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Early Years Strategy –Submission

Graduate Women-NSW Inc. has as one of its main areas of focus a concern with government policies that have an impact on women and their education and wellbeing. Australian society is complex and the lives led by Australian women are diverse. These factors make any policy implementation challenging, and particularly difficult in areas of such crucial need as the early years of childhood. We welcome the opportunity to contribute to this important process.

We hold two points of principle relevant to this strategy (Q7). Early Childhood Education is an area which has a double impact on women's education and well-being. Firstly, support for girls' education in the early years can have a lasting effect on achievements throughout life; and secondly, opportunities for subsidised childcare can enable women and men who care for small children to undertake programs of education themselves or to engage in paid (or unpaid) work. We are particularly mindful of the effects of multi-generational disadvantage, including among First Nations peoples.

With these points made, we acknowledge that they can be achieved in many ways. We note the strong emphasis on an economic approach throughout the strategy. We also acknowledge that strategies are mostly developed to lead to measurable outcomes, that will provide evidence that can be used in the development of future programs and strategies, and that there is a strong economic approach inherent in the Discussion paper, an approach which has become the default position for measuring success in many circumstances, not always a position easily recognised by an individual.

Thus, having stated our guiding principles, we turn to the notion of an evidence-based approach, **Q8**. Policy and practices for the early years will be data driven and evidence-based, as might be expected in contemporary times. The Discussion paper presents several models that can guide the kind of evidence to be collected. The public health model and ecological systems models based on the work of Bronfenbrenner are useful complementary approaches, with the public health model's focus on the provision of service and support and the ecological systems model's focus on the child in her environment.

We acknowledge the value of the formalization of an ecological approach into a policy framework, such as the OECD Wellbeing framework and the OECD Aspirational Child Well-being Measurement Framework, as a way of focusing on the child within her environment. At one level, this approach clearly breaks down silos, a key aim of the Early Years Strategy. We caution, however, that such approach may run the risk of creating new silos, as the drive to collect data on certain indicators leads to the enhancement of certain programs and collaborative relationships at the expense of others. We applaud initiatives such as the Multi-Agency Data Integration Project,

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which bring together data from a range of government agencies and recognize the significance of the Australian Early Development Census.

The discussion paper presents the idea of disadvantage, which leads not to “inequality”, but to a “gap”, to children “falling behind” and not being “on track”. This language assumes a norm, and may work against the valuing of cultural diversity. There have been many examples in the provision of social support programs and their enforcement where criteria have intentionally or unintentionally entrenched vulnerabilities. The use of algorithms, removing active human intervention at the point of interpretation of the data, can entrench vulnerabilities in a hidden and insidious way. We encourage the implementation of checks and balances in the development of any data collection process. By the same token, we are aware that the record-keeping, required as an essential part of a monitoring process, for example in education, health, social work and community development, may place an additional administrative burden on those professionals working with children. Any such requirement would need to be appropriately (and separately) resourced as part of a policy approach.

References

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