



University of
South Australia

SUBMISSION

Royal Commission into Early Childhood
Education and Care

Workforce

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Introduction and background

The University of South Australia (UniSA) is Australia's University of Enterprise, operating through a partnered, end-user informed culture of teaching and research with a commitment to outstanding service, continuous improvement and sustainability. We educate and prepare global learners from all backgrounds, instilling professional skills and knowledge, and capacity and drive for lifelong learning. We undertake research that is inspired by global challenges and opportunities, delivers economic and social benefits, and which informs our teaching. UniSA was one of a number of Australian universities established following the Dawkins reforms in the late 1980s, which centred on quality, diversity and equity of access, and engagement with industry, which were values built into UniSA's Act of Establishment. Our mission and values as a university also chart the recommendations of the Bradley Review with its similarly strong focus on equity and participation.

UniSA welcomes the opportunity to make a second submission to the Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care. This submission has been prepared in consultation with staff in UniSA Education Futures - the Academic Unit that delivers Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programs and undertakes Education research.

The following commentary serves to inform the early childhood workforce challenges and provide further information for the consultation session with the Royal Commission. In so doing we address the following key questions:

- What are the most important competencies for people who are delivering high quality early childhood education and care?
- What are the highest value interventions that would improve sector workforce supply in South Australia?
- What else should South Australia do in addition to workforce supply initiatives already underway?
- Are there innovative approaches to building workforce supply that the Royal Commission should consider?

Competencies for high quality early childhood education and care

Educational, wellbeing and child development literature is unequivocal about the importance of early childhood education, and the critical work undertaken by early years teachers. These teachers need to possess personal and professional competencies including analytical and diagnostic skills to make decisions about children's needs, knowledge of age-relevant curricula and teaching practices, sensitivity to language differences, respect, and authenticity in relationships, and understanding of institutional roles.

Although the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers provide guidance, there is work needed to ensure they reflect the essential work of early childhood teachers. Learning is a complex process heavily influenced by numerous factors - social, biological, and environmental. The competencies for Early Childhood Educators (ECE) are therefore also multifaceted and contextually dependent.

As such, the core competencies ECE require include:

- Understanding of child development: ECE should possess a deep understanding of how children from birth to age 5 develop physically, socially, emotionally, and cognitively. This knowledge will enable them to create developmentally appropriate activities and experiences that support

children's growth and development. Importantly ECE also require an understanding of how to identify and support children with developmental disabilities and delays.

- **Effective communication:** Strong communication skills are essential as ECE need to communicate with young children, families, and colleagues. ECE should be able to communicate effectively through verbal and nonverbal means to engage young children, convey information, and collaborate with families particularly in linguistically and culturally diverse contexts. ECE should also be able to communicate and engage with other related disciplines and contexts that aim to support children and families, for example, social workers, allied health, and community health.
- **Curriculum planning and implementation:** ECE should be able to design and implement developmentally appropriate curricula that reflect the learning and developmental needs of young children. This includes creating play-based activities that are engaging, challenging, and relevant to young children's interests and experiences.
- **Understanding of early learning:** ECE should be skilled in employing a variety of techniques to determine overall learning progress and to document children's development (including formative assessment and feedback). This information should be used to inform curriculum planning and teaching practices and to communicate progress to families, colleagues, and other key stakeholders.
- **Cultural competence:** ECE should be aware of and responsive to the cultural, linguistic, and developmental diversity of young children and their families. This includes creating a welcoming and inclusive classroom environment that recognizes and values diversity.
- **Lifelong learning:** ECE should hold onto the need for lifelong learning and professional development. This provides opportunities to specialise and to explore new models based evidenced research, and to work within communities of educators for mutual professional building.

While of each of the detailed competencies above are seen as critical, there are also multiple specialist skills and knowledges required. Such as an understanding (and early detection) of learning disabilities and delays, working with diverse communities, proficiency in a range of pedagogical approaches and ensuring a safe, and supportive space for child exploration and growth. ECE also require longer term professional support to engage with and develop skills in appraising contemporary research.

High value interventions to improve workforce supply

Recommendations 4 and 5 of the Royal Commission Interim report relate to workforce supply. UniSA strongly supports the recommendation 4 to trial alternate pathways and upskilling and evaluate impact and optimal configurations. UniSA also supports an inclusion of ECE (birth – 5 years programs) as a category of registration with SA TRB. The Royal Commission Interim report flags the critical need for developing and growing early years workforce, within South Australia and nationally. The programs supporting the early childhood workforce involve TAFE accredited and Initial Teacher Education (ITE) pathways.

We recommend the following high value interventions to grow workforce supply include:

- No-cost education upskilling for active ECE TAFE-accredited graduates and future ECE students. The pathway for specialist and qualified (Bachelor level) ECE graduates could be supported through multiple avenues.
- As detailed below, we recommend a targeted 3-year ITE program specifically for early childhood settings. ITE is a 4-year degree program. This requirement reflects AITSL accreditation and for early years teacher programs covers birth – 8 years. Graduates from the 4-year early childhood program are therefore qualified for employment in both early years settings and reception to Year 3 in school contexts. Given the extent of teacher shortages across all years of schooling our graduates are quickly employed in Reception – Year 3 environment. This is often a preferred space due to differences in salary and conditions between schools and early years. In the absence of addressing salary differentials, a faster route to employment could serve to offset any perceived deficit and attract graduates.
- Early employment programs – removing the requirement for AITSL accreditation can provide for more novel and innovative work integrated pathways for early childhood settings.
- Registered as Early Years Educators – the teaching profession collectively requires an uplift in public perception. The inclusion of ECE with the TRB can help promote and further voice to support the sector and policy changes.

Additional innovative initiatives to improve & build workforce supply

UniSA is committed to exploring and implementing initiatives to increase the supply of early childhood teachers. The current early childhood ITE accreditation requirements differ across States and Territories. In South Australia early childhood is defined as a period of a child's life between birth – 8 years. Therefore, early childhood programs that focus on birth – 8 years must include content relevant to both prior-to-school and the early years of primary school contexts. Such degrees are also known as dual degrees. Dual degrees must meet requirements for two accrediting bodies –AITSL and ACECQA. AITSL is primarily concerned with primary curriculum content, whilst ACECQA focuses more on program requirements for children aged birth – 5 years. Within a dual degree, roughly seventy percent of the content relates to the primary school curriculum, whilst the remaining thirty percent, focuses specifically on children aged birth – 5 years. If early childhood dual programs are to truly prepare graduates to work with children aged birth – 5 years, it is imperative that program standards for early childhood ITE be re-examined.

The interim report from the Royal Commission stated 'teachers who are qualified in birth – 8 years teaching tend to prefer to work in primary schools' (Government of South Australia, 2023, p. 51). This situation is supported by UniSA's own data which evidences the final placement experience as an indicator of future employment, with over two-thirds of students choosing to undertake their final placement in a primary school setting. The parity in pay and conditions between government and non-government prior-to-school sectors has also been reported by the Royal Commission to have a strong influence on workforce attraction and retention (Government of South Australia, 2023), and must be addressed if there are to be gains in teacher numbers for early childhood.

To meet the necessary workforce requirements, UniSA recommends implementation of a birth – 5 years Bachelor degree, as a preferred early childhood education qualification. The success and long-term viability of a birth – 5 years Bachelor degree is contingent on the degree being recognised by the state government, TRB and DfE. Some States, such as New South Wales, Victoria and Western Australia, offer birth – 5 years Bachelor degrees illustrating the inconsistent standards in operation nationally. The lack of consistency in operations, standards, staffing and qualifications in early years services for children necessitates an overhaul of the system. Achieving this requires significant changes to the current teacher registration system. Without intervention, the complexities of early childhood teacher accreditation, registration and employability make it impossible for ITE providers to educate sufficient early childhood teachers who are attracted to teaching in prior-to-school contexts.

UniSA is investigating the feasibility of a birth – 5 years program with stakeholders. However, we also recognise there are numerous competing views on the viability of this program offering. We recommend the following models:

1. A three-year, fit-for-purpose birth – 5 years Bachelor degree focusing exclusively on early years development, competencies, and settings. The program could include a pathways for credit for Diploma qualified educators to upskill to a Bachelor degree. The pathway has an in-service study option that could be seen to support recommendation five of the interim South Australian Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care, to provide professional learning to Diploma qualified educators (this could be tailored to sites, and be undertaken part-time as required, with an ‘interim registration’ opportunity including equitable pay and conditions with other EC teachers, after a suitable amount of study is completed)
2. The three-year birth – 5 years Bachelor degree would be structured in a manner that articulates into the Master of Teaching (birth – 8 years) degree. This would enable graduates from the 3 year program to extend their qualifications to ensure accreditation requirements are met for birth – 8 year settings.

UniSA strongly recommends a three-year fit-for-purpose birth – 5 years Bachelor degree. While this requires support from the State Government, TRB and DfE, the degree can be operational in a relatively short space of time and would drive improvements in the workforce pipeline in a more targeted way.

UniSA is committed to ensuring that our preservice teachers are provided with flexible study pathways that not only meet their personal needs, but the needs of the profession. Preservice teachers who have a Diploma of Early Childhood Education and Care could enter the Bachelor of Early Childhood Education (birth – 5 years) program with 12 months credit, completing the degree in two years. This would enable preservice teachers to work as educators whilst upskilling to the Bachelor level program. At the end of the Bachelor of Early Childhood Education (birth – 5 years) program, graduates could register with the TRB and work as an early childhood teacher specifically for early years settings.

Conclusion

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the Department of Social Services' Early Years Strategy (the Strategy) discussion paper. For further information, please contact:

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