1. Background

The Council of Australian Government’s National Partnership Agreement on Early Childhood Education was signed in November 2008, with the aim that by 2013 every child will have access to a preschool program in the year prior to school.

The Commonwealth Government has committed $970 million over five years for this reform, including $210.6 million for Victoria. The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) is responsible for leading implementation of universal access to 15 hours of kindergarten.

Why is it important?

The National partnership recognises the importance of early childhood as contributing to Australia’s future prosperity. Victoria is committed to working in partnership with the Commonwealth Government, Local Government, employers and early childhood staff in delivering on this important initiative.

The implementation of universal access to 15 hours of kindergarten in the year before school (universal access):

- Recognises that quality kindergarten programs improve children’s learning, health and behaviour with positive impacts extending into adult life.
- Enables children and families to have access to a high quality developmental program in a range of settings such as public, private and community based kindergartens and childcare services.
- Supports a successful transition to formal schooling
- Supports planning of an integrated service system
- Is a major component of the Commonwealth Government’s early childhood reform agenda and is consistent with the Victorian Government’s policy direction.
2. Policy context

Early childhood has been the focus of considerable policy and legislative attention in Victoria in recent years and the implementation of universal access is one of, and is complemented by, a range of changes, including:

• the requirement for a degree qualified early childhood teacher in all standard services (i.e. long day care and kindergarten) in Victoria by 2014
• implementation of the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework and the Transition: A Positive Start to School initiative to strengthen children’s learning and development from birth to eight years, guide the partnership between families and everyone who works with children and support children’s transitions, including moving to school
• the release of an Early Childhood Workforce Strategy later this year. Major priorities for the strategy will be to attract and retain staff in careers in early childhood, particularly in hard-to-staff areas, and to increase qualification levels among the workforce.
• development of the National Quality Framework for Education and Care to provide parents, communities and operators of early childhood education and care services with a nationally consistent, streamlined and integrated licensing and accreditation system which ensures quality standards are implemented and that services focus on continuous improvement.
• signing of the Heads of Agreement between the Australian Education Union, the Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Union, the Municipal Association of Victoria and Kindergarten Parents Victoria. The Heads of Agreement states that in the context of delivery of 15 hours per week of kindergarten education, child contact time for teachers will increase to a maximum of 25.5 hours per week, effective from 2011.
• continued investment in early childhood infrastructure through provision of economic stimulus packages, school regeneration projects, early childhood hubs and early learning centres
• the release of a revised kindergarten cluster management policy framework later this year that aligns the policy directions for kindergarten cluster management with the broader early childhood policy builds on successful cluster management models and highlights the need for strong local networks, effective local planning and the integration of care and education in early childhood cluster managed services.
3. Victoria’s approach

The achievement of universal access will require major sector transformation in Victoria and it is dependent upon strong leadership and sustainable working partnerships between the State Government, Commonwealth Government, local government, employers and early childhood staff.

The Victorian Government, through the DEECD, consulted with key stakeholders in developing its approach to implementation of universal access.

Victoria has identified seven key areas for action, outlined in Diagram 1.
This work is just beginning, and there is a significant amount of planning to be done before universal access can be rolled out across the state.

Planning will provide better information to understand the impacts of universal access and support the development of new approaches to be piloted and evaluated before moving forward.

**Action 1. Municipal planning**

Between August 2009 and June 2010, each local council will work with service providers to develop a plan to implement universal access in their community. The plans will encompass four year old kindergarten delivered in a range of settings including stand alone kindergartens, schools, integrated children’s centres and for profit and community based long day care centres. The plans will also identify the impact that universal access may have on other programs such as three year old activity groups and playgroups.

**Action 2. Optimising available places**

Starting in 2009/10, and continuing until 2013, work will be undertaken to establish and implement a planned approach to optimise service and infrastructure use for four year old kindergarten, three year old activity groups and playgroups. This approach will ensure that all current available kindergarten space is being fully used.

**Action 3. Access to 15 Hours**

At the same time, and to support Councils in their planning, DEECD will work with organisations such as Kindergarten Parents Victoria, the Australian Education Union, the Municipal Association of Victoria, Community Child Care and private child care providers to develop possible models for delivering a 15 hour kindergarten program. Pilots will be undertaken to help develop strategies on how 15 hours of kindergarten can be delivered in a range of settings. This will later inform the state-wide roll-out of universal access.

**Action 4. Innovation: Trialling new approaches**

Innovative models of 15 hour kindergarten program delivery will also be trialled over the next 3 years to provide an evidence base to inform the state-wide roll-out.

**Action 5. Improving Access for vulnerable children**

Barriers to kindergarten access for vulnerable children will be identified and strategies will be put in place to support inclusion of vulnerable children in 15 hour kindergarten programs. Solutions will be implemented in coordination with home learning and parent support programs.

**Action 6. Infrastructure**

New infrastructure or extensions to existing buildings may be required to support universal access to 15 hours of kindergarten. Capital grants will support this element of the reform.

**Action 7. Workforce**

The Victorian Early Childhood Workforce Strategy will support universal access to kindergarten. Early childhood education and care workforce reform will be prioritised to improve the overall number of kindergarten teachers and the quality of service delivery in line with the strategy.
4. Engagement, communication and partnership

To successfully implement 15 hours of kindergarten by 2013, ongoing consultation, communication and engagement with families, employers, early childhood staff and other key stakeholders is important.

Partnerships between the State Government and peak bodies, representing local councils, kindergartens, schools and community and private child care services will be critical in moving forward with this reform agenda over the next few years.

For more information about Universal Access to 15 hours of kindergarten, contact: 15hours@edumail.vic.gov.au