violence echoing historical colonial policies). Stewardship must not be hierarchical or top-down in this view. A model of stewardship with many stewards, including at a local community level, could mitigate this risk
- a taskforce, which could be set up with a stewardship remit
- existing entities that could be given greater responsibilities and powers (for example, the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Agency (ACECQA)).

Leadership and clear lines of responsibility

A key risk of system stewardship is to lose sight of the ultimate goals of stewardship in the attempt to find consensus on 'the steward.' There is also a risk of immediately concluding there must be only one entity acting as a steward. While the system needs to have overall leadership and clear responsibilities, there can be multiple actors stewarding the system.

Considering a networked form of governance, having a single steward need not be the answer. Australia's current ECEC system already sees multiple entities positioning themselves in a stewardship role and seeking to influence different components of the system.

Australia's ECEC sector is comprised of hundreds of hyper-localised markets, a diversity of providers, and complex relationships between actors. In this context – acknowledging the strengths that this complexity brings and the differing challenges informed by each market context – actors throughout the system must see themselves as contributing to the stewardship of their local market and, by extension, the overall system.

Such a networked interpretation of stewardship would involve the many actors in the system – children and families, teachers, educators, service directors, centre owners, local government, states and territories, and

the Commonwealth Government – all contributing to a degree of stewardship and to the overall health of the system. A strong sense of individual and collective responsibility is necessary, with a clear guiding vision and purpose to align incentives and actions, and steer towards intended outcomes.

A steward (or stewards) has responsibility on behalf of others and can be held to account. The faithful steward internalises that and knows they are responsible for the system's welfare and that of those within it.

The risk in such a networked and inclusive approach is that there is no clear owner of ultimate responsibility. There is still a role for leadership, which may be best placed emerging from the Commonwealth Government or a collection of governments, aligning with the capacity of government to bring all actors together, operate nationally and hold many of the levers for change.

Tensions between leadership and networked governance

At its core, system stewardship is a collective effort. It is achieved through recognition that all actors are jointly responsible for the health of the system. Under true system stewardship, responsibility is distributed across the multitude of system participants. For example, an educator may see their stewardship role as ensuring a quality educational experience for the children within their care, while a family may see their role as ensuring their children participate in quality early learning, and that this learning is supported at home.

Governments (at all levels) may see their role as ensuring equitable access to safe and quality services. In this frame, all participants have a clear sense of purpose and responsibility to the system.

If the settings are correct and the responsibilities are appropriately distributed, the stewardship role – of reinforcing the system's vision and purpose, setting and maintaining the system rules and design, of service delivery and continual improvement – would occur organically and collaboratively.

While government bodies may continue to hold leadership responsibilities, the role of government within a system stewardship model would look different to what it does now. System stewardship would require government to conceptualise its role in a very different way, moving from relationships characterised by transactions to relationships characterised by:

- mutual responsibility
- adaptability and learning
- committing to local flexibility
- relinquishing power to enable that power and autonomy in others.

Regardless of who the steward (or stewards) is, relationships across the system will need to be reimagined and redefined. This provides opportunities to place children and their families at the centre of the system. It also provides opportunities for deliberate consideration on which elements of decision-making should be localised and which should be universal.

The iterative nature of system stewardship

By nature, system stewardship rests on continual iteration and improvement. The system must remain dynamic and responsive to the changes and challenges it faces, and a part of this can include revision or evolution of the model of stewardship.

While consensus and buy-in to the concept and model of stewardship will be important to progress towards system stewardship in ECEC, it should not be 'set and forget', and can be improved on.

If indecision remains about who should play a steward role following further consultation and coordination within the sector, there is an opportunity to amend the model and stewards over time.

The case study below highlights how New Zealand's education sector utilised a co-design approach to adopt a stewardship model with multiple identified stewards and to put learners at the centre of decision-making.

Case study – System stewardship in New Zealand’s education sector

In 2016, seven government agencies identified weaknesses in the New Zealand education system. These agencies identified systemic problems in the use of funding, information and talent across the New Zealand education sector. This resulted in successful outcomes relying on individual factors outside of the system itself. In response, they proposed a [Blueprint for Education System Stewardship](#) (*the Blueprint*).

The seven agencies were the Ministry of Education, the Education Review Office, the New Zealand Qualifications Authority, the Tertiary Education Commission, Careers New Zealand, Education New Zealand and the Education Council.

The Blueprint recommended a system stewardship approach, laid out for 2016–20. It recognises the seven agencies as stewards, with the Ministry of Education as the overall steward. It originated from the agencies’ request for a more cohesive approach to their respective stewardship roles and was developed in a series of iterative co-creation workshops. There is no publicly available documentation regarding other options that were considered alongside a system stewardship approach, but the concept of stewardship is being increasingly adopted across the New Zealand Government.

Underpinning strategies of the approach include:

- **effective collaboration** – agencies working together, digital advancements and shared systems, and seeing ECEC as part of community
- **advising government** – focusing on policy analysis and advice that looked at the system, not individual parts
- **sharing data** – assisted by giving national student numbers to children in ECEC and seeking a new IT vendor for payment processing
- **tailored services** – recognising and building on culture and identity, partnering with Iwi and Māori groups, better use of existing funding and managing property portfolio.

Consultations for this report sought the views and experience of NZ ECEC government representatives on their transition to a system stewardship model. To begin the transition, they were clear on the overarching objectives for the system and how long it would take to achieve them. There was an understanding that shaping strong change in the education system was going to be a 30-year plan.

Policy makers took a systems approach that put the learner at the centre. Every decision for the sector was made taking its impact on children into account. Interestingly, the key focus was on the longevity of children’s learning and tracking this through each stage of education. There was a deliberate move away from measuring specific outcomes. There were also specific strategies for Māori and Pacifica communities to promote equity within the system.

Increasing the size and quality of the workforce was a primary strategy for improving the quality of ECEC. This included realising pay parity for educators and increasing their minimum qualification requirements. This was achieved through a shift in funding structures that focused a dedicated stream on workforce issues.

The consultation participants suggested that the biggest challenge for Australia in achieving similar improvements was the diversity between the states and territories, an issue that was not present in New Zealand. To move forward, they cited the need for consistency on objectives. All states needed to be aligned under the same goals. However, individual strategies could differ, and each state could identify the most appropriate pathways to reaching the overall system goals.

No comprehensive evaluation of the program has been published yet, likely due to the long-term nature and goals of the reform. Early findings regarding system performance have been mixed. One positive finding is anecdotal reports of the Early Learning Information system resulting in better data being available in real time. As a new system, results cannot be compared prior to 2017, although all groups (by ages three and four, ethnicity, and separated into attending early education for over 10 hours a week) increased the percentage of participation between 2017 and 2020, with a decrease in 2021, most likely due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Ministry of Education NZ, 2021).

Conclusion

The Australian ECEC system is diverse and complex with a vast range of service models, stakeholders, motivations and capabilities, as well as a complex array of actors, relationships and activities. At its core, the system seeks to fulfill three critical imperatives of contributing to the development and educational outcomes of children, offering opportunities for increased social equity and contributing to workforce participation outcomes.

However, the Australian ECEC system faces a number of challenges, including unequal access to and participation in quality ECEC, issues of affordability, and critical workforce issues of low retention and workforce shortages.

All systems require ongoing revision to ensure they are fit for purpose to identify and achieve desired outcomes for the context they operate in. This is true of the Australian ECEC system. Through literature reviews, international and inter-sectoral case studies and consultations with experts across a number of fields, this collection of papers has illustrated that by thinking systemically about Australia's ECEC system, a systems stewardship approach provides a timely opportunity to improve the health, performance and efficiency of the ECEC system.

A move towards a system stewardship approach in the ECEC system will need to account for a number of considerations. For system stewardship to be effective there needs to be a decision on who the steward(s) are. For ECEC, this is likely to be a group that takes up a stewardship role, including all levels of Government, the regulator and families. Agreement also needs to be reached on the model of system stewardship required to best achieve the three primary imperatives of the ECEC system. There needs to be a commitment to the process and acceptance that it will take time and require significant investment, patience and willingness to influence perspectives and ways of working across all stakeholders. This may require incremental and cumulative shifts to build capacity and retain engagement.

Given the critical role that the ECEC system plays as a foundational pillar for Australian society, now is the time to explore possibilities for transformative change through system stewardship to ensure that all children across Australia are able to access affordable and accessible, high-quality ECEC, for their benefit and that of their families, their community and Australia more broadly.

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