

Engagement of students in Children's Services qualifications - final report

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NATIONAL CENTRE FOR
VOCATIONAL EDUCATION RESEARCH

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CONSULTANCY REPORT



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Executive summary

This report aims to examine reasons for non-completion of nationally accredited qualifications in childcare and, more importantly, strategies and initiatives that are or could be put in place to engage students until the completion of courses.

This project is of interest due to government reforms in the area of early childhood (e.g. the National Quality Framework for children's education and care services) which requires increased numbers of qualified staff. The reforms are taking place in the context of a sector where the pay is low but where there is a high demand by employers for qualified staff due to high turnover in the sector. The reforms will also place more demands on employers for qualified staff. In addition, the sector is trying to become more professionalised and to improve public perceptions.

One way to meet the increasing demand for qualified Child Care educators is to increase numbers of places in these courses. Another way and, this is the area of interest for this project, is to improve completion rates in childcare courses which are said to be quite low.

The project was undertaken in three main stages. First there was a review of research and any other information about non-completion in these courses and strategies to re-engage students. Secondly there was a descriptive analysis of student enrolments and completions in these courses. Also included is an analysis of student outcomes and intentions survey data about: reasons for and intentions in undertaking the training, attitudes towards the training, reasons for discontinuing training, and satisfaction, further study and employment outcomes.

The third part of the project consisted of interviews with peak agencies, public and private Registered Training Organisations (RTOs), child care providers, and focus groups/interviews with students. A pilot study took place in South Australia followed by further interviews and focus groups in Western Australia, Queensland and New South Wales.

There was not a great deal of literature regarding non-completion of childcare courses specifically in the VET context. One issue that was raised in a few papers was inappropriate selection into courses, and this was also one of the main reasons for non-completion found in the interviews. Concerns were also raised for workers in particular areas such as rural and remote, and Indigenous students, where it was said that more training needed to be facilitated.

The issues of low pay and professionalising the sector were raised as contextual issues in regards to non-completion in the literature and these issues were also raised time and again in the interviews that took place for this project.

The literature had more to say about strategies aimed at increasing student retention. These included initiatives around student selection, employment based training options such as traineeships, flexible learning options, effective use of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), improving the image of the sector, training subsidies and peer mentoring. Most of these issues were also raised in the interviews.

The quantitative analysis that took place confirmed that there were large increases in the numbers of students undertaking and completing childcare courses - enrolments and completions more than doubled from 2004 to 2011 (with most of this increase occurring post 2008). The quantitative analysis also indicated that students who did not complete their course were less likely to say that they chose the right course of study, had a clear idea of the career they wanted, and that they were confident in their ability to

complete. Main reasons for not completing by course module only completers were personal reasons and that their training did not meet their needs (or other training related reasons). This data points to course selection/motivation issues and personal reasons as being important reasons for non-completion and this was indeed supported by the interview data.

The interviews focused mainly on reasons for non-completion and strategies to engage students to completion. However, important contextual issues were raised repeatedly at the interviews. They are contextual because they have implications for training in the sector although not necessarily directly leading to course non-completion.

One of the contextual issues concerned 'raising the status' of the sector in view of the new regulation requirements and public mis-perceptions about the role of childcare educators. Another concerned the new regulatory framework which has implications for the qualification requirements of childcare centres. The most often mentioned contextual issue raised however was the low pay in the sector. This can be a cause of non-completion in itself when the student finds out about the pay, but is also a major factor in the high staff turnover in the sector.

There were several reasons for non-completion mentioned at interview. One of the main reasons identified by respondents was that students who were unsuitable for the course but technically met the criteria were still allowed to enrol. Another reason that was identified was personal issues, which are largely outside of the training providers' control, but which affects students' ability to complete the course. Respondents also identified the work placement component as a significant factor in non-completion, in that students found the practical experience more challenging than they had expected. Other reasons mentioned at interview for non-completion included course-related factors such as course design and complexity, literacy and numeracy issues, the relatively low level of pay, student support and living in a remote location.

Apart from pay and conditions of employment, the interviews (and literature search) suggest that there are some key strategies that can assist with keeping students engaged to completion of childcare courses. These include:

- Having mechanisms in place to ensure that appropriate students are selected into the course (this applies mainly to new entrants). This includes having detailed provision of pre-course information through briefing sessions and the like, making sure students have the sufficient literacy/numeracy skills to undertake the course (or to provide bridging courses where appropriate), and having a selection process in place to ensure that students are suited to the course.
- A strong commitment to ongoing academic and personal support for each and every student. This support can be; workshops, provision of pastoral care, regular follow-up, help with assignments and email/phone contact. Face to face contact is a particularly important feature of student support. One specific approach is known as 'learning circles'. These are held weekly and a forum where students can discuss assignments, difficulties with work placements, can access learning support or pastoral care for personal issues that are impacting on their studies.

These two points are not unique to childcare qualifications. However they were raised by virtually all RTO and childcare provider respondents as being critical factors in helping students successfully attain their qualifications.

In addition to the two key strategies, there are also other considerations. One of the risk points for non-completion is the work placement component of the course. This can be the point where the student is hit with the realities of the job and also often where insufficient RTO or provider support is offered.

Therefore, early exposure to the on-the-job component of the course for new entrants is critical in confronting them with the realities of the job. The RTO and employer need to ensure that sufficient student support is provided at this stage.

In this light, the traineeship model was put forward as a good example of how to achieve successful completion with the proviso that the selection process into the traineeship is rigorously managed (although no ‘hard’ numerical evidence of completion rates was provided). There are also other models that provide early on-the-job exposure such as ‘play sessions’ where there is a childcare facility in the proximity of the teaching facilities. Here students can get access to a ‘real’ childcare experience early in the course.

Findings from the interviews also suggested strategies and initiatives for particular groups of students. These include:

- Recognition of Prior Learning mechanisms for existing workers. RPL not only allows existing workers to obtain a qualification based on their experience and skills, but also increases the workers’ confidence. This may affect students who want to undertake diplomas level qualifications more than those undertaking certificate III since diploma students are more likely to be existing workers. One RPL model that was thought to be ‘good practice’ involved qualified children’s services workers who were trained as RPL assessors and who then assessed workers while they are on the job.
- Flexible delivery models to meet the needs of older workers and also those who need to do the course online. Older workers in particular (but most students generally) prefer face to face contact with the educator so models of training should ensure the availability of some face to face or classroom based delivery. However, where students need to do their course entirely online some support mechanisms should be considered. These can include visits from the RTO or regular phone/email follow up.
- Strategies to meet the needs of students in remote areas. Access to networks, workplaces and educator support can be difficult in remote areas. The various stakeholders (RTOs, employers, area council) can support students in these areas through a holistic approach to course provision. An example of this exists in remote Western Australia where a scholarship program is offered by the main stakeholders that involve networking opportunities, facilitation of work placements and student support (including financial incentives).
- Strategies for Indigenous students. There are various initiatives that are designed for Indigenous students. These include a ‘wrap round’ service provided by one provider in remote Queensland. This service provides a high level of student support, course materials adapted to the needs of Indigenous students and provision of resources to enable the student to attend the course. The Learning at Workbook is another good practice approach discussed in the literature that involves learning guides, yarning circles that allows learners from isolated areas to network with students from the same culture, and an online tool to address literacy needs.

Introduction

The aim of this project is to investigate reasons for non-completion of key nationally accredited childcare qualifications, and initiatives that can be taken to encourage student retention or re-engagement with the field.

Government policy has been driving changes to an integrated early childhood education and care framework (as opposed to only childcare) with the aim of ensuring that children have access to quality early childhood education and care by mid 2013 through the National Partnership agreement on Early Childhood Education and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children Universal Access Strategy¹. Another component of reforms in this area is the Early Years Learning Framework which ‘describes the principles, practice and outcomes essential to support and enhance young children’s learning from birth to five years of age, as well as their transition to school’².

Another aspect of the reforms is a new National Quality Framework (NQF) for children’s education and care services which came into effect in January 2012. One component of the NQF is the National Quality Standard for Early Childhood Education and Care and School Age Care (NQS) which has implications for skill development in the sector. One of the quality areas of the standard are mandated qualifications for people working in children’s education and care. For example, for centre based services, by 1st January 2014, at least 50% of educators must have or be working towards a diploma in early childhood education and care, with the rest of the workforce having or be working towards a certificate III level qualification. There are also requirements regarding having access to or employing an early childhood teacher (ACECQA, 2011).

For employers, meeting the qualification requirements for their organisation can be difficult for two reasons. Firstly, not all current workers in the sector have the mandated qualifications. This means that they will need to gain these qualifications to remain employed in the sector. Some may choose to leave rather than to obtain the mandated qualifications. Secondly, high turnover in the sector, which can to a large degree be attributed to working conditions; particularly low pay (see e.g. Productivity Commission 2011 and Bretherton 2010), means that employers are reliant on new entrants to fill demand in the sector. This is particularly challenging in rural and remote areas.

There are various ways to meet the increased demand for qualified childcare educators. One way is to increase the number of training places for childcare courses (and this has indeed been happening). This has also been associated with government incentives to undertake training. For example, the Australian Government has introduced a ‘TAFE fee waiver scheme’ whereby regulated course fees have been removed for undertaking a diploma or advanced diploma course in early childhood at TAFE or other government provider. The scheme began in 2009 and is funded until 2014³.

Another way to help meet the demand for qualified childcare educators is to improve the completion rates for childcare qualifications, which are purportedly quite low. An unpublished paper on childcare courses in Victoria (CRES, 2011) reports completion rates of about 33% for certificate III courses and 27% for diploma courses. Engaging or re-engaging students to complete their course is the area of interest for this project.

¹ See

http://www.deewr.gov.au/EarlyChildhood/Policy_Agenda/ECUA/Pages/EarlyChildhoodEducationNationalPartnership.aspx

² See http://www.deewr.gov.au/EarlyChildhood/Policy_Agenda/Quality/Pages/EarlyYearsLearningFramework.aspx

³ See http://www.deewr.gov.au/EarlyChildhood/Policy_Agenda/EarlyChildhoodWorkforce/Pages/RemovalofTAFEfees.aspx

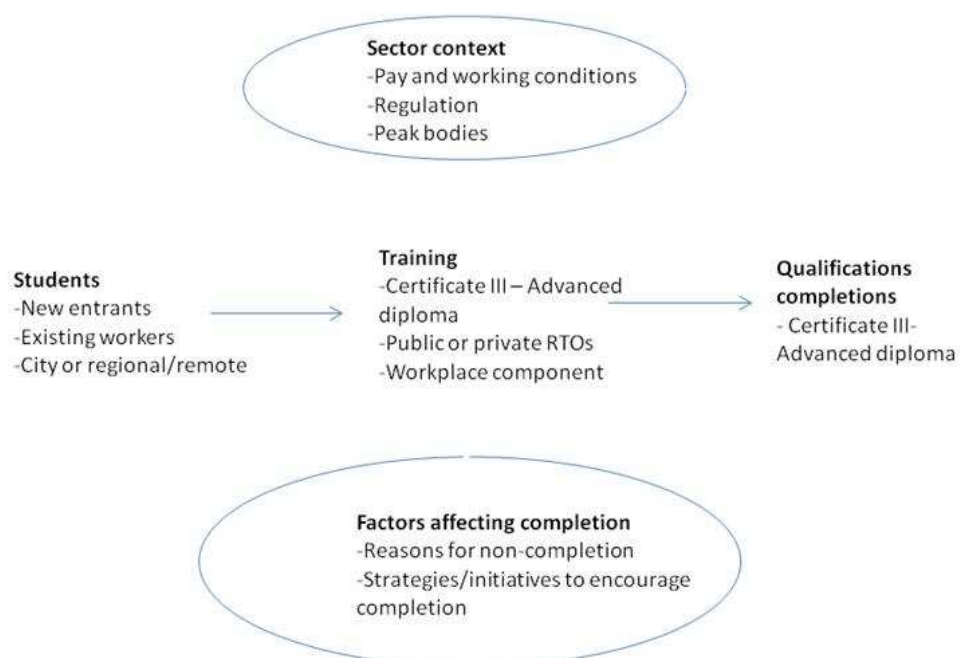
The project was conducted in four main phases:

- A literature review on factors influencing students' continuation or non-continuation in courses and strategies/initiatives that focuses on student retention/completion.
- Descriptive statistics on course enrolments and completions, and also student outcomes and student intentions data on reasons for undertaking the training, training intentions, attitudes towards the training and VET, reasons for discontinuing training (for module completers); and satisfaction, further study and employment outcomes.
- A series of interviews and student focus groups/interviews in four states (Western Australia, Queensland and New South Wales and a pilot in South Australia) with public and private training organisations, and childcare providers, both in city, and rural/remote locations. The main emphasis of the interviews and focus groups was to explore motivations to undertake the courses, identify reasons for non-completion of courses, and to identify the types of strategies and initiatives that assist in retention/completion of childcare courses. There were also interviews with various peak agencies on these areas. Details are provided in Appendix 1.
- Analysis of all the findings and a final report.

The report is structured around the first three phases (quantitative analysis, literature review, analysis of interviews/focus groups), followed by 'good practice' suggestions.

The factors of interest in this project are shown in the diagram below which shows the main components of training in the children's services sector.

Figure 1: VET training in the Children's Services Sector



The figure shows that students are either new entrants to the sector or existing workers and are in city or regional/remote locations. The training that takes place can be undertaken by either public or private Registered Training Organisations and has a workplace component. There are five Children's services

qualifications in the Community Services training package ranging from Certificate III to Advanced Diploma. The figure indicates that students may not complete the course for various reasons and that there are, or could be put in place, strategies and initiatives to aid student retention and completion. Affecting all of this is the sector context which includes the pay and working conditions in the sector, regulation and the various sector peak bodies.

Summary of the literature

The following discussion focuses on what the literature says about the nature of the childcare sector, reasons for non-completion and the types of strategies that are used to assist completion of courses in different situations, and for different groups of people.

There is however relatively little research/literature that focuses specifically on non-completion of early childhood courses in VET and strategies to mitigate non-completion. Some of the research focuses on higher education courses rather than VET. The dearth of research into the quality and effectiveness of early childhood courses, particularly in institutions other than universities was noted in an unpublished report on the effectiveness of early childhood courses in Victoria by The Centre for Research on Education Systems (2011).

There is some discussion in the literature about the nature of the childcare sector with some fairly broad suggestions for improving the sector. The Productivity Commission report (2011) into the early childhood development workforce usefully summarises the main issues. These include the working conditions of the workforce and the poor pay. In terms of training the report mentions that there is an unacceptable degree of variability in the VET sector in the quality of training provided for early childhood care workers. Factors affecting quality include insufficient student support, courses of too short a length, and inadequate access to practical experience. This report also mentions the need to facilitate more training in specific areas such as rural and remote locations, where demand for childcare and early childhood workers is not being met.

Issues relating to pay and working conditions are also mentioned in other reports (e.g. Bretherton, 2010, Choy et. al 2008, and Watson 2006). While these issues are not discussed in the various reports in terms of non-completing students, they may still have some effect on motivations to complete the training. The issue of inadequate student support for instance seems to be a factor in students not completing courses.

These reports also mention ways of improving the workforce. These include professionalising the workforce so as to improve its image, improving pay rates, and ways of lowering staff turnover (for example permanent employment opportunities, employer supported staff development, and improving staff to child ratios). Once again, while these were not discussed in terms of non-completion of courses they are still relevant factors. For example, employer support for higher level training for existing workers can provide further encouragement to complete the course (Bretherton, 2010).

Little literature was found that specifically discusses non-completion of childcare courses in the Australian VET context. The CRES (2011) report, using unpublished data from Skills Victoria, calculated completion rates for the various VET childcare courses in Victoria. Noting that they calculate completion rates in a fairly simplistic fashion⁴, they arrived at completion rates of 32.8% for certificate III qualifications and 26.7% for diploma qualifications. Estimated completion rates were far higher for private providers (around 60% across both qualification levels) than for TAFE (23%) or Adult and Community Education (26%). Possible reasons for these differences proffered in the report include differences in intentions of students, the different circumstances of students, and differences in delivery mode, noting that private providers have more workplace delivery, including traineeships and apprenticeships.

⁴ They essentially took the number of students completing a course and divided it by the number of students commencing the course four years earlier.

Of other reasons for non-completion cited in the literature, one that was mentioned was that some students were not appropriate for the course. For example, Choy et al (2008) mention that students suited to childcare work should be selected into the course, while those not suited should be deterred from undertaking the course. Similarly, Watson (2006) found in the higher education sector that course-based selection processes assisted in selecting suitable students.

Also in the higher education context, Whittington and Thompson (2010), in a small study of non-completing entry level higher education students with TAFE qualifications identified five main factors for non-completion. These were: challenges managing work/family and study; difficulty with academic work; insufficient academic support; work-professional experience conflict; as well as other personal factors. They mentioned that the majority of these students were distance education students and that this was a risk area. While this study was focused on higher education it nevertheless has some resonance to students undertaking VET childcare courses.

The Productivity Commission report (2011) discusses issues that may affect retention in particular areas. For example, they mention that in the Family Day Care sector requirements for upskilling under the National Quality Standards may mean that workers in the sector without the minimum certificate III qualification may choose to exit the sector because of an unwillingness to undertake further training. The report suggests that in home training and assessment should be an option to encourage these workers to undertake the requisite training as centre based training may be a barrier to the uptake of training. The CS&HISC (2011) report on the family day care workforce also discussed resistance to imposed formal study and that there was a risk of people leaving the sector rather than undertaking the training. In particular, barriers to undertaking training included a lack of flexible delivery options, a lack of support and access to trainers, cost, and poor RPL processes.

In contrast, the research/literature has more to say about initiatives or strategies aimed at attracting and retaining students in the courses. Some of the initiatives would seem to have general applicability. These include:

- Peer mentoring programs which includes creating social networks for new students (Heirdfield, Walker & Walsh, 2007).
- Provision of flexible learning or blended learning options as opposed to classroom only or distance only delivery modes (Watson, 2006; Choy et al 2008).
- Employment based training options including the provision of traineeships (Productivity Commission, 2011).
- Effective use of Recognition of Prior Learning for workers who already possess some of the competencies required for the qualification (Productivity Commission 2011, CS&HISC 2011).
- A variety of funding incentives and training subsidies from government (Various Commonwealth and State programs).
- Improving the image of the sector (including pay and professionalising the sector) (Bretherton, 2010), and
- Selecting suitable students into the courses (Choy et al 2008).

In addition, CRES (2011) suggests eight domains for effective provision of childhood education. By extension one would expect these good practice domains would also assist with course retention/completion.

The eight domains are:

- Good practice in flexible delivery (including some face-face delivery, comprehensive course materials and a code of practice about keeping regular communication between teachers, students and employers).
- A systematic approach to the work placement component of the course.
- High quality in course teaching.
- Courses having depth and breadth as well as being of sufficient duration.
- Rigorous assessment practices.
- Meeting individual learning needs (through for example customised learning support to individuals and groups, and use of recognition of prior learning).
- Provision of structured pathways to higher qualifications.
- Monitoring course outcomes (through for example feedback from students and employers regarding satisfaction and employment outcome, and using data collected to improve the course).

Some of the strategies and initiatives that are discussed are situation specific and it would appear that some situations require specific solutions (i.e. not a one size fits all approach).

There are, for example, a series of small projects focused on increasing the workforce participation in remote areas and also among Indigenous people. The focus of these projects includes providing contextualised and culturally relevant training, mentoring approaches and upskilling of existing workers. One example is the *Reaching the hard to reach early childhood Indigenous workforce* (Albion, 2010). This project focused on obtaining nationally recognised qualifications amongst Indigenous early childhood practitioners in very remote areas of the Northern Territory. More particularly, the project looked at supporting a cohort of Indigenous early childhood practitioners to obtain a certificate I in Workplace Preparation, a certificate II in Community Services (Children's Services) leading to a certificate III using the *Learning at Work book* approach. This *Learning at Work book* approach as described by Fasoli (2010) is an innovative training model to help develop an early childhood workforce for remote Indigenous early childhood services. It has three components:

- Learning at Work Booklets and DVDs which are used to guide students through the full range of tasks that are expected of childcare practitioners. Collaborative problem solving activities also form part of the workbook.
- TREC's or Technology, Reading and Early Childhood Services - This component complements the Learning at Workbook and is aimed at addressing literacy needs. It is an online tool with three sections; reading skills, listening skills and numeracy skills.
- Regional Yarning Circles - These are aimed at providing isolated learners with opportunities to share knowledge, skills and experiences with others that share their cultures and languages. The Yarning circles involve group learning strategies as well as providing an opportunity for accredited assessors to verify assessment evidence.

A subsequent evaluation of the Albion (2010) project indicated some success with completion rates and with developing partnerships between all the stakeholders involved. The completion rate was considered to be high in this particular context even though only three out of eight participants completed the certificate I and II, with a further two completing the certificate I training with partial assessment. Non-

completion was said to relate to literacy and numeracy issues and the fly in and fly out nature of the course. The courses were also seen as being successful in developing ICT, literacy and advocacy skills, and also self-esteem and confidence.

Lessons learned from the model included the need for learner support between visits from the trainer (who is the Learning Co-ordinator). Other lessons learnt include the importance of strong partnerships between stakeholders, the importance of culturally relevant teaching and learning tools and for implementation of these tools by Learning Coordinators to be both flexible and consistent.

As another example of initiatives aimed at a particular group or situation, the Family Day Care Workforce Development Project (CS&H ISC, 2011) suggested a best practice training and assessment model to improve training outcomes in the sector (for both existing workers and new entrants). The best practice model was derived by tracking 176 educators' experiences in undertaking training and assessment over an eight month period. This best practice model contained the following components:

- Flexible delivery options for training.
- Recognition assessment for educators and unit coordinators upgrading their qualifications.
- Aligning induction and orientation processes in this sector to the accredited qualifications.
- Provision of training and assessment practices and materials specific to this sector.
- Unit co-ordinators providing mentoring support, training assessment and coaching, and
- Provision of subsidised training.

In summary, there are some initiatives that are aimed at assisting student engagement and retention in childcare courses. These start with selecting appropriate students into the course and providing funding incentives for students to undertake courses. Then there are strategies relating to actual course delivery such as providing flexible delivery options and providing training tailored to specific areas or groups. There are also strategies involving training subsidies.

Quantitative analysis

This section discusses student participation in and completion of early childhood courses in the VET sector. It also discusses students' intentions, satisfaction, attitudes and employment outcomes from these courses. The data sources used here are NCVER's students and courses data, NCVER's Student Outcomes Survey and NCVER's Student Intentions Survey. The analysis focuses on the five early childhood courses (and their antecedents) in the Community Services training package. These are:

- CHC30708 Certificate III in Children's Services;
- CHC41208 Certificate IV in Children's Services (Outside School Hours Care);
- CHC50908 Diploma of Children's Services (Early Childhood Education and Care)
- CHC51008 Diploma of Children's Services (Outside School Hours Care); and
- CHC60208 Advanced Diploma of Children's Services

Course participation and completion data

The first table shows that participation in early childhood courses has increased markedly since 2004. Across all qualification, enrolments have increased from 33,493 in 2004 to 75,121 in 2011 - more than a doubling of the number of enrolments with most of this increase occurring post 2008. Most enrolments occur in two qualifications: the certificate III (61% of enrolments in all early childhood qualifications in 2011), followed by the Diploma in early childhood education (35% of all enrolments).

Table 1 Total course enrolments by qualification (2004 – 2011)

Qualification	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
Certificate 3	18,604	20,590	23,777	24,303	24,960	25,933	34,022	45,830
Certificate 4	604	619	692	771	750	566	701	865
Diploma (ECE)	13,729	13,427	13,145	13,013	13,113	21,072	23,954	26,525
Diploma (OSH)	171	253	355	493	327	348	287	282
Advanced Diploma	385	341	307	462	582	1,634	1,780	1,619
Total	33,493	35,230	38,276	39,042	39,732	49,553	60,744	75,121

Source: NCVER students and courses collection

Note: Certificate 3 comprises CHC30708, CHC30402 and CHC30399

Certificate 4 comprises CHC41208, CHC40402 and CHC40399

Diploma in Children's Services (ECE) comprises CHC50908, CHC50302 and CHC50399

Diploma in Children's Services (OSH) comprises CHC51008 and CHC50202

Advanced Diploma comprises CHC60208, CHC60202 and CHC60399

Course completions have also increased rapidly since 2004 (table 2). While there were 8,043 course completions in 2004 this more than doubled to 18,205 in 2010. Between 2008 and 2010 completions increased by about 57%. Nevertheless, completion rates are reported to be low. As a very rough guide, if we compare total completions in 2010 (18,205) to total enrolments three years earlier (39,042) we see that completions are less than half of the enrolments.

Table 2 Number of course completions for childcare courses in public VET for 2004-2010

Qualification	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
Certificate III	5,182	5,814	6,678	7,286	8,397	10,444	12,912
Certificate IV	213	138	211	167	255	211	279
Diploma (ECE)	2,559	2,542	2,823	2,549	2,731	3,752	4,388
Diploma (OSH)	8	43	76	89	101	133	97
Advanced diploma	81	54	42	82	105	376	529
Total	8,043	8,591	9,830	10,173	11,589	14,916	18,205

Source: NCVER students and courses collection

The next table summarises the characteristics of students enrolled in children services qualifications in 2011 and those who completed a course in 2010. The table has been separated into the five children's services qualification of interest. In addition, the last row of the table provides summary information on student characteristics for all enrolments in the public VET system. Note that 2010 has been used for course completion data as it is the latest data available for completions. The data also needs to be treated with some caution as patterns of enrolment/completion can vary from year to year. In addition, some qualification levels have relatively low numbers associated with them (as can be seen from the table above).

The gender profile of these courses is overwhelmingly female. One of the interesting features of table 3 is the age groupings of completers for some of these qualifications. It can be seen for example that for the higher level qualifications substantial proportions of those who completed (and indeed enrolled) were over 40 years old. (In contrast the certificate III and certificate IV course completers have a much younger age profile). This is suggestive of existing workers upgrading their qualifications. This is supported by data on previous highest education level where it can be seen that over a half of students who completed a diploma in early childhood education qualification already have a certificate III level qualification or higher, while over a half of those enrolled in the advanced diploma already hold a diploma or higher.

Quite high proportions of students who enrolled in or completed the certificate III, certificate IV and diploma in early childhood education came from a non-English speaking background or were born overseas (roughly one in five came from a non-English speaking background and a quarter were born overseas). However, for the diploma in out of school hours care and the advanced diploma there were lower proportions from a non-English speaking background and/or born overseas. For those who completed the advanced diploma in 2010, only 5.1% came from a non-English speaking background and only 11.0% were born overseas.

The other feature of the table worth noting is the relatively low proportions of completers who reported being Indigenous or reported having a disability compared to the equivalent enrolment data (once again noting that this data needs to be treated with some caution).

Table 3 Major socio-demographic student characteristics by qualification for enrolments (2011) and completions (2010)*

Qualification	Sex	Age ¹	Indigenous Status	Disability Status	Language Background	Country of Birth	Highest Education Level ²
<i>Certificate 3</i>							
Enrolments	96.1% female	29.2% aged 15 to 19 19.3% aged 30 to 39 18.2% aged 20 to 24	4.4% Indigenous	6.1% reported a disability	19.5% NESB	25.5% overseas	31.8% Year 12 18.1% Year 10 11.6% Cert III
Completions	97.1% female	25.9% aged 15 to 19 19.9% aged 20 to 24 18.3% aged 30 to 39	2.6% Indigenous	4.7% reported a disability	22.1% NESB	26.4% overseas	30.7% Year 12 16.0% Cert III 15.8% Year 10
<i>Certificate 4</i>							
Enrolments	88.3% female	20.2% aged 20 to 24 19.7% aged 30 to 39 19.4% aged 15 to 19	4.2% Indigenous	8.0% reported a disability	14.9% NESB	21.8% overseas	26.7% Year 12 16.8% Cert III 16.5% Year 10
Completions	91.3% female	23.7% aged 20 to 24 17.2% aged 30 to 39 16.1% aged 25 to 29	4.3% Indigenous	5.0% reported a disability	21.5% NESB	28.3% overseas	22.6% Year 12 12.9% Year 10 12.9% Cert IV
<i>Diploma (ECE)</i>							
Enrolments	97.7% female	26.5% aged 20 to 24 22.1% aged 30 to 39 16.4% aged 40 to 49	2.0% Indigenous	4.5% reported a disability	21.3% NESB	26.2% overseas	48.2% Cert III 19.4% Year 12 6.2% Bachelor
Completions	97.8% female	28.0% aged 20 to 24 21.1% aged 30 to 39 18.8% aged 40 to 49	1.5% Indigenous	3.2% reported a disability	19.3% NESB	24.8% overseas	44.2% Cert III 20.6% Year 12 6.9% Diploma
<i>Diploma (OSH)</i>							
Enrolments	87.2% female	27.0% aged 40 to 49 19.9% aged 50 to 59 18.4% aged 20 to 24	1.1% Indigenous	9.9% reported a disability	12.4% NESB	20.6% overseas	36.5% Cert IV 17.0% Cert III 12.8% Year 12
Completions	90.7% female	26.8% aged 40 to 49 20.6% aged 50 to 59 19.6% aged 20 to 24	1.0% Indigenous	4.1% reported a disability	9.3% NESB	17.5% overseas	24.7% Cert IV 16.5% Year 12 13.4% Cert III

Advanced Diploma							
Enrolments	98.4% female	31.2% aged 30 to 39 22.9% aged 25 to 29 21.2% aged 40 to 49	2.0% Indigenous	3.3% reported a disability	10.8% NESB	18.6% overseas	54.6% Diploma 11.0% Year 12 9.1% Cert III
Completions	98.1% female	33.3% aged 30 to 39 26.7% aged 40 to 49 19.3% aged 25 to 29	0.8% Indigenous	2.6% reported a disability	5.1% NESB	11.0% overseas	46.1% Diploma 10.8% Year 12 7.0% Adv. dip.
All public VET enrolments	47.2% female	27.3% aged 15 to 19 17.5% aged 20 to 24 17.2% aged 30 to 39	5.2% Indigenous	7.1% reported a disability	16.4% NESB	21.7% overseas	23.7% year 12 17.0% year 10 11.4% certificate III

Source: NCVER students and courses collection

¹ The top three age groups with the highest percent values are provided.

² The top three highest education level groups with the highest percent values are provided.

*These figures refer to stated status for example 6.1% of all students, including those of unknown status, reported a disability.

The labour force status of students enrolled in childcare courses is shown in table 4. It can be seen that the proportions stating unemployed or not in the labour force is highest for students enrolled in the certificate III (36%) followed by the diploma in early childhood education (22%). The lowest proportions unemployed or not in the labour force are in the Advanced diploma (4.4%) and Diploma out of school hours care. This is perhaps not surprising as the latter two qualifications would generally be undertaken by existing workers, whereas there are many new entrants undertaking the certificate III and also to some extent the diploma (ECE).

Table 4 Labour force status of students enrolled in childcare courses, 2011(%)

	Cert 3	Cert 4	Dip (ECE)	Dip (OSH)	Adv Dip
Employed	51.8	74.8	66.9	82.6	82.6
Unemployed	26.3	10.8	15.2	2.5	2.1
Not in the labour force	10.1	2.2	6.7	0.0	2.3
Not known	11.9	12.3	11.2	14.9	13.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: NCVER students and courses collection

Student Survey Data

The following tables use data from NCVER's Student Outcomes Survey and Student Intentions Survey. The Student Intentions Survey was a one off survey which asked a variety of questions about student intentions for students enrolled to commence a Vocational Education and Training (VET) course at certificate I level or higher in February 2011. The data for each of the tables sourced from this survey is broken down by intention to complete course (split by 'still in training', 'completed the course', and 'left the course without completing/did not start') as well as 'overall'. Note that due to small sample sizes information could not be broken down by qualification level.

Reason/intention for undertaking training

The table below indicates that the overwhelming reason for undertaking the training for graduates was employment related (85%). Within this category 25.4% cited get a job as a reason with a further 22% saying it was a requirement of the job. The proportion reporting main reason for training as requirement of a job has increased over time (student outcomes data from earlier surveys indicates that in 2009 only 14.1% reported requirement of job as reason with 17.4% reporting this in 2010). This increase may be as a result of increased regulation in the sector.

Table 5 Main reason for undertaking training for qualification completers, 2011 (%)

Main Reason	%
Employment-related	85.5
<i>Get a job</i>	25.4
<i>Develop an existing business</i>	2.2
<i>Start my own business</i>	0.9*
<i>Try for a different career</i>	11.2
<i>Get a better job or promotion</i>	7.4
<i>It was a requirement of my job</i>	22.0

<i>Gain extra skills for current job</i>	16.4
Further study: to get into another course of study	8.2
Personal development	6.3

Source: NCVER's Student Outcomes Survey 2011 (unpublished data)

* The estimate has a relative standard error of greater than 25% and therefore should be used with caution

Looking at the greatest influence in undertaking the training for those intending to complete the training, table 6 shows that the greatest influence is personal interest, followed by family, friends and colleagues. There is not much difference when looking at the intention to complete categories (partly due to small sample sizes) except possibly for the first two categories where those who left without completing or did not start were less likely to state personal interest as the greatest influence in undertaking the training, while those who completed the course were more likely to state family, friends or colleagues as the greatest influence in undertaking the training.

Table 6 Greatest influence in undertaking the training, by training status, 2011 (%)

	Total	Intend to complete the course		
		Still in training	Completed the course	Left without completing/did not start the training
		%	%	%
Personal interest/self-directed	44.7	47.0	42.1	37.3
Family, friends, colleagues	28.0	24.2	42.2	29.9*
Employer/employment related	13.1	13.7	**	20.7*
School/VET practitioners	5.7*	5.9*	8.5*	**
Financial benefit	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Nothing at all	4.7*	6.8*	0.0	**
Other reasons	3.8*	2.4*	**	**
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: NCVER's Student Intentions Survey 2011 (unpublished data)

* The estimate has a relative standard error of greater than 25% and therefore should be used with caution

** NCVER does not report on estimates based on less than five respondents because the estimates are unreliable

Table 7 provides information about knowledge of the training. The interesting feature of this table is that those who left without completing the training or who did not start were less likely to say yes to three of the categories of knowledge, particularly 'chose the right course of study for me' and 'clear idea of the career I wanted when I chose the training'.

Table 7 Knowledge of training¹ by training status, 2011 (%)

	Total	Intend to complete the course		
		Still in training	Completed the course	Left without completing/did not start the training
	%	%	%	%
Chose the right course of study for me	92.3	97.3	98.2	62.9
Understood time and effort involved in the training	86.1	84.9	94.6	82.3
Easy to find information about the training	90.9	91.6	88.5	90.6
Clear idea of the career I wanted when I chose the training	92.8	94.5	97.4	79.8

Source: NCVER's Student Intentions Survey 2011 (unpublished data)

¹ Shown as the proportion of respondents who 'agree' or 'strongly agree' with each statement.

There were also differences in attitudes towards the training by training intention. Table 8 shows that those who did not complete the course or did not start were generally less likely to say yes to the various statements regarding attitudes to training particularly around confidence in ability to complete, encouragement from family and friends, and needing to complete the training for further study.

Table 8 Attitudes towards the training¹ by training status, 2011 (%)

	Total	Intend to complete the course		
		Still in training	Completed the course	Left without completing/did not start the training
	%	%	%	%
Confident in my ability to complete the training	93.7	96.2	98.4	76.0
Friends and family encourage me to complete the training	91.8	94.9	97.0	71.3
Completing the training does not fit in with my family and other commitments	22.4	27.0	10.7*	12.6*
Undertaking the training is financially challenging	35.0	41.8	20.7*	19.4*
Completing the training will be personally rewarding	97.3	99.6	100.0	82.3
Need to complete the training to get into the kind of job I want	88.8	89.5	90.8	83.4
Need to complete training to get into the further study I want to do	81.3	82.3	87.0	69.2
Training relevant to occupation I want to work in	96.7	98.6	100.0	83.5
The training is highly valued amongst employers	95.0	95.9	98.3	87.4

Source: NCVER's Student Intentions Survey 2011 (unpublished data)

1. Shown as the proportion of respondents who 'agree' or 'strongly agree' with each statement.

* The estimate has a relative standard error of greater than 25% and therefore should be used with caution

Similarly, there are differences about attitudes towards VET. The main areas where there are differences by training intention are understanding what is required to get a VET qualification, the value of completing a whole qualification as opposed to a part of the course, and the importance of gaining skills rather than a qualification, with non-completers/starters less likely to respond in the affirmative.

Table 9 Attitudes towards VET¹ by training status, 2011 (%)

	Total	Intend to complete the course		
		Still in training	Completed the course	Left without completing/did not start the training
	%	%	%	%
VET can be used as a stepping stone to other types of study or training	98.9	99.1	100.0	96.9
VET qualifications are recognised around Australia	94.8	94.7	94.9	95.4
VET qualifications are as highly regarded as university degrees	57.3	57.7	54.5	58.2
I understand what I need to do to get a VET qualification	89.2	91.7	88.8	78.4
It is better to complete a whole course than only part of the course	90.0	92.0	96.5	74.3
When it comes to VET, gaining skills is more important than gaining a qualification	60.1	59.5	72.9	48.5

Source: NCVER's Student Intentions Survey 2011 (unpublished data)

1. Shown as the proportion of respondents who 'agree' or 'strongly agree' with each statement.

For those that did not complete a qualification, NCVER's Student Outcomes Survey provides information on reasons for discontinuing the training. Table 10 shows that the main reasons for discontinuing the

training were for personal reasons (40%), followed by the training did not meet needs or other training related reason (33%).

Table 10 Main reason for discontinuing the training for module completers, 2011 (%)

Main Reason	%
Got what they wanted from training	7.3*
Changed jobs or started a new job	12.2*
Training did not meet needs or other training-related reasons	32.8
Personal reasons	40.3
Other reasons	7.3*

Source: NCVER's Student Outcomes Survey 2011 (unpublished data)

* The estimate has a relative standard error of greater than 25% and therefore should be used with caution

Recognition of prior experience

One of the mechanisms to improve training outcomes in the childcare sector is through effective use of recognition of prior learning. Table 11 below shows information on recognition of prior experience for graduates. For 2011 graduates 37% had their training shortened as a result of prior study, experience or skills. However, there was a substantial proportion (about 44%) of those with prior experience and skills that did not have their training shortened. For about 20% of this group, the training provider did not offer to assess prior experience and skills.

Table 11 Recognition of prior experience and skills for graduates, 2011 (%)

	%
With prior experience and skills related to the training	65.8
Training shortened	37.0
Based on prior study only	6.1
Based on previous experience and skills only	13.0
Based on both prior study and previous experience and skills	17.9
Training not shortened	28.8
Training provider did not offer to assess prior experience and skills	13.4
Did not accept offer to have prior experience and skills assessed	7.2
Experience and skills assessed but training not shortened	8.1
No prior experience and skills related to the training	34.2
Training provider offered to assess prior experience and skills	22.5
Training provider did not offer to assess prior experience and skills	11.7

Source: NCVER's Student Outcomes Survey 2011 (unpublished data)

Outcomes of training

Table 12 shows that the large majority of graduates (90%+) were satisfied with the training and achieved their main reason for doing the training. Over 80% reported that the training was relevant to their job and that they received at least one job related benefit from the training. In addition, for graduates not employed before training, about 55% of graduates were employed after their training, and for graduates employed before the training, about 17% were employed at a higher skill level after training (presumably existing workers). About 15% were employed in their first full-time job after training.

Substantial proportions of graduates (just over a third) enrolled in further study. Most of these enrolled in TAFE (about 21% of childcare graduates) but also university (about 9%) and other providers (about 5%).

Table 12 Satisfaction and improved employment outcomes for qualification completers, 2011 (%)

Outcome	%
Satisfaction with training	
Satisfied with the overall quality of training	90.5
Fully or partly achieved their main reason for doing the training	92.2
Benefits of training for those employed after training	
Reported that training was relevant to current job	86.5
Received at least one job-related benefit	82.4
Improved employment status after training	
Difference in proportion employed from before training to after	6.3
Employed in first full time job after training	15.4
<i>Of those not employed before training</i>	
Employed after training	54.9
<i>Of those employed before training</i>	
Employed after training at a higher skill level	17.3
Further study outcomes	
<i>Enrolled in further study after training</i>	34.2
Studying at university	8.9
Studying at TAFE institute	20.7
Studying at private provider or other registered provider	4.5

Source: NCVER's Student Outcomes Survey 2011 (unpublished data)

Destinations can be examined in a bit more detail by looking at training relevance by occupational destination. Table 13 shows that about 60% of those in the community and personal services occupational group were in the same occupation as the training but only 10% of managers were. That figure needs to be treated with some caution as management training is quite generic and applicable across many occupational areas. It is therefore prudent to also include those who found the training to be relevant to their work even though they were in a different occupation to the training course. This shows then that about three quarters of those whose intended occupation of training was a manager either ended up in that occupation or found the training relevant to their job, while about 65% of those intended occupation of training was community and personal service workers did. The table shows that only relatively few graduates did not find the training relevant to their current job.

Table 13 Occupational destination and training relevance for graduates, 2011 (%)

Intended occupation of training activity (ANZSCO)	Employed				Total employed ¹	Not employed ²	Total
	In same occupation group (as training course)	In different occupation (to training course)—training was relevant to current job	In different occupation (to training course)—training was not relevant to current job	Occupation after training not known			
Managers	10.5	63.9	7.5	4.0	86.7	13.3	100.0
Community and personal service workers	59.4	5.3	10.0	4.0	78.7	21.3	100.0

All graduates in selected courses ³	42.0	26.2	9.1	4.0	81.5	18.5	100.0
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Source: NCVER's Student Outcomes Survey 2011 (unpublished data)

1 Total includes instances where training relevance is not known

2 'Not employed' is defined as unemployed (looking for full-time or part-time work), not in the labour force, or not employed (no further information)

3. Totals exclude students from community education providers (for whom occupation after training is not captured). Also excluded are a small number of students with an unknown intended ANZSCO category. As a result, figures for 'total employed' and 'not employed' differ from those contained within other tables where the base is all graduates

Main findings and discussion

This section will firstly discuss the findings from the peak organisation interviews and then the larger discussion will be about the findings from the RTO and childcare provider interviews, including some student focus group discussions and interviews.

Pilot study interviews were undertaken in South Australia (two in TAFE, two in private RTOs and four in childcare centres) in part to test the interview protocols; but also to start gathering information on the main causes of non-completion and strategies for engagement. As such, interview material gathered from South Australia is included in the main discussion. The pilot study interviews indicated that the interview schedules prepared worked quite adequately during these interviews with only very minor modifications made to the protocols.

Quotes are used to illustrate issues raised in the interviews and focus groups points but do not necessarily reflect the distribution of responses across the different organisation types consulted.

Peak organisation interview findings

Interviews were undertaken with six peak body organisations that are relevant to the childcare sector in Australia. The themes coming through the peak body interviews were quite consistent and there was little in the way of opposing views. The main focus of these interviews centred on reasons for non-completion of courses and initiatives or strategies to engage or re-engage students to complete these courses. However within this context, issues relating to the childcare sector as a whole were raised as they appear to be part of the story about completion or non-completion, and the way that some initiatives need to be designed.

Reasons for non-completion were quite clear. A couple of these applied only to new entrants and a couple only to existing workers, but many applied to both. Reasons for non-completion pertaining to specific groups such as those in remote areas were also raised.

Quality of training, including the quality of the workplace experience was mentioned by some peak body organisations as a reason for non-completion. The comments concerned issues such as a disconnect between the realities of the job and the teaching, a lack of quality teaching, course complexity and issues in the work placement component of the course. Comments included:

Some RTO training is purely book based (Quality Authority respondent)

Minimal support is provided in the work placement or it's an inappropriate placement (Industry Skills Council respondent)

Personal reasons, which are out of the control of the RTO, were also mentioned by most of the peak agencies as a cause for non completion. These personal reasons often came back to time to do the course but health reasons were also raised.

Students are time-poor because of work and family commitments (Union respondent)

Another major reason for course non-completion was related to suitability to do the course or what could be termed 'selection' issues. This related both to new entrants and existing workers. In the case of new entrants, respondents commented that often students were inappropriate for the course. It seems that these students are inappropriately advised to do the course by career counsellors who see the childcare sector as an option for students who are often below average in academic attainment. In the case of

existing workers an issue can be lack of motivation because they are required to do the course to keep their job.

Other reasons for non-completion that were mentioned by only a couple of the peak organisation respondents included leaving when they find out how low the pay is, leaving to go onto university, and insecurity about formal study for older workers. Issues relevant to students in remote areas were also raised in several of the interviews. They were not necessarily raised directly in relation to non-completion but nevertheless are concerns that could lead to non-completion. These centred mainly on a lack of face to face contact and networking opportunities, and the availability of employer support in these areas.

Students from remote locations have no networking opportunities and can't come together as a group (Community childcare co-operative respondents)

Employer support in remote areas because of small size of child care centres (Community childcare co-operative respondents)

When asked about strategies to mitigate the reasons for non-completion discussed above, two main approaches stood out. The first related to student support and contact, and the other to use of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). Student support can involve a number of things ranging from general support to support with literacy and numeracy, and also support for people from disadvantaged backgrounds. As will be seen in the next section, a high level of student support and contact was seen as critical in getting students through the course.

The other strategy, which is mainly relevant to existing workers, concerned the effective use of RPL. RPL related initiatives were seen as a way of attaining qualifications and also importantly, as a way of building confidence in workers' skills. The following comment typifies this sentiment.

(A strategy is) RPL processes for experienced workers that allows them to articulate their skills and gain confidence (Quality Authority respondent)

One model that was mentioned and thought to be successful for older existing workers involved qualified children's services workers being taken off the job and trained as RPL assessors. They then assessed workers on the job rather than the workers having to go through the lengthy paperwork process. This was thought to be a particularly useful approach for older workers who are nervous about formal study.

There were a few other strategy or initiative areas raised by some of the respondents. These include attention to good selection practices and provision of pre-course information, the use of flexible training models (that can include both e learning and face-to-face components), and employer initiatives, in particular the provision of some study time while at work. These strategies were all mentioned in the main fieldwork interviews and so will be discussed in more detail below.

As was mentioned, other issues relating to the childcare sector were raised in the interviews. These will be discussed in the next section but relate to contextual issues concerned the low level of pay in the sector, professionalising the sector and regulations. In terms of professionalising the sector, people consider themselves to be educators rather than childcare workers. There is also a push to use the term sector rather than industry to boost the image of the sector and also to help address public misconceptions about the work that they do.

There was also discussion about the new regulations regarding staff qualifications and concerns about staff that have been in the sector for a few years leaving because they do not have the requisite qualifications. This is an important point in relation to strategies to engage this group to undertake further studies. These strategies would include effective use of RPL mechanisms and also the provision of flexible delivery options that are less threatening to the existing worker who hasn't studied for several years.

Main findings

This section discusses the overall findings from the interviews and focus groups. Firstly however, contextual issues in the sector are discussed as these have implications for skill development within the sector. Following this the main reasons for non-completion of childcare courses are discussed. The section finally discusses strategies/initiatives to improve completion of childcare courses.

Contextual issues

Any discussion of non-completion and strategies to mitigate non-completion must necessarily take place within the context of the sector (see Figure 1). These contextual factors impact the training system in the sector and while perhaps not directly contributing to non-completion of qualifications are certainly parts of the overall story. The factors are also interlinked to some extent. The major contextual factors that were raised by interview respondents (including the peak body interviews) were:

- Working conditions in the sector (especially pay),
- the new regulation requirements (meaning new qualification requirements), and
- perceptions/professionalisation of the sector.

These factors also appear as considerations in the ensuing discussion on reasons for non-completion and the strategies to address these. The most oft mentioned contextual factor was that of working conditions, in particular pay. Pay in the sector is considered to be very low and a major contributing factor in the high turnover of staff within the sector. The high turnover has a consequent effect on the demand for new entrants in the sector which also has an effect on the number of qualifications that are required. In some cases low pay within the sector was seen to be a cause of non-completion (see discussion of reasons for non-completion below). The issue of low pay seems intractable however and there is clearly no easy solution, although some child care centres purportedly pay above award wages as a way of retaining staff.

Typical of responses regarding pay and working conditions were:

Low pay and long hours are the main deterrence from the sector (Public RTO student services respondent SA)

Dollars need to be increased. Some centres pay above the award to keep their good staff but often it's not a 'living wage' (Private RTO respondent WA)

The new regulations for early childhood education have a direct impact on the qualification requirements in the sector. It was mentioned in the introduction that, by 1st January 2014 at least 50% of educators must have or be working towards a diploma in early childhood education and care with the rest having or be working towards a certificate III level qualification. This has implications not only for new entrants in the system but also for existing staff who do not have the requisite qualifications. This can cause tensions. For instance, as will be discussed later, a motivation to do the qualification is because people have to, rather than intrinsically wanting to. There may also be implications regarding student ability in the push to get sufficient numbers of qualified people into the system. A couple of comments that illustrate these points were:

Most people are taking up courses because of changes to the childcare profession (Public RTO respondent SA)

There is a worry that less able students are being pushed to undertake the diploma qualification by centres where there is a need to fulfil ratios (Public RTO respondent NSW)

The other contextual issue raised that is closely related to the previous points was that of professionalisation in the sector. The professionalisation was discussed in terms of pay, perceptions by the community, and referring to childcare as a sector (of education) rather than an industry sector. Mostly respondents discussed these issues in terms of 'raising the status'. The main reasons behind this push for professionalisation include the new National Quality Framework for children's education and care and its consequent implications for qualifications, and following on from this the level of work that is expected by people working in childcare. Most respondents thought that the public, and indeed sometimes career counsellors, misunderstood what it is that childcare educators do in their occupations. The quotes below illustrate these points.

Need attitude shift (by public) - staff are infant educators not baby sitters (Public RTO respondent SA)

The sector needs to be raised in status as the job itself carries a lot of responsibility and the Early Years Learning Framework needs to be visible to the wider community (Childcare provider Qld)

Committed to working in the sector; like the support from TAFE but feels that the community perception of what they do needs to change (Public provider student focus group, WA)

These contextual factors point to an underlying tension between the requirements of the job on the one hand and pay and public perceptions on the other. As said previously, while these points themselves do not generally lead to non-completion (although pay was raised as a reason for non-completion by some), they are worth keeping in mind in the following discussion. They are also largely out of the control of RTOs in terms of developing strategies to increase student engagement and retention (with the possible exception of raising the status of the sector). Nevertheless, they do have an (albeit indirect) impact on training in the sector.

Reasons for non-completion

A rubric developed by Thomas (2012) will be loosely adapted for the discussion of reasons for non-completion. While her study concerned student attrition in VET distance education programs many of the factors she found were similar in tenor to the findings of this study and can be adapted to the findings of this study. Thomas categorised reasons for attrition into two major categories which she called internal factors and external factors. Internal factors were those seen as being within the training organisations' control whereas external factors were not. The major categories within the internal factors that she considered were administrative procedures and VET educator, course, selection and student factors. Not all factors apply to this study. In addition, the external factors were personal, socio-economic, and motivational factors. These factors are not mutually exclusive and some reasons for non-completion apply to more than one factor.

Internal factors

Selection factors

Course selection was a major issue that was raised by most respondents and this was a factor that was raised in previous research (see e.g. Choy et al 2008 & Watson, 2006). This is also supported by some of the analysis of the quantitative data where we saw in table 7 that those who were categorised in the Student Intentions Survey as not completing or starting the course were less likely to say that they chose the right course of study or had a clear idea about which career they wanted than those who completed or were still training.

Within this, there were subgroups of reasons related to course selection. The first of these was that childcare was seen as a 'dumping ground' for less able students. This can start already with VET in School programs. One respondent noted that:

Children's services are promoted as a soft option in high school and often students lack abilities/desired behaviours (Public RTO SA)

Post school, less able students are often advised by various parties such as guidance counsellors to undertake childcare as it is seen as an 'easy option'.

Another major reason for course attrition within selection factors related to misperception by students as to what the course involved. Some students decide to undertake childcare because they love children but become disillusioned when they find out what childcare actually involves and then they drop out.

Age plays a big role; the younger girls who just came out of high school don't have a grasp of what the job entails and of all the responsibilities that come with the job (Public RTO NSW)

Related to these two reasons was lack of information about what the course involves.

They aren't given enough info about the practical elements of the course (Public RTO student focus group, Qld)

This has implications for RTOs in terms of providing adequate pre-course information both to potential students and also to parties advising students, such as career guidance counsellors. There are also implications for selection mechanisms into courses. These points will be discussed further in the section on strategies.

A final point to mention in terms of selection factors, relates to existing workers. The new regulations/legislation will require the up-skilling of some existing workers without the requisite qualifications. There is a potential for some of these existing worker students to drop out (of the course and the sector) because they have to do the course to keep their job. One response was that:

Students were more motivated before the certificate III was mandatory because now most only enrol because they have to, not because they want to (Private RTO Qld)

Course related factors

Issues were also identified that related to course design and complexity and the work placement component of the course. A couple of respondents mentioned that flexible delivery and distance education courses can be related to course attrition because of lack of student support and lack of defined timelines for completing assignments. More commonly mentioned as a cause of attrition was course complexity or intensity. A typical response was:

The demands of the course are harder than they thought (Public RTO WA)

For some though, it was more a matter of fitting the demand of the course into their work and personal life rather than the course being academically difficult.

Many times it's that people can't handle the workload and balance this with other life responsibilities (Public RTO NSW)

While course difficulty/intensity often applied to students who are enrolled in diploma level qualifications, it could also be an issue with certificate III students.

The depth of what is expected from the training package is beyond what a certificate III should be. Students struggle with these demands because of literacy barriers (Private RTO Qld)

Drop out from courses often occurs early on, typically when the first assignment is due, but the work placement component of the course is another critical point for non-completion of courses, and this would typically apply to new entrants rather than existing workers. This could be because this is the juncture where students find out that the job is not what they thought it would be or harder than expected, or because of lack of on the job support. One respondent summed up both these reasons.

(Some students) drop out because of lack of support from within the centre where placement is being undertaken. The placement is a crucial element and if the experience isn't positive it often taints the student's perspective of what working in the sector is like (Public RTO WA)

Student support

Student support was not often mentioned as a specific reason for non-completion by respondents although lack of support was mentioned a couple of times by students.

Lack of service support for my advanced diploma studies (non-completing student NSW)

It was also mentioned in the context of e-learning courses.

E-learning leads to high dropout rates because students still need the personal support and attention from an RTO (Private RTO Qld)

Similarly, VET educator factors, which are in part related to student support, did not really arise as an issue in the interviews as a reason for non-completion. However, it needs to be kept in mind that the RTOs that were interviewed are unlikely to mention something like this as a reason for non-completion. VET educator and teacher quality factors were mentioned in the peak organisation interviews as discussed above.

Student support came through very strongly however - probably more strongly than any other factor - as a strategy to keep students engaged in the course and completing the course. The issue of student support will be discussed in more detail under the section on strategies. Quipped one respondent:

Did think about dropping out because of personal issues but had a lot of support and motivation (Private childcare provider and RTO student)

External factors

Personal factors

Personal reasons for not completing the course were the largest overall reasons for non-completion (along with selection related issues). They covered a lot of different types of responses but the majority could generally be put down not having the time to dedicate to the course of study. Within this however there were reasons related to caring for family (children and parents), and also work commitments. Time was seen as being even more of an issue for students enrolled in the diploma than in the certificate III. Typical of the responses were:

Time management is the biggest obstacle to completion, especially for young women who work and need to look after their families (Public RTO Qld)

Diploma students are better because they know about course and sector but they struggle balancing home life and course completion (Public RTO WA)

Other personal reasons that were also raised were health issues (including emotional problems) and cost of doing the course. Cost was mentioned as a factor in one regional/remote location because of the cost of living expenses in that location.

People often drop out because they can't afford to stay in town (Public RTO student focus group)

I would keep studying with (private provider) if it was able to provide low or no cost courses like TAFE (non-completing student, NSW)

Motivational factors

Students' motivations for doing the course may indirectly be related to reasons why students drop out of courses. Some of these have been discussed previously under selection issues (e.g. misperception about what the course entails, or have to do the course for their job). Another motivation to do the course that may eventually lead to non-completion is the financial cost. Due to the funding arrangements in place (e.g. the TAFE fee waiver scheme), the diploma course can be undertaken for free.

The fact that the diploma is free is a big motivator for students to begin the qualification, but it is also making it easier to walk away (Public RTO student focus group NSW)

Some students also undertake the course because they see it as an alternative to university. It was mentioned in the peak organisation interviews as well that VET level childcare courses are seen as an alternative to university, but that students will leave the course once other options become available to them.

Students are now quite upfront about using the certificate III and diploma as a pathway to university (private RTO WA)

Socio-economic factors

Literacy and numeracy issues were raised by most respondents as an area of difficulty with students not only at certificate III level, but also diploma level. It is seen as an issue across the board including non-English speaking background students and English background speaking students. Included in literacy issues are also poor computer skills. These issues have implications for RTOs supporting students with literacy issues, and may also have implications for selection practices.

Included under socio-economic factors is remuneration in the sector. Wages are quite low and some students do not complete their course once they realise how low the pay is.

Wages are a big factor for attrition because many students don't realise how little they will earn. They can make more money packing shelves (Public RTO Qld)

Wages can also be a factor for courses non-completion in regional/remote areas where the cost of living is very high.

(Students) drop out because they are lured away by mining or interstate where the cost of living is cheaper (public RTO WA)

The low pay more broadly has an impact on people staying in the sector and is a major reason for high turnover which then means that there is an increased demand for workers. Interview respondents invariably mentioned pay and conditions, and while it was not always discussed specifically in terms of non-completion, it was seen as necessary contextual information by respondents. Some comments from respondents that illustrate these points include.

The low wage is a big turn off - McDonalds pays more (Private RTO WA)

In asking students why they aren't upskilling to the Diploma it's because it's a lot of effort for minimum reward (Childcare provider Qld)

However, a few respondents mentioned that students stay on in spite of the low pay because of the nature of the work.

Students in the class know that they'll be earning very low wages. However, most students really enjoy the nature of the work; it is meaningful work and thus they are not put off by the low wage (Public RTO student focus group Qld)

As alluded to earlier, there are also particular issues involved with studying and working in regional/remote locations. These include lack of facilities, lack of networking opportunities and the high cost of living that can occur in some of these locations.

Some remote students are already working in child care and access TAFE through online networks but for others it is often difficult for them to do the work placement because there is no day care centre in their community so they have to go to a regional centre (public RTO Qld)

This means that strategies to mitigate non-completion need to be tailored within the context of the remote location.

Summary of reasons for non-completion

Overall the most common reasons for non-completion related to the suitability of the student for the course and personal reasons. While many (although not all) personal reasons are outside the control of the RTO, institutions are often able to put mechanisms in place to improve selection into the course. Other reasons for non-completion that were mentioned related to course related factors, including the work placement, and literacy and numeracy difficulties.

Some of the reasons for non-completion that were mentioned are more pertinent to some groups than to others. For example, reasons such as did course because had to for job, and insecurity about study for older students apply more to existing workers than to new entrants. There are also problems that students in regional and remote areas face.

The reasons for non-completion are used to inform strategies for in the next section, as well as other information gained from interviews and the literature review on what can be considered 'good practice' in getting students to complete courses.

Strategies and initiatives to assist engagement

There were a variety of strategies and initiatives that were discussed at interviews but these can be condensed down to a handful of categories. These strategies and initiatives can be seen as overriding principles for good practice (i.e. they apply generally) but within this, there will be some specific examples. In particular, vignettes are included in the discussion to illustrate initiatives or to illustrate issues with particular groups, such as students in remote areas. While these are illustrations of 'good practice' initiatives, it can be difficult to back these up with hard data.

Many of the strategies are applicable to RTOs but there are also strategies that employers can use to assist students in completing their courses. The strategies discussed also carry the implication with them that the training is of good quality. It needs to be noted that having a high proportion of students completing a course does not by itself indicate that the course was of high quality.

It is also interesting to note that the strategies that were discussed at the interviews are broadly similar to those that were discussed in the review of the literature. In summary, the strategies can be classified according to the following headings and will be discussed in turn:

- Selection/recruitment of students (including provision of pre-course information)
- Student support

- Flexible delivery options
- Training models
- Workplace related
- Recognition of prior learning
- Students undertaking qualifications in remote areas.

The strategies should not necessarily be treated as being independent of one another but often complement each other, for example, good practice models could involve both good selection practices and student support practices.

Selection and motivation to do the course was mentioned as probably the single largest issue regarding student's non-completion of courses (see the previous section on non-completion). The alternative of this is having stringent student selection strategies in place for entry into childcare courses - as already mentioned this plays a very important role in mitigating student non-completion. One of the strategies that were mentioned by respondents regarding course selection issues included provision of pre-course briefings that provide an adequate level of information for potential students about the realities of the job. One RTO provides what they call 'taster' sessions that shows students what the position actually involves.

(This RTO) is now offering 'taster' practical sessions called 'observation and orientation' where students can see what is expected of them and what the position of child care educator actually involves (Private RTO WA)

Some RTOs and childcare providers mentioned that they interview students for suitability to undertake the course. This includes interviewing for 'fit' and also for literacy and numeracy. The following quotes illustrate these points.

RTOs do their own literacy/numeracy tests to filter out academically unfit students (Private RTO SA)

(Employer) interviews each student for suitability and fit to her centre and will refuse them if she doesn't think they are the right fit (Private RTO WA)

There was a more specific example of selection mentioned in terms of the traineeship model that is being used by an employer and a private RTO in New South Wales. This will be covered in detail in a vignette to follow on training models.

VET in Schools is an important pathway into getting new entrants into childcare. However, often the selection of students into these courses is not appropriate (i.e. the less able students are encouraged to do these courses). In one example, Southern Queensland Institute of TAFE, Toowoomba dedicated a lot of resources and effort to ensure that students who are undertaking childcare as part of VET in Schools are doing so for the right reasons. The following vignette illustrates good practice regarding selection into VET in schools childcare programs, as well as good practice in providing student support during the program.

Box 1

The VET in Schools Children's Services coordinator at Southern Queensland Institute of TAFE, Toowoomba engages with students and their parents so there are no misunderstandings of the course content, what is expected of the student and the behavioural requirement. The program coordinator interviews every student who applies to find out their motivations for wanting to enrol. Moreover, because the student places are limited this initial interview is used as a 'filter' and can help identify students who are engaging with the VET in Schools program for the wrong reasons. School Counsellors are also actively engaged in process of alerting the students to the program.

Good communication with the schools is an essential component to helping students successfully complete their course. The VET in Schools coordinator is in constant contact with schools and the students and tries to identify possible difficulties early. Attrition from the VET in Schools program usually occurs towards the end of Year 12 when the school workload increases or earlier on in the course when students realise that it is not an easier option than schools assignments but having a stringent selection process in place does help mitigate drop out.

Student support and regular contact from the RTOs was seen as about the most critical factor in the completion of childcare courses as it keeps students engaged in the course. Indeed, provision of face to face contact and support would seem to be a necessary condition for all childcare courses. This contact and support can take various forms. The most frequently mentioned and preferred were face to face contact and the provision of pastoral care. Most respondents stated that face to face contact, in particular with teachers, but also with other students is critical to course completion. In addition, pastoral care such as counselling students in difficulties or providing them with general support or 'shepherding' is seen as important in getting the student to stay for the duration of the course. These points are illustrated by the following quotes.

Visiting students regularly and turning up to the services is what keeps students going (Public RTO Qld).

Student support is built into class time which has reduced dropout rate (6.5 hours of student support per week now) (Public RTO WA)

'Mummy talk' when there is suspicion for potential dropout-this is to work out a strategy to support students and help them complete (Public RTO WA)

Face-to-face contact and pastoral care is absolutely critical for student retention (Private RTO NSW)

To illustrate this point, the following vignette illustrates the support program being offered by Western Sydney Institute of TAFE in New South Wales.

Box 2

The support that is offered by Western Sydney Institute of TAFE does seem to have an influence on student engagement and completion. Staff at one outer metropolitan public provider offers 'learning circles' that are held weekly where students can discuss assignments, difficulties with work placements, to provide learning support or support regarding personal issues that are impacting on their studies.

Learning circles were formally introduced in early 2012 as a strategy to increase unit and course completions and to help students who were experiencing a range of personal issues that were having a negative impact on their learning but were afraid to seek out help in a class room environment. Learning circles are also used as group workshops, which can aid the student's learning in for instance study skills, resume writing and meditation sessions to help alleviate stress and anxiety in students. These sessions are often run through the college's counselling unit and are based on the need of the group. There is significant engagement with learning circles by students when they encounter complex topics or when assignments are due.

A previous incarnation of learning circles did not attract a great deal of student participation. While the learning circles are not mandatory, it was claimed that the students who do attend are repeat customers. Some students only attend sporadically; for example when they are having difficulty with a particular topic area.

The Institute staff run the 'learning circles' in their own time but felt that they were a contributing factor in keeping students engaged and confident in their studies. Students identified the learning circles as highly valuable and were appreciative of the extra support that staff provided.

Another program where significant support is provided is by Mount Isa Institute of TAFE in Queensland involving what is known as 'flexi-students'.

Box 3

'Flexi-students' start off as full-time students in Mount Isa Institute of TAFE and become flexi-students when they leave full-time study and go to work in a childcare provider and do their study after hours. The RTO's aim is to meet each student's need in this arrangement. Some students are only allowed to enrol in one unit at a time rather than 'setting them up for failure'. Past experience by the RTO has shown that drop out tended to occur when a timeframe for completion was set.

The RTO uses a face to face strategy to support students which entails regular visits to the workplace. The TAFE institute provides resources for the students such as access to computer and also language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) teachers on Monday and Wednesday nights. There are also evening or weekend workshops to attend. The TAFE selects resource workbooks specifically for students in the flexi arrangement that provide detailed learning material to support the assessment parts of the course. Further support is provided by the TAFE by email newsletters and one on one support sessions either in work time or out of hours.

The key to success in unit completion by this provider is the level of integrated support that is provided to the students who are working full-time at a childcare provider.

The face to face component of the course is also related to flexible delivery options for the childcare courses, that is, learning that has aspects of both face to face teaching but also online learning. Flexible learning is seen as being important in meeting the needs of diverse groups of students. Certain groups of students, for example older learners who may be a bit nervous about undertaking further study, value the

option of taking the course on a face to face basis. This is mainly because older learners have been out of touch with formal education for extended periods of time. Also, many older students feel uncomfortable with information technology and face real challenges when having to conduct internet research to complete course assignments. Face-to-face courses and additional pastoral care can help remedy anxieties of this nature. Other students mentioned that because of work commitments, location, or other reasons, they value being able to undertake the course online. However, the interviewees suggested that purely online learning courses are not optimal for student engagement in this sector. This is illustrated by the following quote.

(RTO) qualifications were all online but now moving towards mixed delivery because paper based is more attractive to older workers (Private RTO Qld)

The workplace component of the course is also seen as a critical juncture in the qualification. Firstly, respondents argued that there needs to be a sufficient amount of work placement so that the student gains enough practical experience during the placement (and this is particularly so at the diploma level). Additionally, it is at this stage where the student has to face the realities of the job. If this is not a positive experience then the student may drop out.

Centres want people with actual work experience, and the practicals that are part of the TAFE diploma course are not considered enough work place exposure (Public RTO student focus group NSW)

The workplace is essential for a positive experience. You need a good workplace so that you can reflect on your theory (Public provider student interviews WA)

Respondents (both childcare employers and providers) also said that the employers have a role to play in assisting students that they employ in completing their studies. Most commonly reported was that some employers provide staff with some study time during their work day to undertake their studies. Some employers also have internal mentoring and provide general support to their staff who are undertaking studies.

Staff get two hours study time built into their week but sometimes it doesn't happen if the rations are affected by sickness etc. (Public RTO Qld)

Students need support to complete and it's important that the centre directors are supportive of students needs (Private RTO Qld)

The traineeship model was discussed by several respondents as a good way of getting students practical work experience, and also to help with course completion. Quipped one respondent:

The traineeship model is often preferred because of the hands on approach; it's time intensive rather than difficult (Private RTO WA)

Prefer the traineeship model because the classroom model has a larger emphasis on theory (Public RTO student focus group, WA)

The following vignette illustrates the traineeship model that is used at International Child Care College in Newcastle.

Box 4

International Child Care College in New South Wales offers traineeships in the Certificate III in Children's Services and the Diploma in Children's Services. They currently have about 240 enrolled students in Sydney, Newcastle and the Hunter Valley. The traineeship model works with the student entering into a contract with a child care centre directly and the centre approaches the RTO to undertake the academic training, support and assessment. The centres, RTO and student were in agreement that the model worked because the student is immersed in the job role immediately and quickly decide whether they are suited to the role.

Trainee selection is rigorous and occurs at the employer level. The employer typically receives between 75 and 100 applications for every advertised traineeship position. About half of the applicants are discarded right away due to the insufficient quality of the application documents. Subsequently, about 10 suitable candidates are interviewed and assessed on motivation and confidence. The best three to four candidates are then trialled on the job during three consecutive paid volunteer days. Finally, the best-performing candidate is offered a traineeship contract with the centre, where they commence a 6-month probationary period. During this period, constant feedback is provided to the trainee by experienced centre staff (i.e., rating competencies; setting bi-weekly goals).

The RTO tracks student progress and offers constant support (face to face, online and telephone) - depending on the individual student needs. Trainers commented that most support was focused on assignment completions but students noted that they felt that they were cared about and supported on a personal level. The RTO expects the child care centres to adhere to a strict code of conduct, provide students with time within work hours to study and senior staff to act as mentors to the trainees. The trainers visit the trainees regularly in their workplace and see their pastoral care and 'hands on' approach to guidance and support as being a crucial factor in their high completion rates.

There are also other types of training models that provide early real world contact with the children. The following vignette describes one such model at TAFE Western, Orange, New South Wales.

Box 5

Play sessions for infants and children of child-care age are held four times a week by teaching staff with assistance, from both Certificate III and Diploma level students of Children's Services, at TAFE Western's Orange campus. The play sessions are run within close proximity to staff offices.

The 'play sessions' are used as a tool by lecturers to assess whether students are work ready. Lecturers also note that 'play sessions' help students understand what is expected of them and also can help students to decide if they are suited to the position. Being directly involved with students during practicals also alerts lecturers to students who are at risk of dropping out and they can help mitigate drop out or assist them in finding a more suitable study option. Play Sessions are used to help students undertaking Certificate III in Children's Services or the Diploma prepare for their work placements. Students participate in play sessions throughout the duration of their course giving staff the opportunity to observe students interacting with children of all ages in a 'real environment'. Students are expected to wear a uniform when they attend class, when they are engaging with children and parents at the play sessions and when they are undertaking external work placements. The uniform was introduced to build a sense of community and also to instil an expectation of dress and presentation standards.

It was seen from the peak organisation interviews and literature review that Recognition of Prior Learning, or RPL, is an important way of attaining qualifications, particularly among (older) existing workers but

sometimes also among new entrants. RPL is seen a particularly important mechanism by government and by the childcare sector, and one that can have manifold benefits. That is, benefits for the individual (gain a qualification and increase confidence) and also benefits for the workplace (in getting the required number of qualified workers per child). Respondents to the interviews did not mention any specific good practice models of RPL (apart from the one mentioned in the peak organisation interviews) however it is clearly seen as an important mechanism in gaining qualification in the childcare sector.

RPL is a tool for those who have been in the sector for a while and can be used to build confidence. We need to try to encourage the use of quality RPL tools (Private RTO Qld)

There are particular issues to consider for students undertaking children's services qualifications in remote areas. This was also a specific issue that was raised by the Productivity Commission report (2011). These issues include context of the region, networking opportunities, and the availability of workplaces for workplace component of the course. The context of the region includes a consideration of the local labour market, the cost of living which can be high and the availability of services such as a library. The peak body interviews further indicated that networking opportunities and face to face contact with educators can be a problem in remote communities. Additionally, employer support for the workplace component of the course can be an issue because of the small size of the childcare centres in these areas. The following comment typifies the particular circumstances of remote communities.

Some remote students are already working in child care and access TAFE through online networks but for others it is often difficult for them to do the work placement because there is no day care centre in their community so they have to go to a regional centre (Public RTO Qld)

While it is difficult to overcome all the issues associated with living in a remote community, the following two vignettes illustrate a couple of programs and schemes to encourage uptake and completion of children's services qualifications in remote areas. The first illustrates a scholarship program that was developed between a large mining company and Pilbara Institute at Karratha, and the second, a program aimed at uptake and completion of qualifications by Indigenous students in the Mount Isa area.

Box 6

The Early Learning Scholarship Program in remote Western Australia has been established by Pilbara Institute, together with Rio Tinto and the Shire of Roebourne. The Scholarship Program is available to eligible students, who are residents of the Shire and are able to exhibit a commitment to Children's Services and the Roebourne community. The Scholarship covers the course expenses and provides students with financial incentives throughout the period of study. Students who are in receipt of an Early Learning Scholarship must be enrolled through the Karratha Campus of Pilbara Institute.

The Scholarship categories include the Certificate III in Children's Services, Diploma of Children's Services (Early Childhood and Care) and the Advanced Diploma of Children's Services. The scholarship students are able to access professional development that is not available to non-scholarship students and attend workshops and seminars by leaders within the Early Learning Sector. Students in receipt of the Scholarship also receive support from a program coordinator who helps students liaise with the Institute lecturer, and facilitates work placements.

Box 7

Mount Isa Institute of TAFE in Queensland offers a ‘wrap round’ program for local Indigenous students. Co funded by the provider, religious charity and the local mining company, the program offers students assistance with transport, food, addressing gaps in literacy and numeracy and also an Indigenous mentor to help them through the qualification. Because so many of the students face multiple disadvantages this additional support is necessary to help students stay in the course. All the resources for the Certificate III of Children’s Services are contextualised to suit Indigenous learning styles and the program coordinator is available for one to one support. The provider is delighted that some of its Indigenous students have successfully completed their Certificate III and are currently undertaking the Diploma.

Summary of good practice suggestions

This section provides suggestions for keeping students engaged in childcare courses until completion based on the previous discussion and with reference to the literature review. The factors that are mentioned are within control of the RTO or the childcare employer. Issues such as pay or lowering course fees (where students pay full fees) are not discussed here. The two ‘big ticket’ items in terms of good practice involve recruitment/selection into the course in the first instance and student support in the second instance. These two areas also came through in the literature review as being important. Effective training models are also important as are good practice elements for particular groups (e.g. students in remote locations). While the language of the suggestions to follow is quite firm, it must be kept in mind that the project involved only a limited number of interviews.

Selection/Recruitment factors

Successful engagement and retention in children’s services qualifications begins with recruitment and selection into the course. This would apply particularly to new entrants to the sector. The following points describe good practice elements that can be kept in mind when recruiting/selecting students into childcare courses. In general it can be said that prior to or at enrolment, RTOs and employers (in the case of the traineeship model) should ensure that students know that the course entails and the job entail.

- For VET in Schools programs, the RTO coordinator should meet with each prospective student and their parents individually and go over the entire program in terms of content, layout, expectations and work experience. This is the model used by Southern Queensland Institute of TAFE, Toowoomba. It requires a dedicated resource, but it has proved to be very successful in that students and their parents know what to expect, so they can make up their minds about whether this sector is for them.
- For regular Children’s Services courses, the RTO should similarly try to individually advise each person at enrolment. Where this is not possible, attendance at a general information session should be mandatory for all new students as a condition of enrolment. Simply providing a website with relevant information is not enough. The interview findings suggested that RTOs have to be more proactive in making sure they select appropriate students for the courses and that prospective students have a solid grasp of the course and the nature of the job. The quantitative analysis and interviews that were undertaken for this project suggested that students who do not complete have a less clear idea about what the course entails.
- For the traineeship model, the employing centre should go through an extensive selection process (see Box 4 for details). The process outlined in the Newcastle centre is a good example of ensuring adequate candidates are selected prior to starting the course/traineeship program (this applies to both Certificate III and diploma level traineeships).

- The interviews suggested that many students have literacy and numeracy issues. As such, literacy tests with a minimum standard of literacy requirement should become a mandatory part of the enrolment and selection process. For those who do not meet this minimum standard, appropriate basic literacy bridging courses should be mapped that lead to the chance of re-enrolment upon successful completion.
- Prospective students should be informed about the current local labour market climate in the Children's services sector. Often times there is an abundance of certificate III qualified workers in a specific labour market, and this oversupply may restrict students' employment outlook to only casual employment. Where this is the case (and it seems to be the case quite often given our insights from various interviews throughout New South Wales and Queensland) students need to be made aware right at the beginning of the potential need to further upskill to a diploma if their aim is to find permanent employment in the local labour market. Also, students should be informed about local wages pertinent to their qualification so that 'surprises' about low wages can be avoided from the outset.

Student support factors

There are also a few points to keep in mind in terms of provision of student support. Interview respondents and the findings from the literature review strongly suggest that student support and 'pastoral care' are very important in keeping students engaged. This involves regular contact with students including face to face contact, phone and email contact and help with assignments where required. There are also a few nuanced points to keep in mind.

- Students often struggle with assignments due to literacy issues or insufficient technology skills (i.e., when they have to use the internet extensively to research particular topics, or in the case of online courses). Teachers need to be available and provide additional support to students. One formalised approach is the 'learning circle' model used in Western Sydney Institute of TAFE (see Box 5). This additional support needs to be budgeted and additional resources allocated for this to be an effective and sustainable model (i.e. having this model can't be dependent on the goodwill of individual teachers or program coordinators).
- RTOs which run distance programs should ensure students have ample 'face time'. One model is the traineeship model such as used by the International Child Care College in Newcastle where educators/support personnel visit students several times per semester/term at their work place. This allows students to receive tutoring, discuss questions on particular assignments, and also feel that someone 'cares' that they do assignments and stick with the course. The formalised rigorous approach to this model means that the support is more likely to occur. Southern Queensland Institute of TAFE, Toowoomba runs a similar model. Both models are very successful in keeping retention rates high because the 'care factor' is absolute key. It does however require adequate resourcing on part of the RTO.
- Non English Speaking Background (NESB) students often require additional support due to language barriers and problems in adapting to a different cultural environment. One approach is to offer dedicated classes only for NESB students (where the volume of NESB students makes this option feasible). These courses may run longer than the regular course to allow for additional language and cultural support. This model is currently practiced by Australian Child Care Career Options in Brisbane.

Considerations for particular groups

Student recruitment selection and student support initiatives are applicable across all childcare courses. There are also other good practice points however to keep in mind. Some of these apply more to certain groups of students than others.

- **Flexible delivery** - Engagement in learning for older existing workers is assisted by a significant component of face to face learning so training models should incorporate the necessary level of face to face learning. Employers can also support these students by the provision of some study time during work hours, as occurs in some of the child care providers that were interviewed. The quantitative data suggests that diploma students are more likely to be existing students (as opposed to new entrants) and have an older age profile. Additionally, the diploma is seen as being considerably more complex and intensive than the certificate III qualification and thus may require more support in terms of time availability to undertake the study. However sufficient support provision should be provided for students who wish to undertake the course wholly online. This can include visits from the RTO or regular phone or email follow up.
- **Recognition of prior learning** - In addition to the points mentioned above about sufficient face to face contact and also employer support for study, RPL is a mechanism that assists (mainly) existing worker students to get through their courses, providing that it is done well. The interviews that were conducted across peak agencies, RTOs and childcare providers indicated that there was a wide variety of approaches and varying degrees of success in the application of RPL. One model that was thought to be successful for older existing workers involved qualified children's services workers trained as RPL assessors who assessed workers on the job. This was thought to be a particularly useful approach for older workers who are nervous about study.
- **Remoteness** - Students in remote areas need access to networks, workplaces and educator support. This requires a concerted effort by the various stakeholders in the system whereby they take into consideration all of the requirements of students in this area (a holistic approach). The example that was presented (see Box 6) in this report involved a scholarship program between an RTO, a large employer and the local council. The program offered opportunities for networking, student support (including monetary incentives) and facilitation of work placements.
- **Indigenous students** - Consideration needs to be given for training that suits the needs of Indigenous students who are often located in remote locations. The 'wrap round' service (see Box 7) provided by Mount Isa Institute of TAFE includes adapting the course to meet the needs of Indigenous learners, a high level of student support and the provision of basic resources to allow the Indigenous learners to attend the course. The learning at workbook approach is another good practice model that was discussed in the review of the literature. This approach involved booklet and DVD learning guides, an online tool to address literacy needs and regional yarning circles which provide opportunities for learners from isolated areas to share knowledge, experience and skills with others from the same culture.

Appendix1: Organisations interviewed and interview schedules

Peak organisations interviewed

Peak Bodies	Contact
Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority (ACECQA)	Sue Fox
Community Services and Health Industry Skills Council (CSHISC)	Jenny Ferber, Emma Richards, Rebecca Tidy and Cassandra Gandolfo
Community Child Care Co-operative	Arian Ploeg and Leanne Gibbs
Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR), Qld	Melinda Cox
United Voice	Melissa Coad
Australian Skills Quality Authority (ASQA)	Cheryl Leary

RTO and childcare provider interviews

South Australian Pilot		
Institute or Child Care Centre	Location	Attendees
TAFE SA South	Children's Services Community Services & Health TAFE SA Adelaide Campus 120 Currie Street ADELAIDE SA 5000	Dubravka Malloy Course Coordinator
Child Care Services Training	267 Salisbury Highway Salisbury Downs 5108	Lisa Tregenza Executive Director
Flinders University Child Care Centre	Flinders University Campus, Flinders Drive, Bedford Park	Meg Scott Centre Director
Goodstart Early Learning	44 Prospect Road, Prospect	Ramona de Angelis Centre Director
Nazareth Early Learning Centre	176 Crittenden Road FINDON SA 5023	Basia Vucic Centre Director
Lady Gowrie	Gowrie Street , Hindmarsh	Centre Director, Education Coordinator
Goodstart early Learning	Cnr Bower Road and Swan Terrace Semaphore South	Karen Prime (Director) & Focus Group – 5 students
TAFE SA South	Noarlunga Camus, Noarlunga, SA	Veronica Ormarod, Head Teacher

Western Australia		
Challenger TAFE	Simpson Road, Rockingham WA	Leigh Cook (Manager), Jenni Hull, Darren Fritzsch and Rosalie Duke-Stanley (Lecturers)
Challenger TAFE	Simpson Road, Rockingham WA	Focus Group (6 students)
Pilbara Institute of TAFE	Karratha Campus Dampier Road Karratha Ph: (08) 9159 6700 Fax: (08) 9159 6711	Sarah Penn Advanced Skills Lecturer Kayla Gallop Scholarship Coordinator
Tambray Childcare Centre	Lot 4225 Tambrey Drive, Karratha, WA 6714 Karratha	Focus Group (8 students & Director)
Rockingham Early Learning Centre	Rockingham Early Learning, Simpson Avenue Rockingham	Kerry Pelajic (Director & support staff)
Australian Higher Education Academy	200 Wellington Street EAST PERTH 6004	Rob Black And 3 support staff
Queensland		
Australian Childcare Career Options	1/52 McLachlan Street (cnr Winn), Fortitude Valley	Naralle Cossettini
Southern Queensland Institute of TAFE	Toowoomba Campus, 100 Bridge Street Toowoomba 4350	Jenni Butler - X 2 teachers & VET Coordinator
Southern Queensland Institute of TAFE	Toowoomba Campus, 100 Bridge Street Toowoomba 4350	Focus Group (16 students) and Lecturer
Eastwood Early Learning Centre	Corner of Herries and Curzon Streets, Toowoomba, Qld	Katy Mason
Mount Isa Institute of TAFE	165-179 Abel Smith Parade Pioneer QLD 4825	Nicole Ewing Lorraine Freese
St Pauls Lutheran Church Child Care Centre	109 Marian Street Mt Isa	Focus Group (2 students & Director)
Mount Isa Day Nursery & Kindergarten	Cnr Alma and Miles Sts Mount Isa	Focus Group (4 students & Director)
Goodstart Training	Metroplex Avenue, Brisbane	Sarah Martin
Goodstart HQ	Metroplex Ave Brisbane	Focus Group (4 students)
New South Wales		
Western Sydney Institute	Kingswood Campus 12-44 O'Connell Street Kingswood, NSW 2747	Tracey Currie
Western Sydney Institute	As above	Focus Group x 2 (5 students each group)
International Child Care College	146 Lambton Road, Broadmeadow, Newcastle New South Wales, Australia	Helen Tapper
Kindy Kapers Child Care Centre		Focus Group (3 students & Director)
Western Institute, Orange	March Street, Orange NSW - 02 6391 5637	Kay Adams
Warratah Early Learning Centre, Orange	Waratah Early Learning Centre 52-54 Farrell Rd, Orange NSW	Focus Group (4 students & Director)

Interview schedules for RTOs

Student classroom focus groups

Welcome

Introduce convenor and assistant where relevant

Timing for the focus group (e.g. 90 minutes maximum)

Mention tape recording of focus group

Introduce purpose of the focus group and the overall project

Provide guidelines for the conduct of the focus group

Students introduce themselves (optional)

Questions

What are your motivations for undertaking this course? (*probe things like intrinsic interest in childcare, articulation, rewarding career*)

How do you feel about the course so far? (*Probe as to whether the course is what they expected it to be, what things they like about the course, anything unexpected so far*).

What attracts or motivates you to continue with the course of study? (*Follow on from the previous question, getting more detail on what makes them want to continue, in particular what would motivate them to complete the course of study*).

What are your motivations for moving into the child care industry, or to continue to stay in the industry? (*In this question probe more specifically about the nature of the industry and what would make them want to stay in the industry, and link this back to motivations to complete the course*).

Do you have any information about students who have dropped out of childcare courses? What were the main reasons they dropped out? (*This is potentially a tricky question and will have to be discussed in a subtle manner*).

Conclusions

Thank them for their time and reiterate purpose of the focus group and project, and that responses will remain confidential.

Teacher/trainer consultations

Background

Which courses they are involved in teaching (Probe course qualification level, delivery modes and numbers of students)

About the students in the courses

What the perceived motivations are for students to undertake childcare courses

What they see as the major strengths of the courses they teach, and alternatively where they perceive there to be gaps in the courses

Information on the types of students that have withdrawn from the course (*Probe as to whether there seem to be particular types of students that drop out, e.g. by their background characteristics or whether they are currently employed in the area or not*)

What the main reasons are for students dropping out or not completing the course (*Probe for differences by qualification levels or types of course, issues to do with the nature of the course, location of the course*)

Examples of practices or initiatives to assist with engagement or re-engagement with the course and industry (*Probe for actual practices/initiatives that can be documented*).

Concluding the interview

Anything else that may be relevant that has not yet been covered?

Ask for information on students that have dropped out of courses (*Probe as to whether they would be willing to ask students who have withdrawn whether they would be willing to speak to us*)

Career guidance counsellors/student services

Background

General information on job role

About training courses for childcare educators

General perceptions about childcare courses in the institute they work in (*Probe about interest in the courses, perceived strengths of the courses and conversely gaps in delivery*)

Perceptions about the extent of and reasons for students withdrawing from child care courses (*Probe for differences by qualification levels or types of course, differences in types of students that withdraw, issues to do with the nature of the course*)

Strategies and initiatives to engage and re-engage students in the courses (*probe for any actual examples of initiatives or programs*)

Concluding the interview

Anything else that may be relevant that has not yet been covered?

Information on students that have dropped out of courses (*Probe as to whether they would be willing to ask students who have withdrawn whether they would be willing to speak to us*)

Interview schedules for public and private childcare service providers

Background

What kind of services are you currently involved in? (prompt - long day care, family day care, outside school hours etc.)

How many staff/children do you have at this centre?

What is the qualifications profile of the staff?

Have you had difficulties in the recruitment of childcare educators now or in the past? (*Probe as to reasons as to why/why not and use this as a lead in to the training courses for childcare educators*).

About training courses for childcare worker

How well do the training courses equip staff to work in your organisation/the childcare sector? *(Probe about what works well, what qualities they are looking for in a childcare worker, use of RPL, gaps in training provision)*

To what extent do childcare students employed by you withdraw from the childcare courses they were undertaking courses? *(Probe about reasons for students withdrawing, whether there is any difference by qualification level or type of course, differences in types of students that withdraw, regional differences).*

What sorts of strategies or initiatives are there in place or could be in to mitigate withdrawal from childcare courses? *(Probe about initiatives in different settings, for different groups of students, and different qualification levels)*

Non-completing students

Basic background information on the non-completing student (prior employment, qualifications etc.)

Reasons for initially enrolling in the course (ask details about the course as well- qualification level, where undertaken)

Reasons for not completing the course

Possibilities or incentives to re-engage with the course (provide some prompts about examples of incentives where required)

Anything else they would like to say

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