

## THEMATIC PAPER: APPRENTICESHIP

# Building the early childhood workforce using supported traineeships

Sue Wyatt\*, Siobhan Siedlecki

Department of education Programs, Chisholm Institute, Dandenong VIC 3175, Australia

## ABSTRACT

The Early Childhood Education Traineeship Project (2022-2024), led by Chisholm Institute in partnership with the Victorian Department of Education and Jobs Victoria, aimed to address critical workforce shortages in early childhood. Initially targeting the employment of 150 trainees across the State of Victoria, the project exceeded expectations, employing 520 job seekers into traineeships. The program's success stemmed from targeted recruitment, comprehensive support structures including job readiness training, tailored mentoring, and financial incentives. The project focused on recruitment of job seekers from priority cohorts such as young people, long-term unemployed and culturally diverse backgrounds. Despite the attrition rate, consistent with national trends, the project facilitated clear pathways to employment and career advancement, with some progressing further onto higher level qualifications. Strong employer engagement, adaptive recruitment strategies, and a collaborative community of practice contributed to the program's success. The project's outcomes provide valuable insights for future workforce development initiatives in the early childhood education sector and in the field of apprenticeship and trainee recruitment.

**Key words:** traineeships, early childhood, workforce initiatives, project management

## INTRODUCTION

Licensed Early Childhood Services across Australia educate and care for children aged 0-5 years before they enter the formal primary school system. Early Childhood Services predominantly include long day care services, kindergartens, family day care, and occasional care programs (the latter not discussed in this paper). Long day care services cater for children aged 0-5 years, operating from early morning until late afternoon. These services are primarily used to support working parents by providing education and care while they are at work. Kindergartens in Victoria support the development of 3-4 years old kids through play-based learning before they start formal schooling (Department of Education, 2023). Some long day care services also run Kindergarten programs.

To be employed in these services, the minimum qualification for entry-level staff is the completion of the Certificate III in Early Childhood Education and Care. Graduates of the Certificate III qualification may also choose to upskill to a diploma-level to access higher remuneration and increased responsibility within early childhood services. The Australian framework also includes a degree-level qualification for those who wish to become kindergarten teachers. Students can apply directly for this degree without prerequisite qualifications, or holders of a diploma qualification can enter the degree program at the second year. Traineeships provide an alternative pathway: "services can appoint entry-level staff working towards their Certificate III qualification".


Traineeships in Australia are similar to apprenticeships but are typically shorter in duration, usually 1-2 years,

### \*Corresponding Author:

Siobhan Siedlecki, Department of education Programs, Chisholm Institute, Dandenong VIC 3175, Australia. Email: sue.wyatt@chisholm.edu.au.

Received: 27 March 2025; Revised: 13 May 2025; Accepted: 15 May 2025

<https://doi.org/10.54844/vte.2025.0946>

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compared to 3-4 years for apprenticeships (Apprenticeships Victoria, 2025). In early childhood, a traineeship allows services to appoint entry-level staff working towards their Certificate III qualification. Employers can offer traineeship wage rates and also receive government subsidies.

Trainees must enroll with a Vocational Education Provider otherwise known as a Registered Training Organization (RTO), which may be a government owned Technical and Further Education (TAFE) institution, a community based organization, or a private company.

In 2021, the Victorian Department of Education published the Next Steps in Victoria's Kindergarten Workforce Strategy (Department of Education and Training, 2021) in response to the government's initiative to fund two years of kindergarten for all children aged 3 and 4. The report highlighted critical workforce shortages in early childhood education, emphasizing the need for strategic recruitment to support expanded programs. Apart from this initiative, Jobs and Skills Australia (2024) forecasted a substantial rise in workforce demand to align with population growth projections and address current unmet needs.

The Victorian government allocated over \$200 million to workforce initiatives (Department of Education and Training, 2021), including a program to recruit 150 job seekers across the State and connect them with early childhood services in need of educators, offering trainee positions as a solution to their staffing shortages. The model specifically targeted unemployed people to prevent disruption to other sectors, particularly given the decade-low unemployment rate (Victorian Government, 2023). The tender model was open-ended, requiring applicants to design effective strategies to address recruitment challenges while creating strong support structures. Additionally, tender applicants were tasked with sourcing services facing staff shortages and encouraging them to consider employing trainees rather than already qualified staff to meet their needs. The program required the successful tender applicant to match trainees with their local TAFE college and work in collaboration, thus developing a statewide approach to training needs.

Chisholm Institute, a TAFE institute, developed a model that secured the tender in partnership with the Victorian Department of Education and Jobs Victoria (DJSIR) in August 2021. The project aimed at placing 150 job seekers in early childhood traineeships over 2.5 years, targeting non-traditional candidates to address high attrition rates of staff in the early childhood sector. Initially funded at \$1.8 million, the project met its targets and was extended twice, increasing the goal to 250

trainees and funding to \$3.9 million. Its success led to an additional three-year funding grant, extending the program to December 2026 with a target of securing traineeships for 300 extra trainees, bringing total funding to \$8.9 million. As an additional incentive the Australian government provided financial incentives for traineeships in skill-shortage industries to encourage uptake of employment of job seekers. Marketing efforts targeted both employers and job seekers, emphasizing the benefits of traineeships in early childhood education to encourage uptake in the program. The initiative highlighted financial incentives, flexible learning options, and a comprehensive mentoring system, all designed to support trainees and employers while removing barriers to success.

## METHODS AND RESEARCH DESIGN

This project implemented an action research methodology, suited to practice-based settings that lead to change and generate insights. The research involved planning, action, observation, and reflection, of the early childhood education traineeship program. The project incorporated data collection to meet government reporting requirements and to inform continuous program improvement.

Qualitative and quantitative data were collected as part of the project's operational activities and focused on program outcomes. Trainee application numbers were used to assess the reach and appeal of recruitment efforts. The demographic details of applicants were collected to quantify diversity and included; prior experience, education levels, and employment history. Enrollment into the study requirements of the traineeship along with detailed tracking of attrition rates, were used to evaluate program retention. Geographical data were collected to identify regions in Victoria with higher demand for early childhood trainees and overall interest in employing staff into traineeships. Collection of data occurred through administrative records, structured interviews, and regular monitoring reports submitted to the Victorian government. Monthly check-ins with both trainees and employers provided qualitative insights into the challenges and successes experienced during the program.

While primarily a recruitment tool, the comprehensive marketing strategy involving radio campaigns, social media outreach, and website promotions also served as an informal data source through the analytics provided by the lead campaign team. The reach and engagement metrics helped identify which strategies were most effective in attracting applicants from different regions and demographics. This information informed adjustments to recruitment approaches, aligning with the

iterative nature of action research.

## RESULTS

### ***Recruitment and assessment of trainees into the program***

A team of four staff conducted over 1000 initial applicant interviews, focusing on matching candidates with suitable early childhood services. Assistance was given with resume development and interview preparation. Approximately 700 candidates progressed to job interviews with service providers, primarily in LDC settings (Siedlecki & Wyatt, 2024). Recruitment strategies evolved to prioritize candidates demonstrating initiative through active engagement in the program, reducing efforts on those less responsive.

Once trainees secured employment, Chisholm Institute facilitated their registration with an apprenticeship agency and enrolment in their course of study with their preferred TAFE. Ongoing support was provided through monthly check-ins with both trainees and employers, contributing qualitative feedback that augmented the data collected. This action research approach allowed for continuous refinement of the traineeship model, ensuring that data informed program improvements over time.

Employers were recruited for the program through provision of fortnightly information sessions, with strong interest across the sector. Early childhood services' quality ratings were verified prior to onboarding into the program to ensure trainees would experience appropriate service standards, and ongoing mentoring supported both trainees and employers. Service agreements outlined obligations and were supported by a support payment of \$4000 per service to facilitate trainee supervision and mentor support. Candidates received tailored support as following.

#### *Career development*

Resume and job preparation workshops (Chisholm) complemented by "Gaining the Edge" pre-employment training focused on professional skills and workplace resilience. Course materials we aid for by the program, additional support provided such as laptops, interview attire, taxi fares for job interviews *etc.*, supported participation by removing barriers.

#### *Pre-employment training*

A virtual, non-compulsory work-readiness program addressed academic resilience, time management, critical thinking, communication, and self-management. This was supported through a partnership with foundation learning centre, a learn local organization, that assists participants to return to study.

#### *Community of practice*

A collaborative network with early childhood service providers and TAFEs was established. While attendance was limited, sessions provided valuable networking and insights into mentoring challenges. Fixed-term scheduling is recommended for future iterations.

#### *Employer engagement*

Employers received \$4000 to support trainee mentoring. Despite administrative challenges (invoice delays), financial incentives were not critical to program success; employers prioritized comprehensive trainee support over funding.

#### *Employment outcomes and retention*

Of 520 job seekers placed in employment, 479 transitioned to paid roles. By project completion, 47 trainees achieved the qualification, with 191 remaining actively engaged. Attrition factors included sector misalignment, personal circumstances (family/mental health), wage disparities, occupational stress, and disengagement from academic program components.

Matching of potential trainees for job interviews with an aim of prospective employment considered location, cultural fit, and language proficiency to promote sustained and successful employment.

### ***Outcomes of the program***

The early childhood education traineeship project produced positive outcomes, facilitating employment offer for over 520 job seekers, although 41 withdrew before their first day of work. These figures well surpassed the initial target of 150. Trainees were enrolled in Certificate III in Early Childhood Education and Care, with a portion of those students progressing onto Diploma-level qualifications. The traineeship model attracted a diverse cohort (Table 1), predominantly consisting of women, individuals under 25, and many from priority groups, including long-term unemployed individuals and those from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds (Siedlecki & Wyatt, 2024). Please note that the figures in Table 1 are not mutually exclusive, as many applicants belong to more than one category. However, for reporting purposes, each has been categorized into a single group as shown below. Success stories include trainees overcoming significant personal and professional barriers to secure stable employment in the early childhood sector (Siedlecki & Wyatt, 2024).

Despite these efforts, there was an attrition rate of approximately 50% (Siedlecki & Wyatt, 2024). This aligns with national trends in traineeships and apprenticeships (Stanwick *et al.*, 2021). Reasons for trainees leaving the program were documented, with low wages

**Table 1: Priority cohorts represented**

Priority cohort	Total achieved
Women aged 45 years and over	47
Long term unemployed people/at risk of long-term unemployment	53
Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people	5
Culturally and linguistically diverse (and experiencing barriers to employment)	29
Young people aged under 25	124
Women	221
Total	479

playing a significant role, as confirmed by previous research on factors influencing apprenticeships and traineeships (Nelms *et al.*, 2017). Other contributing factors included social issues, mental health, family dynamics, and the challenge of balancing study and work. This attrition rate reflects the inherent challenges of vocational training and underscores the need for adaptive strategies and flexible delivery models.

## CONCLUSION

The Early Childhood Education Traineeship Project surpassed its initial targets, operating in a period of low unemployment and all-round workforce shortages. By engaging job seekers from Government priority cohorts including young people, long-term unemployed individuals, and those from culturally diverse backgrounds, the program demonstrated the effectiveness of its comprehensive support model, which included tailored training, mentoring, and financial incentives. These strategies enabled participants to overcome challenges and secure meaningful employment in early childhood services, addressing critical staff shortages in the sector.

The success of the project underscores the importance of inclusive, flexible workforce development models in tackling skills shortages. By fostering a pipeline of candidates from diverse backgrounds, the program highlights the need for adaptive recruitment strategies, robust employer partnerships, and holistic support systems in recruitment and retention. Despite challenges such as high attrition rates and the physical and emotional demands of the job, the program succeeded in placing trainees in sustainable roles, offering valuable insights for future workforce initiatives. The project's outcomes suggest that policies should incentivize collaboration between government, educational institutions, and employers, focusing on flexible training models and continued support for trainees, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The implications for practice and future research are also significant. Lessons from the project suggest refining recruitment processes to better identify candidates likely to commit and succeed and establishing more structured mentoring networks. Further research into the factors contributing to trainees' disengagement and the long-term career trajectories of those in the sector will be crucial for improving retention rates and ensuring the sustainability of early childhood service programs. Additionally, ongoing support and wraparound services such as access to technology, study support as well as targeted professional development for mentors will be essential in addressing barriers to success and reducing attrition rates.

## DECLARATIONS

### Acknowledgement

None.

### Author contributions

Wyatt S, Siedlecki S: Writing—Original draft, Writing—Review and Editing. All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

### Source of funding

This research received no external funding.

### Ethical approval

Not applicable.

### Informed consent

Not applicable.

### Conflict of interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

### Data availability statement

No additional data

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