

28 February 2023

The Hon Julia Gillard AC
Royal Commissioner into Early Childhood Education and Care
GPO Box 11025
Adelaide SA 5001
email: RoyalCommissionECEC@sa.gov.au

Dear Ms Gillard

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission on the delivery of universal 3-year-old preschool to the Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care.

Flinders University has expertise in the development and delivery of curriculum in early childhood education, offering both undergraduate and post graduate qualifications in this space.

Our approach is learner centered, inquiry driven and uses critical and reflective pedagogies.

Our programs and work in the early years are intentionally designed and delivered to not privilege any one age-group or size-type above another.

We would like to extend an invitation to you and the Expert Advisory Group to visit our childcare centre, which successfully models this approach and is an exceptional example of what could and should be the level of provision given to young children across South Australia.

Flinders University also stands ready to support the Royal Commission into this important area of inquiry in any way that we can be of assistance.

For further information, please contact Ms Jayne Flaherty, Chief of Staff on [REDACTED]

We look forward to welcoming you to Flinders University, soon.

Yours sincerely

[REDACTED]

Professor Colin Stirling
President & Vice-Chancellor

Professor Deborah West
Vice-President & Executive Dean
College of Education, Psychology & Social Work

Flinders University is aware that submissions are being provided by the Early Childhood Australia (SA Branch) and The Thrive by Five SA Committee to the Royal Commission which Flinders University have contributed to however we highlight that this submission contains the sole views of Flinders University.

In this submission we respond to guiding questions outlined in the Royal Commission's Call for Submissions, then summarise our key points relating to 1) consistency in addressing workforce demand and 2) career-ready graduates, skilled in Early Childhood teaching and learning pedagogies.

Response to Guiding Questions:

Purpose and aims

What should every 3-year-old child in South Australia be entitled to in terms of early learning? | What should be the central aim of 3-year-old preschool? What are important but secondary aims?

The Early Years Learning Framework advocates that "different theories about Early Childhood inform approaches to children's learning and development" (Department of Education and Training [DET], 2019, p. 11). In addition, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) (2003) advocates for culturally appropriate practice that recognises children's development that arises through cultural practices and beliefs. Flinders University Early Childhood Education pre-service teachers develop a **pedagogy of listening** in order to observe and learn about the child. This enables them to focus on authentic, meaningful learning opportunities that see children reach their full potential.

We recommend that any preschool program considers children's individual needs in relation to play, learning and development, focussing on a play-based curriculum.

Children's social and emotional development requires careful attention in the pre-school years as they navigate and construct safe and supportive relationships with caregivers and their peers. Early emotional experiences, mediated by the caregiving context, may have lifelong consequences for personality development and resilience (Garvis et al. 2018). All preschool education settings need to respect children's sensitivity to autonomy, providing opportunities for children to express personal agency and demonstrate their capabilities through play. A preschool context needs to develop a sense of belonging by creating and maintaining a safe and welcoming space for children, to ensure that their emotional needs are met before they can engage in any further learning opportunities that are offered to them.

Recommendations:

1. Develop a preschool program which considers children's individual needs in relation to play, learning and development, focussing on a play-based curriculum.

Defining key terms

Does a universal program mean the same program design and service is offered to everyone? How would you define universal? | (How) should 3-year-old preschool differ to 4-year-old preschool? | (How) should 3-year-old preschool differ to ECEC currently provided to 3-year-olds (e.g. in centre-based day care and family day care?)

Flinders University supports an education system that advocates for the wellbeing of all Australian children. We recommend that **'universality' be considered in terms of access rather than prescribed curriculum content, teaching and learning**, so that all children have the opportunity to regularly attend an education setting that meets their individual learning needs. Universality can be defined as all children regardless of background or geographic location accessing the same level and amount of care each week. This has implications in terms of

space, but also with rural and remote communities. One key barrier behind the design of a universal program is the workforce shortage, and teacher mobility needed to satisfy the demands of a universal program.

Research suggests that a second year of preschool does have significant and lasting effects for the participants, including reducing the demand for special education services, improving educational efficiency, reducing crime and promoting social equity (Arteaga et al, 2014; Hahn & Barnett, 2022). In addition, AEDC data reveals that children in the poorest areas of Australia are three times more likely to demonstrate developmental vulnerability than children in wealthier areas. Universal access could help reduce this statistic (Hedger, 2022). We support a universal Early Childhood education and care program that focusses on meeting young children's needs as a priority, and that which fosters a child's sense of belonging to ensure that effective learning can take place.

The provision of early education for 3-year-old children differs greatly across education settings in South Australia. There are some excellent examples of practice and some very poor examples where children are not meeting their full potential. To create a universal program for 3-year-old children, there needs to be a **consistent level of meaningful education and care pedagogy** for all preschool settings. The current lack of consistency is a result of the existing workforce shortage and the need for established groups of educators and teachers across Early Childhood settings. Research suggests that better outcomes are achieved with low adult:child ratios where children's needs can be met by a consistent and supportive caregiver (Meloy et al, 2019). Cohesive and collaborative groups of teachers in birth-5 settings are more likely to establish effective pedagogies of preschool education. This model is evidenced at *Flinders University Child Care Centre* who have established teams of teachers and educators in each age-group. The outcomes of this model result in high staff retention rates as they feel valued and necessary in the work that they do. Flinders University strongly support the provision of registered teachers within all 3-year-old preschool education settings.

We also recommend that neither program, for 3-year-old preschool or 4-year-old preschool, should be working to prepare a child for school. We are concerned of the potential for a push down of the Australian Curriculum into preschool. The preferred alternative is a **push up** of the early childhood pedagogy into the primary school environment to incorporate a specialised integrated play-based curriculum. For the Royal Commission, this involves a commitment to look beyond pre-school provision to our school settings and how prepared our Reception Year teachers are for the diverse range of children entering their classrooms.

Recommendations:

2. Work to establish consistent standards of education and care in birth-5 settings.
3. Consider universality in terms of access for all children and not in terms of a universal, one-size-fits-all program of teaching and learning.
4. Create teams of teachers and educators in birth-5 settings that collaborate and construct meaningful learning for children as evidenced at *Flinders University Child Care Centre*.
5. Work closely with schools to ensure they are ready for children and their varying needs as they commence their transition year. Do not use ECEC settings to prepare children for the school curriculum – recognise the early learning framework and allow this to push up in the initial stages of early childhood schooling.

Quality and innovation

What does high-quality 3-year-old early learning look like? | What are the markers of optimal program delivery? | What does high-quality look like in terms of the amount of time spent in preschool? | (How) does quality differ for different cohorts of children?

Early Childhood research contests the term ‘quality’ and how it is used as a narrative to generate prescribed outcomes that focus on standards, performance, ‘smart investments’ and ‘massive returns’ (Dahlberg et al, 2013). “Quality is a universal formula, identified and distilled by experts for application anywhere or anytime to achieve standardised results” (Dahlberg et al, 2013, p. vii). ‘Quality’ neglects multiplicity, context, and the complexity of working with Australia’s diverse children and their families.

If the Royal Commission ECEC genuinely wants to “reflect the most contemporary thinking in early childhood education and care policy, operations and outcomes” (Royal Commission Newsletter, December 2022), then it must reconsider the term ‘quality’ and how this is used to define Early Childhood Education and Care in South Australia. If the Royal Commission wants to reflect contemporary thinking, it will move **beyond quality to an approach of meaning making between educator and child in an informed and pedagogically rich environment**. Meaning making sees Early Childhood settings as complex organisms reliant on context, culture, tradition and community.

Critical reflection is an underpinning philosophy of the Early Childhood degrees at Flinders University to ensure that we do not produce educators that are happy to follow prescriptive models of teaching that ignore children’s varying needs and the educational context in which they are situated. Pre-service teachers connect to educational theory and evaluate the effectiveness of any new strategies they come across. **Universal preschool education does not equal uniform curriculum and delivery**. We encourage the Royal Commission not to consider a one-size-fits-all preschool curriculum or strategy that can be taught prescriptively, regardless of context and devoid of educator agency. Furthermore, South Australia has previously made great gains in terms of Early Childhood Education through the Reimagining Childhood project, established by the South Australian Government under Jay Weatherill’s leadership in partnership with Reggio Emilia. This initiative involved a review of the South Australian Education system by Thinker in Residence Carla Rinaldi, who published a final report in 2013. We strongly urge The Royal Commission ECEC to revisit this document and consider the immense work and pedagogical gains that were carried out as part of this initiative. The report is still relevant today and provides a clear starting point to springboard future innovation to offer every chance for every child.

Where is innovation happening in programming and service delivery? What does that look like?

Flinders University Child Care Centre offers an exceptional example of what could and should be the level of provision given to young children across South Australia. It is a beacon of excellence in ECEC within the State. Their model of practice proves that it is possible to offer high levels of education and care to children and provide the best possible start in life. We wholeheartedly recommend that this model be studied and replicated across the State. We strongly advise you to visit *Flinders University Child Care Centre* to see the way in which this site is organised in terms of provision of teachers and educators and the ways in which it delivers Early Childhood Education and Care to children aged birth-5.

Recommendations:

6. Move beyond quality to the creative realms of meaning making through authentic, meaningful, and supportive relationships between children, educators, and their families.
7. Revisit the Reimagining Childhood initiative and how the valuable work of this project could be used to leverage change within South Australia’s ECEC context.
8. Visit sites across South Australia that clearly demonstrate effective approaches to ECEC in birth-5. Learn about their pedagogical approaches and the philosophies that underpin this and consider how this could be transferred to ECEC settings more broadly across the State.

9. Consider how any educational strategy or curriculum will still enable educator autonomy and agency, knowing that Early Childhood teachers are trained to deliver teaching and learning that best meets the needs of the children in their care.

Workforce

In the context of the Shaping Our Future national ECEC workforce strategy and other recent announcements by Commonwealth and state governments: What are the most important competencies for the people delivering 3-year-old preschool? | What are the highest value interventions to improve workforce supply in South Australia?

There is a current supply of Early Childhood teachers residing in SA with Birth-5 teaching qualifications that cannot register to teach and subsequently work in SA. The TRB only recognise Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) approved qualifications for registration, where AITSL is the accrediting body for school-based teaching qualifications. They do not fully recognise the role of ACECQA as the accrediting body for early childhood teaching qualifications. This means that graduates holding a birth-to-five early childhood teaching degree cannot be registered as teachers in South Australia, even when they have registration in another state. In addition, South Australian universities cannot offer Birth-5 qualifications to lessen the workforce shortage because the TRB will not recognise and register applicants with this level of qualification. We raise this issue as a matter of urgency in addressing the workforce shortage. Designing and preparing a Birth-5 qualification will take time to create and accredit with ACECQA. To mitigate the workforce shortage, we need to establish Birth-5 qualifications in South Australian universities now. **We recommend that the TRB be advised to register teachers with Birth-5 qualifications as soon as possible.**

Beyond initial teacher education, the key barriers prohibiting the attraction and retention of suitable preservice teachers are low wages and poor working conditions (Fenech et al. 2021). Until pay parity is established, attracting, and retaining qualified and experienced early childhood teachers will remain a critical barrier to the provision of high-quality early childhood education, irrespective of any other strategies that are put into place. Concerns have been raised about the value of Birth-8 qualification across Australia. Early Childhood teachers develop a deep understanding of children within 4-8. Their pedagogy, experience and practice are needed in the early years of school to understand and teach to young children's learning needs. Establishing pay parity in Birth-5 would remove any concern around Birth-8 qualifications.

In the Eastern States, there has been a policy focus that prioritises increasing the supply of early childhood teacher graduates through accelerated programs. The accreditation of these programs has been made without an evidence base of demonstrated quality and graduate preparedness. Research suggests that a highly skilled and well-supported workforce, developed through a strong teacher preparation pipeline, ensures knowledgeable and skilled Early Childhood educators who are more likely to sustain a career in the sector (Meloy et al, 2019). As a provider of Initial Teacher Education (Early Childhood) we recommend that any suggestions made around shortened degree pathways should be carefully researched and established with a strong evidence base for their effectiveness in providing young children with effective education and care.

There are numerous ways in which potential candidates can seek to **upskill** to become an Early Childhood teacher. These include pathways from Vocational Education and Training (VET) and Higher Education Institution (HEI) qualifications, internships for experienced, Diploma qualified educators, degree apprenticeship models and Primary trained teachers upskilling to gain an Early Childhood qualification. Flinders University is open to investigating and working with partners to explore and develop multiple pathway opportunities for Early Childhood teaching qualifications.

Recommendations:

10. Implement the recognition and registration of Birth-5 qualifications with the Teachers Registration Board SA as a matter of urgency.
11. Implement policies and strategies conducive to achieving pay parity for all Early Childhood teachers, irrespective of where they are employed.
12. Review abridged Early Childhood degree programs for their efficacy and capacity to produce fit for purpose Early Childhood teachers before making any recommendations to roll this out within South Australia.
13. Explore partnerships between VET and HEIs for improved articulation pathways.

Summary of Key Points:

There are two consistent themes highlighted throughout our responses to the guiding questions:

1. Consistency in addressing workforce demand**a. Alignment with the Review of Education & the Early Years Strategy from the Minister of Social Services and other State and Federal reviews.**

There are currently multiple large initiatives in South Australia concerning Education with strong overlaps and relevance to this Royal Commission: (a) [National Children's Education and Care Workforce Strategy](#) (b) [Department of Social Services The Early Years Strategy](#) (c) [Specialised and inclusive education attention by SA Minister of Education](#) (d) [The Federal Productivity Commission inquiry into Australia's Early Childhood Education and Care \(ECEC\) system](#). (e) Labour's Seven Point Plan for Teaching Quality and (f) [Purpose of Public Education in SA](#)

Flinders University suggests clear consideration and alignment of the recommendations coming from these initiatives in the further review and development of recommendations from this Royal Commission.

b. Teachers Registration Board of South Australia (TRB) issues concerning accreditation and registration and a lack of consistency with other states.

Universities are highly regulated entities at state and federal levels, yet the TRB does not fully recognise the role of ACECQA as the accrediting body for early childhood teaching qualifications. Specifically, in South Australia, early childhood teaching graduates are only eligible for registration if they have a dual primary/early childhood qualification, thus excluding graduates holding a Birth-5 early childhood degree from being eligible to register as a teacher in South Australia. This is inconsistent with teacher registration requirements in other jurisdictions. Enabling birth-5 qualifications provides one opportunity to address the current significant shortage of staff in early learning settings.

c. Entry pathways to education, including ATAR entry levels & incentivising the profession.

High ATAR entry level scores do not necessarily correlate with the effectiveness of a teacher entering the workforce. There are multiple entry points and pathways into Initial Teacher Education and Flinders University is committed to exploring these in an effort to mitigate the Early Childhood workforce shortage. Similarly, the focus needs to shift from entry pathways and incentives, such as the high ATAR scholarships being scoped by the National Teacher Workforce Action Plan, to a focus of graduate outcomes and outputs and support strategies for teachers. Changing training of early teacher educators will allow pre-service teachers to learn in place.

Flinders University recommends a focus on leveraging the current Early Childhood workforce, encouraging Diploma trained educators to upskill through pathway programs, scholarships and recognition of prior learning. Similarly, we suggest articulating pathways for Primary trained teachers to upskill and become Early Childhood teachers who can bring their expertise to the preschool space.

Further, the **pay scale between Birth-five and school settings needs to be equalised**. Early childhood teachers employed in early childhood non-school settings have long experienced a lack of pay parity with teachers employed in schools. They earn up to \$30,000 less than their primary and secondary counterparts despite having equivalent teaching qualifications and, in most jurisdictions, being professionally registered and accountable to the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers. We recommend a collective effort with Federal Government to resolve this important issue and build a strong national Early Childhood workforce.

2. Career-ready graduates, skilled in Early Childhood teaching and learning pedagogies.

a. Listening Pedagogy and inclusive education being considered in early childhood education.

Flinders University sees early childhood pre-service teachers and graduates as competent and capable educators, specialising in early education and care pedagogies and practices. They are critical in their approach to teaching to ensure that any pedagogical resource or strategy that teachers adopt can be adapted to meet the needs of the children they are working with.

Flinders University recommends that the Royal Commission ECEC challenge approaches to 'quality' and the restrictive nature of this term when used in the context of ECEC. We suggest focussing on meaning making that aligns with Early Childhood Education and Care pedagogies.

b. Creating markers of teaching that recognise teachers' skillsets and specialisations.

A teacher will reflect a professional development experience in the learning environment, therefore we recommend the creation of direct links to the structure of the education system, providing teacher mobility, upskilling, and the recognition of generalist vs specialist teachers. Such models will scope the role of continuing professional education in upskilling and cross-skilling between jurisdictions and year levels.

c. Consistency in teacher and learner experiences. To provide a universal experience for children, we need to ensure teachers are capable of creating that experience.

We recommend that 'universality' be considered in terms of access rather than prescribed curriculum content, teaching and learning, so that all children have the opportunity to regularly attend an education setting that meets their individual learning needs.

We recommend the creation of opportunities combining theory and practice, researching young children, their interests, learning processes, developmental needs and perspectives and incorporate these into a rich environment of play experiences that optimise children's learning and development.

Going forward, we would recommend two key pieces of work:

- A. Accurate mapping of teacher capabilities and identification of competencies** is needed. The models for initial ECE will support research informed practice that focuses on the development of the whole child.
- B.** The last few years have shown a strong need for **evidence-driven solutions for ECE**. We would like to participate in the data evaluation and evidenced-driven approach that the Royal Commission will be involved with, as Flinders University has research strengths, capacity, and capability to collaborate in this space.

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