



University of  
South Australia

# SUBMISSION

Submission to the Royal Commission into Early  
Childhood Education and Care, South Australia

## **ABOUT THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA:**

The University of South Australia (UniSA) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Royal Commission’s inquiry into South Australia’s early childhood education and care (ECEC). UniSA aims to be integral to the development and sustainability of communities by facilitating evidence-based, and targeted learning experiences for the current and future workforce. UniSA offers programs in Early Childhood Education, Primary and Secondary teaching, at both Bachelor and Master levels. UniSA has much research expertise covering the broad expanse of ECEC including, health, well-being, psychology, cognitive science, early years education, teacher training, leadership, and social inclusion and outreach to name but a few. Overall, in 2023 UniSA provides support for more than four thousand students enrolled in teacher training programs.

## **PURPOSE**

The purpose of this submission is to propose a partnered and integrated model of early childhood education and care (ECEC). By establishing a partnership between ECEC providers, Government and university, we can leverage the collective strengths, knowledge, and resources of all entities to create an innovative and comprehensive early childhood education system. The establishment of a partnered model can have a significant positive impact on the professional growth of educators, the quality of care provided to young children, and the advancement of early childhood education practices in South Australia.

## **BACKGROUND**

Integrated models of ECEC that facilitate collaboration between researchers, service providers, and policy makers have been identified as effective ways to address the diverse needs of children and families. These models enable the formation of a “living laboratory” that ensures evidence-based practices are integrated into the daily experiences of children in early childhood settings and can be scaled across the sector to improve educational outcomes. Integrated services are particularly beneficial for families requiring social and health support, such as those with a child with a disability, mental health issues, or facing social and cultural marginalization. Early intervention services, in particular, emphasize the necessity of a systemic approach to cater to the multiple needs of children with disabilities, encompassing various services like medical, allied health, social work, and education. However, the current scenario in Australia often involves standalone specialized services, leading families to navigate a complex system with different funding arrangements and rules. Several long-standing not-for-profit early childhood service providers in Australia, such as Ngala, bestchance Child

and Family Care, the Infant's Home, and Gowrie South Australia, have developed integrated models to effectively meet the needs of their clients. However, these models lack full integration with the deep expertise residing in University settings.

Childhood care and early education play a critical role in a child's cognitive, social and emotional development. The impact of a quality education setting in the first 5 years of a child's life extends well beyond individual families. Although the importance of ECEC is undisputed among policy advisors, educators and researchers, there remain numerous challenges in how to best service the early childhood industry and ensure quality access and progress outcomes. A University, Government and ECEC partnered model brings the strengths of multidisciplinary research and the training of future workforce and professions into ECEC spaces. The opportunities are not limited to teacher training alone. Working with university research centres such as BetterStart, brings together emergent professionals in the fields of education, health, occupational therapy, pediatrics, social work, speech therapy, learning sciences, and cognitive science. An integrated approach aligns the need for high-quality childcare and education with the necessary expertise that is available within the university setting. By working together, we can provide more comprehensive support that is tailored to the unique needs of each child.

## **MODEL OVERVIEW**

The idea of integrated university schools is not new. Esteemed educator John Dewey established the Chicago Living School in the late 1890's within the University of Chicago. Dewey's model involved students actively participating in their own learning by engaging in hands-on activities and collaborative projects. The Living School served as a training ground for teachers, where pre-service teachers could observe and learn from the innovative educational practices being implemented. The model proposed here continues this legacy by embedding emergent and experienced professionals into shared spaces with multidisciplinary research expertise. The integrated model provides a framework for incorporating participatory input and engagement in innovative contexts. We envisage a pathway approach that combines deep research expertise with profession-based knowledge, practice and training. In so doing, the model serves as a long-term incubator for developing best practice tied to professional development and training that can help scale key research outcomes to advance ECEC (figure 1). Furthermore, the approach establishes a career development pipeline to ensure ECEC professionals have access to long term career support (figure 2).

The University of South Australia and University of Adelaide have complementary research and

outreach expertise that can be better leveraged to address ECEC challenges in SA. For instance, Better Start, Children’s University, Dept of Rural Health, UniSA Education Futures, and UniSA Outreach collectively, not only span disciplines aligned to ECEC such as health, education, psychology, sociology and learning sciences, but also hold geographically important spaces in SA. UniSA has campuses in the Northern Corridor as well as regional hubs. All identified areas that experience education and social disadvantage. Unfortunately, SA has experienced a consistent rise in the proportion of children who are developmentally vulnerable by the time they enter school. There is a clear imperative to examine alternate models that can systematically address ECEC issues.

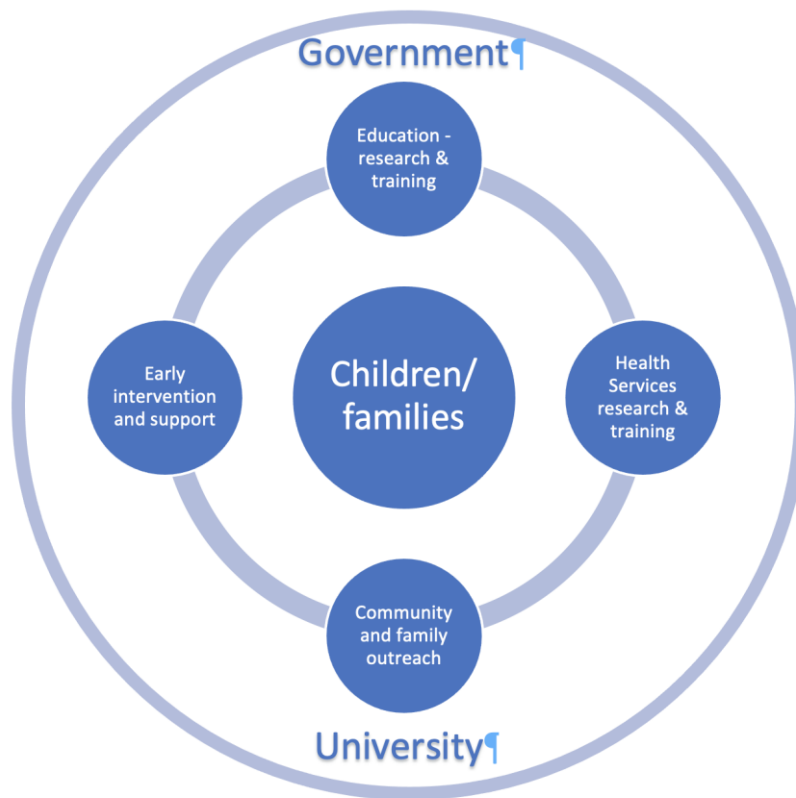


Figure 1: Partnered and integrated ECEC model

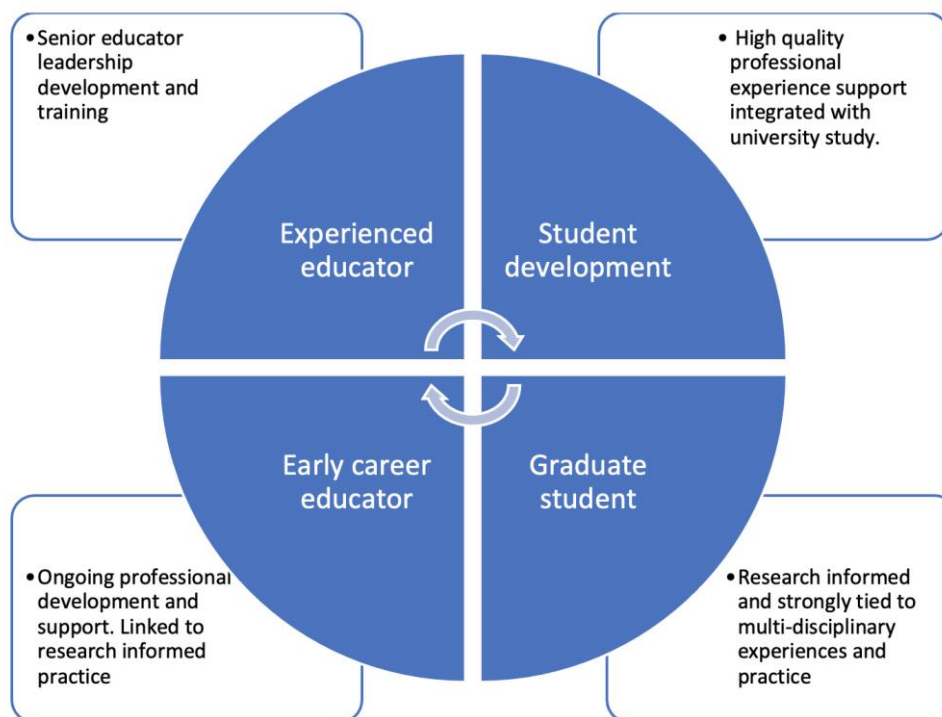


Figure 2: Career development and training

## OUTCOMES

Improvements in childhood development require regular and consistent collaboration among numerous stakeholders. However, in complex family and social contexts, the broad support required can fall narrowly on health and allied care providers, social workers, or learning support experts. A partnered and integrated ECEC system allows for early intervention to access a range of professional experts so that each child can receive the best education and care that is responsive to their individual needs. In the South Australian context, we would strongly recommend that establishment of a partnered ECEC model between providers, government and university in the northern and southern Adelaide corridors will bring significant benefits and outcomes. For example, there are significant opportunities to develop this model as part of the Playford Health Precinct. This could be extended into regional hubs to also attract and build capacity in areas of need. A partnered and integrated model would bring key benefits for:

- *Research and Innovation:* The establishment of a partnership between child care and early education centers within universities raises novel opportunities for research and innovation. This extends beyond education into other fields such as allied health, social work, learning sciences, psychology, neurodiversity, and more. These collaborations can evolve into living laboratories where cutting-edge research on child health and development, education, and

pedagogy are conducted ethically and transparently. The outcomes of such research serve to inform evidence-based practices and contribute to the advancement of the entire sector, ultimately leading to improved development and learning outcomes for young children. The outcomes of this work lay a foundation for uptake by university students engaged in professions associated with early childhood education and care.

- *Quality Workforce Development:* An integrated model requires engagement across the entire career span for early childhood educators and allied health professionals. By immersing students pursuing degrees in education, allied health, psychology, and related fields within these centers, they gain valuable practical experience and the ability to apply their theoretical knowledge in real-world settings. This hands-on approach enhances their teaching skills, equips them with up-to-date research findings, and prepares them to address the diverse needs of young children effectively. Moreover, University training can be better adapted to ensure that all students receive guided expert instruction. Present models of teacher training are limited to a minimum number of placement days. We are acutely aware that a minimum is suboptimal for some students. The ability to offer guided extensions can only serve to improve graduate outcomes and help address longer term systemic workforce issues.
- *Interdisciplinary Collaboration:* The presence of child care and early education centers within universities facilitates interdisciplinary collaboration among faculty members from various disciplines. By bringing together experts in psychology, social work, nursing, education, and other relevant fields, we can address complex issues related to child development comprehensively. This collaborative approach enriches research, teaching, and practice, leading to holistic and integrated early childhood education programs that foster the overall well-being of young children.
- *Community Engagement and Outreach:* An integrated model of early childhood education extends its impact beyond the university campus to families and the wider community. These centers can serve as valuable resources, collaborating with local schools, community organizations, and government agencies to share best practices, offer training opportunities, and provide resources that elevate the overall quality of early education in the region. By actively engaging with the community, we can create a ripple effect, positively impacting the lives of children and families beyond the university setting.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that the Royal Commission;

1. Support the exploration of partnered opportunities between universities and government to target areas of South Australia in most critical need of ECEC services. Establishing a partnered model in the Northern and Southern corridors of metropolitan Adelaide as well as distinct regional hubs (UniSA campuses) can provide the highest quality and innovative ECEC services to better address key geographical areas of disadvantage.
2. Consider recommending a set of Model Preschool's that would be housed on the various University of South Australia's campuses where Education degrees are offered (City East, City West, Magill, Mawson Lakes, Whyalla, and Mount Gambier). Although auspiced by Education, being implemented within a university setting has the advantage of different disciplines, such as education, psychology, health sciences, and social sciences, which can collaborate with the preschool staff to create a holistic learning context. This collaboration can support innovative research studies, and the integration of diverse perspectives into the preschool program.
3. Consider recommending that these partnered preschools become *safe hubs* for experimenting with system enhancements to promote equity and address noted areas of disadvantage. Three year old preschool in South Australia is being planned as a universal service system. This can present challenges when aiming to ensure equal access and equitable distribution of services to those in most need can be a challenge. Various factors such as geographical location, transport, socioeconomic status, cultural barriers, and disabilities can create barriers to accessing services. Model preschools within the regional and urban UniSA campuses would provide a unique opportunity to experiment with system enhancements (such as utilising child protection notifications as an early warning system), differing entry criteria and differing support staff (eg. outreach social workers, financial support services etc.) to ensure that those who are most in need can access and benefit from the services provided.
4. Consider recommending that a comprehensive administrative data collection system with minimum standards be established for all providers of 3 year old preschool that enable data integration and interoperability to enable sharing, reduce redundancy and most importantly to minimize burden while optimizing effective support to families. Linking this data with existing data assets, such as those held by Better Start at the University of Adelaide will generate insights that can be fed into a continuous learning system that can help inform scaled and targeted support services.



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