

Submission on Behalf of: The Cultural Au Pair Association of Australia (CAPAA)
www.capaa.org.au

To: Education and Employment References Committee Parliament House Canberra, ACT
2600

Date: 20 September 2025

Subject: Submission to the Inquiry into the quality and safety of Australia's early childhood education and care system

Dear Committee Members,

The Cultural Au Pair Association of Australia (CAPAA) is pleased to provide this submission, suggesting the Au Pair Program as an alternative and complementary solution to ensure the safety and quality of Australia's early childhood education and care (ECEC) system. The au pair program is a cultural exchange where a person from another country lives with a host family, assisting with childcare and light domestic duties. In return, the au pair receives board, pocket money, and the opportunity to experience Australian culture. As the peak body representing agencies and families within this sector, CAPAA's primary role is to advocate for a formalised and regulated program to ensure the safety and security of both au pairs and host families.

CAPAA's submission addresses the terms of reference as follows, positioning the au pair program as a key and complementary part of the ECEC ecosystem.

1. The health and safety of children in childcare services across the country; The recent, widely publicised issues of abuse and neglect within formal childcare centres across Australia have highlighted a critical vulnerability in the current ECEC system. These incidents, in which children have been subject to harm by trusted caregivers, underscore the need for models that provide a higher degree of transparency and oversight. The au pair program, by its very nature, offers a significant safeguard against such risks. It operates on a one-on-one, in-home model, where care is provided in a private, familiar setting rather than a large, public one. The presence of a parent working from home provides an additional, direct layer of supervision, ensuring that the child is never out of sight or in an unmonitored environment. Furthermore, when families work with one of our agencies, they are able to choose the au pair who best fits their family's needs and values, as opposed to childcare centres where parents have no control over who cares for their children. This dedicated and monitored approach minimises the opportunity for harm and provides a level of security that is difficult to replicate in a group setting.

2. The effectiveness of Australia's childcare regulatory system

The au pair program operates as a distinct model from formal childcare centres, with participants entering Australia on a Working Holiday Visa. While not directly regulated by the same legislative frameworks as commercial childcare, the current lack of specific oversight poses a significant risk to quality and safety. This situation is exacerbated by

Australia's chronic childcare crisis, which has led to a rapid increase in agencies with a consequent risk of lower standards.

However, CAPAA's Agency Members follow a rigorous self-regulatory process, including carefully screening au pairs with a Police Check from their home country and verification of childcare references. These guidelines and our code of conduct serve as a crucial self-regulatory mechanism for our member agencies, but we advocate for a system that recognises and supports this model as a legitimate and high-quality form of care.

We strongly recommend that formalised, government-mandated standards are introduced to ensure that all au pair placements are conducted with appropriate background checks, agency accreditation, and ongoing support for both the au pair and the host family.

3. Early learning providers' compliance with quality standards and legislative requirements, including compliance with workplace laws and regulations;

Au pairs are not domestic workers but cultural exchange participants, and their relationship with a host family is founded on mutual respect and shared living arrangements. CAPAA's guidelines recommend a standard weekly stipend, which is a key part of the cultural exchange agreement, not a wage. This model is distinct from employment and should be recognised as such. By promoting fair expectations and clear agreements, our program helps families and au pairs operate in a transparent manner that ensures the au pair is a valued and well-cared-for member of the household. The introduction of formalised standards will further ensure compliance and protection for all parties.

4. The impact of childcare providers' employment practices on quality and safety; In the au pair model, the care relationship is founded on trust and personal connection, rather than a commercial employment contract. This unique dynamic fosters a nurturing environment where the au pair, typically aged 18-22 and seeking international experience and to improve their English, acts as a dedicated caregiver and a cultural role model. The focus on a personal connection, rather than a purely professional one, directly contributes to the child's safety and emotional development by creating a secure and predictable bond.

5. The role of worker compensation and pay on childcare quality and safety; Au pairs receive a stipend and in-kind benefits, including room, board, and often other allowances, in exchange for their caregiving duties. This financial model makes high-quality, in-home care accessible for many families who cannot afford other options. The combination of a stipend and living support ensures the au pair is provided for, while enabling families to access flexible, dedicated care. This reduces financial pressure on families and encourages a focus on quality rather than commercial outcomes.

6. Transparency within the early childhood education and care system, including access to information and data; CAPAA is committed to promoting transparency. We provide comprehensive information to both host families and au pairs on their roles, responsibilities, and the expectations of the program. We believe that promoting clear, accessible information is key to ensuring positive outcomes for all participants. Formal regulation would further

enhance transparency by creating a uniform set of standards that all agencies and placements must follow.

7. The suitability and flexibility of the funding of early education and care across Australia; Au pair care is a flexible and affordable alternative that fills a significant gap in Australia's ECEC funding landscape. It is particularly beneficial for families with limited access to formal childcare, families with multiple children, and families with non-traditional work hours. The rise of working from home arrangements means that many families require a flexible solution that can accommodate a parent's presence in the household while still providing dedicated childcare. The in-home nature of the care also eliminates the need for commutes to and from a centre, providing added convenience. Au pair placements can last for an initial six months, with the option to extend for up to another six months.

8. The choice of care options available to parents and families; The au pair program is a crucial choice that provides families with greater flexibility than most other options. For families with specific needs—such as caring for a child with a mild disability, a non-standard work schedule, or a desire for a multicultural experience—the au pair program is an invaluable solution. It should be recognised as a legitimate and beneficial care option for Australian families.

The Role of a Regulated Au Pair Agency In an informal au pair placement, families and au pairs are left to navigate complex cultural, legal, and personal issues on their own, with no formal support or recourse. By contrast, a placement managed by a professional, approved agency provides a critical safety and support network. This includes:

Thorough Vetting and Background Checks: A core function of an approved agency is the rigorous vetting of all au pair candidates. This includes mandatory Police Checks from their home country and verification of childcare-related references. This ensures that only suitable candidates are presented to families, providing a fundamental layer of security from the outset.

Structured Onboarding: The agency provides comprehensive orientation for both the au pair and the host family, including clear guidelines on roles, expectations, and cultural sensitivity. This proactive education sets a foundation for a safe and successful placement.

Ongoing Support and Mediation: The agency acts as a neutral third party and provides dedicated support throughout the placement. If a conflict, misunderstanding, or a safety concern arises, the agency is available to mediate and provide guidance, helping to de-escalate issues before they become serious.

Accountability and Recourse: Approved agencies have a formal complaints process, ensuring that both families and au pairs have a clear avenue to voice concerns. This provides a layer of accountability and a mechanism for a swift, professional response to any potential issues.

The Pilot Au Pair Visa Program as a Solution In our 2017 submission, CAPAA proposed a solution to these systemic flaws: the Pilot Au Pair Visa (PAPV) program. This model is

designed to improve oversight and reduce risk by standardising the recruitment, placement, and support processes. Under the PAPV program, au pairs would be sponsored by designated agencies, and their visa would be tied to strict guidelines. These would include mandatory background checks and police clearances for both the au pair and the host family, as well as a defined framework for compensation and hours.

Conclusion In conclusion, CAPAA believes that Australia has an unprecedented opportunity to address its ECEC challenges by formally recognising and regulating the au pair program. This model is not just a complementary solution; it is a critical piece of the puzzle for ensuring the safety and security of children while providing much-needed flexibility for families. CAPAA's proposed Pilot Au Pair Visa Program offers a comprehensive blueprint for achieving these goals through a robust system of vetting, support, and accountability. We are dedicated to ensuring that the au pair model continues to provide safe, reliable, and culturally rich care for Australian children, and we urge the Committee to consider this submission as a pathway to a safer, more diverse childcare landscape.

We would be pleased to provide further information to the Committee or to appear at a public hearing to discuss these matters in more detail.

Sincerely,

Jackie Rylance – Secretary

Representative Cultural Au Pair Association of Australia (CAPAA)