

# Universal preschool is the best option for Australia

Two years are better than one

Providing universal access to preschool programs for all 3 year old children is an achievable and desirable policy goal for Australia.

With two thirds of 3 year olds accessing early education and care (ECEC) services, Australia already has the foundations of a universal preschool program. The challenge is to:

- Make sure all 3 year olds receive the 'dose' of high quality early learning through a dedicated preschool program that will have a sustained impact on their development
- Ensure the children currently missing out due to financial and non-financial barriers have the opportunity to participate.

## Universal programs lift outcomes for all children

It is more efficient, equitable and effective to provide preschool programs to all children.

- All children benefit from participating in high quality early education, and it can be transformative for children experiencing disadvantage.
- Children from all backgrounds can experience school readiness challenges. Only half of children with developmental vulnerabilities are in the bottom two economic quintiles.
- Most families don't travel more than 4km to attend preschool, they use local centres. Ensuring there is a high-quality preschool program in every local Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) service is the best way to make sure everyone has access.
- Families experiencing barriers to accessing preschool are more likely to attend a universal service that all

children use - as long as the service is culturally appropriate, welcoming and non-stigmatising.

- Children do better in mixed cohorts, with peers with diverse backgrounds and strengths.
- Participation in preschool programs is strongly influenced by community norms. In states that have established preschool for 4 year olds for a long time, attending preschool has become the norm for all children and there are much more equal patterns of access for priority cohorts.

## Australia already has the foundation of a universal preschool platform for 3 year olds

Participation in ECEC is near-universal for 3 year olds in most working families. This means that building on our current ECEC system to make sure all children can participate in the right amount of high quality early education is achievable and affordable.

Preschool and Long Day Care services are different in each state and territory, but it is feasible and appropriate to embed a dedicated preschool program for 3 year olds within the existing system.

The National Quality Framework (NQF) provides the foundations of structural quality needed for a 3-year-old preschool program - including appropriate educator to child ratios and a second Early Childhood Teacher coming online in many services from 2020.

There are also opportunities to better use existing infrastructure, including vacancies within the Long Day Care sector, to increase enrolments for 3 year old children.

**We have achieved near-universal enrolment in preschool for 4 year olds in the past five years. With a commitment from all levels of government and modest investment, we can do the same for our 3 year olds.**

Two years of high-quality preschool has more impact than one.

All children benefit from two years of preschool, but the children who benefit the most are those with the greatest risk of developmental vulnerability.

For these children in particular, two years of preschool would substantially change their trajectories

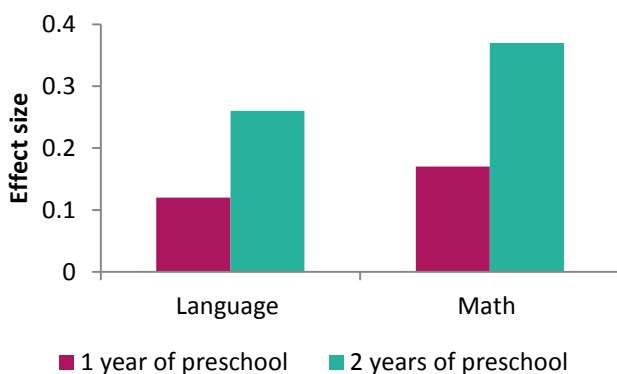
### Research shows two years of preschool have more impact than one

Two years of high-quality preschool can be transformative. It lifts educational achievement for all children and especially benefits the children most likely to experience developmental vulnerability.

There are many studies that show the long-lasting positive impact of two years of preschool for all children, regardless of socio-economic status.

- A landmark UK study showed that students who attended 2-3 years of preschool obtained higher total final exam scores (effect size 0.38), better grades in English (effect size 0.28) and in maths (effect size 0.30), and took more final year exams (Sammons et al 2014).
- Analysis of international test results (PISA, PIRLS and TIMSS) show that, across the population, children with at least two years of preschool achieve much higher scores at age 15 than those who attend no preschool or only one year (Mullis et al 2012).
- The Abbott Pre-K program in New Jersey found much higher impacts for the children who attended from age 3 (Barnett et al 2013).

Abbott Pre-K impact on language and maths at Grade 4 (Barnett et al 2013)



Meta-analyses looking at the impact of two years of preschool find that it has the biggest impact on low-income children (Zaslow 2010).

This is important because children from poor communities are often significantly behind their peers, even at age 3.

For these children, one year of preschool does not provide a sufficient dose of high-quality developmental enrichment to achieve a substantial and sustained impact.

### Reduced educational opportunity has lifelong consequences for young people and for the broader community and economy

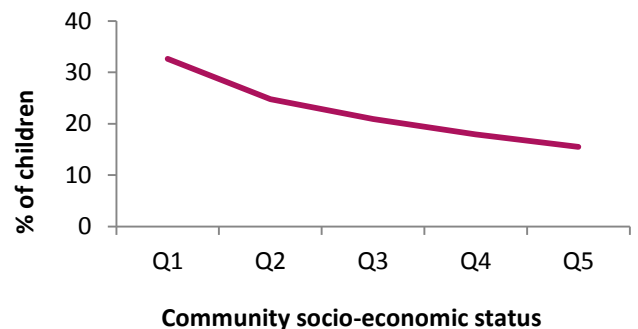
Nearly a quarter of Australian children start school without the foundations that enable them to take the best advantage of learning opportunities.

There is a direct correlation between how wealthy a child's community is, and their risk of developmental vulnerability.

Children in the poorest communities have double the risk of being developmentally vulnerable (33% compared to 15.5% for the most advantaged communities). However, this problem is not limited to poor communities. There are many children right across Australia - in every post code - who experience challenges.

Many children who start school behind their peers never catch up. At age 24, 26% of young people aren't in full-time education or training.

Children experiencing development vulnerability by socio-economic status (AEDC 2016)



Children who arrive at school with vulnerabilities that impact their ability to engage in education are more likely to leave school not ready to work. To secure the long term productivity of our nation, we need to turn things around for these children.

National and international evidence shows that two years of high quality preschool is one of the most effective strategies we have to change the trajectories of these children.



Mitchell Institute  
300 Queen Street, Melbourne, Vic 3000  
t. +61 3 9919 1820  
mitchellinstitute.org.au  
info@mitchellinstitute.org.au

## Preschool is an efficient and effective strategy for investing in the most important economic asset our nation has: the capabilities of the Australian people

### Access and quality are the priorities

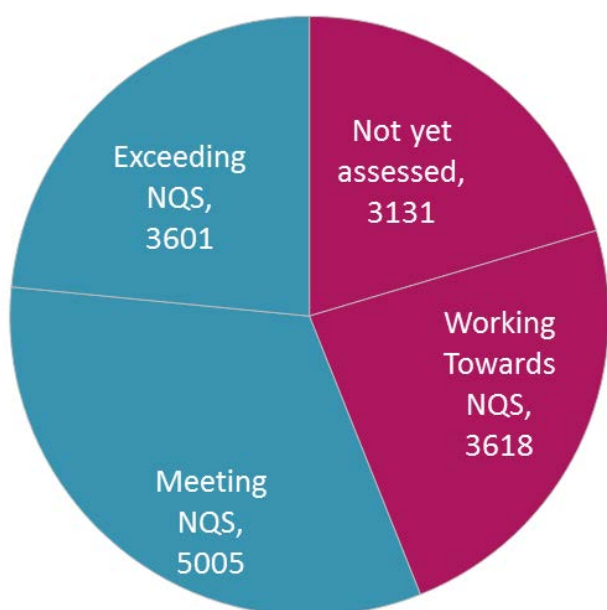
Establishing an entitlement to access two years of a preschool program for all children is the most practical and achievable way of leveraging our current investment and service system to accelerate outcomes for Australian children.

Establishing minimum and consistent quality standards, in the way we have for 4-year-old preschool, is critical. Although many 3 year olds currently attending ECEC will be experiencing a high quality learning environment, Australia does not yet consistently provide high-quality early education to all children.

- Quality levels are lowest in poorest communities, where children are most in need of exceptional quality (Cloney 2015).
- Only 7% of children in the lowest socio-economic quintile attended programs delivering the highest levels of instructional support (MGSE 2015).
- Quality levels are highest for older children, especially those in 4-year-old preschool programs, and much lower for younger children (Cloney 2015).

Establishing a developmentally appropriate preschool program for 3 year old children will ensure all children have the opportunity to engage in a learning program that delivers substantial and sustained impact on their development and outcomes.

*Breakdown of service assessment ratings (ACECQA 2016)*



## A national approach is optimum

The evidence suggests that providing at least two years of a preschool program is an additional, and currently under-utilised, lever for lifting Australia's educational performance and long-term productivity.

Based on the current evidence it will deliver the best 'bang for our buck' to lift the educational performance of all children, break the cycle of disadvantage and improve long term outcomes for children.

High quality early education can also reduce the significant downstream costs of the justice system, welfare and ill-health.

A national approach to deliver a universal preschool program for 3 year old children would also be affordable and efficient.

- We can leverage and build on already high participation rates of 3 year olds in ECEC.
- The structural quality features we have already established through the NQF are a good foundation to build on, in order to ensure all children access a preschool program with the dose and quality needed to lift their outcomes.
- We can strengthen successful reforms, including the National Quality Framework and Universal Access to Preschool National Partnership Agreements.

**Most peer countries in the OECD already provide two years of preschool - it is time for Australia to do the same.**

### Key recommendation

Education Council should commission a scoping study into universal 3-year-old preschool programs for Australia. The study should be completed by the end of 2017 and should identify:

- Implementation gaps and opportunities
- Core process and structural quality elements
- Strategies to address barriers to access for priority cohorts
- Jurisdiction-specific implementation challenges and opportunities
- Improvements in data collection needed to track impact