

Productivity Commission Draft Report: *A Path to Universal Early Childhood Education and Care*

Flinders University submission

Acknowledgement of Country

Flinders University acknowledges the Traditional Owners and Custodians of the lands on which its campuses are located. These are the Traditional Lands of the Arrernte, Dagoman, First Nations of the South East, First Peoples of the River Murray and Mallee region, Jawoyn, Kurna, Larrakia, Ngadjuri, Ngarrindjeri, Ramindjeri, Warumungu, Wardaman and Yolngu people.

We honour their Elders past, present and emerging.

Introduction

Flinders University welcomes the Productivity Commission's release of its Draft Report: *A Path to Universal Early Childhood Education and Care* and supports the overarching strategy and approach to addressing the challenges faced by the sector and families accessing services.

In responding to the Draft Report, Flinders University has focused on the draft recommendations and findings that are directly relevant to our role as a provider of higher education.

Availability can only improve if workforce challenges are resolved.

DR 3.1 Reduce barriers to educator upskilling.

Flinders reiterates the importance of ensuring **pay parity** for early childhood teachers working in birth-5 settings and a collective effort between state and federal governments is required to resolve this important issue and build a strong national early childhood workforce. 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.

Flinders strongly agrees, and is ready to support, **accelerated degree programs** for upskilling diploma-qualified educators to early childhood teachers, however this recommendation needs to be linked to the regulatory frameworks that exist in the early childhood education and care (ECEC) sector. Without the changes outlined in Draft Recommendation 3.3 being implemented, there is reduced ability to make a significant impact on this barrier.

Central to the **retention of Early Childhood teachers** is the need to attract those that have a desire to work with young children and are supported professionally and financially to do so. Birth-5 qualifications are the most highly preferred by early childhood sector employers because of the specialised focus on educating young children in birth-5 settings (Boyd et al., 2020). Standalone birth-5 degrees, **only accredited by ACECQA**, will enable a focus on birth-5 teaching philosophies, therefore creating specialised, skilled birth-5 educators who are more likely to complete their degrees.

Flinders strongly backs innovative ways to support pre-service teachers to study whilst working, including the consideration of **paid placements to enable pre-service teachers (PSTs) to undertake paid employment and completed work-based professional experience at the same time**. The University acknowledges the opportunity to use placements to develop communities of practice that enable PSTs from different stages in their studies to engage whilst on placement to provide on-placement observations and contextual feedback of fellow PSTs. We also see scope to adjust the fraction of time pre-service teachers are required to be on placement, and to better allow the integration of curriculum into the learning.

DR 3.2: Support innovative delivery of teaching qualifications.

Flinders supports the investigation into the development of innovative approaches for providing initial teacher education for early childhood teachers. The current regulatory arrangements governing the delivery of initial teacher education curriculum in higher education providers significantly restricts innovation and discourages, rather than encourages, deviating from the norm. **A move to a single accreditation for birth-5 degrees (under ACECQA) will provide greater room for innovation and responsiveness of the curriculum.**

Another avenue for innovation lies in optimizing the recognition of prior learning. By doing so, we can enhance entry pathways, potentially expediting undergraduate degrees for individuals who lack a recognised bachelor's degree but possess substantial relevant experience in educational settings. Examples of such experience include early childhood educators and student support officers.

DR 3.3: Improve registration arrangements for early childhood teachers.

A review of the regulatory arrangements for the accreditation of early childhood teacher qualifications and **national consistency for teacher registration** is a recommendation strongly supported by Flinders. The University recognizes that removing duplication of accreditation and inconsistencies across jurisdictions is an important outcome.

DR 3.4: Lift support and mentoring for new early childhood teachers.

Flinders agrees that a structured mentoring and support program for early childhood teachers is critical for early career success. We reiterate that teams of early childhood teachers in birth-5 settings can establish and maintain supportive, professional, and collegial relationships with their colleagues who come together to collaborate and plan for effective educational provision for our youngest children. **Registered teachers are more likely to maintain a career in the sector if they work in collegial and supportive environments.**

DR 3.5: Improve pathways and support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to obtain ECEC qualifications.

Flinders strongly supports this recommendation and acknowledges the importance of providing pathways and learning environments that encourage **greater participation in higher education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people**. We need to ensure diversity in the teaching profession to be representative of the super diversity (Morrison et al. 2019) experienced in our schools and classrooms.

Flinders University has established specific approaches to increasing the number of students who identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander and there are supports in place for these students to support them through education to workplace transitions.

DR 3.6: Contribute to professional development for the ECEC workforce.

DR 3.7: Improve the ECEC Workforce Strategy.

Flinders agrees that better support is required to ensure ECEC workforces able to undertake professional development activities.

We recognise the need for innovation and flexibility in the delivery of professional development programs. Flinders has **micro-credentials available that focus on supporting children who have experienced trauma, and children with autism in inclusive educational settings** to meet this need. These micro-credentials are available online and use a method of applied practice to ensure immediate impact in the workplace.

A universal ECEC system has to be inclusive of all children.

As an advocate for research-informed policy, Flinders strongly supports the need for research to inform future policy in the ECEC sector to improve childhood development outcomes. We share the government's aim of ensuring ECEC services are inclusive of all children, including children living with disability and children from diverse backgrounds, and are committed to working together at a state and federal level to increase access to specialist allied health support in children's centres and schools.

Flinders is at the forefront of a paradigm shift from fitting children into systems to a system that wraps around a child, delivering new touchpoints to identify developmental vulnerability and connect families and children to the support service they need. Central to this is providing screening and support services where children live and learn, **putting children and their caregivers at the centre of integrated health, education and social services systems**. Our nursing and allied health experts are working with Autism and Child Assessment Team services to re-design models of care.

Through our collaborative linkages between our education, nursing and allied health researchers, educators and practitioners, Flinders University is well suited to design, develop and evaluate a model of systematic change to build workforce capacity, improve children's lives, and reduce the use of crisis management teams that are called in to address complexities. In turn, we hope to close the gap and improve outcomes for children from diverse and complex circumstances.

Affordability and availability gaps need to be addressed to achieve universal access.

Flinders strongly supports the Productivity Commission's view that universal access does not mean 'uniform' and acknowledge there are many elements of the system that need addressing to ensure all children have the opportunity to regularly attend an education setting that meets their individual needs. We support a universal early childhood education and care program that **focuses 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**.

Quality is paramount to achieving the benefits of ECEC.

Flinders agrees that quality provision of ECEC is critical and believe **birth-5 qualifications will support and arguable enhance quality**. With a focus on birth-5 teaching philosophies, pre-service teachers are able to develop in-depth pedagogical knowledge of the differing needs and requirements of this age group.

New coordination mechanisms will support universal access.

A **coordinated and uniform regulatory framework** across all Australian jurisdictions is strongly supported by Flinders, particularly in relation to the accreditation of higher education qualifications and for teacher registration.

References

Boyd, W., Fenech, M., Mahony, L., Wong, S., Warren, J., Lee, I. -F., & Cheeseman, S. (2020). Employers' perspectives of how well prepared early childhood teacher graduates are to teach in early childhood education and care services, *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*. 45(3), 215-227. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1836939120935997>

Morrison, A, Rigney, L-I, Hattam, R & Diplock, A 2019, *Toward an Australian culturally responsive pedagogy: a narrative review of the literature*, University of South Australia, Adelaide

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