



University of  
South Australia

# SUBMISSION

Productivity Commission: Inquiry into Early  
Childhood Education and Care

CRICOS 00121B

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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, that in turn 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. These are core 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 submission in response to the Australian Government's Productivity Commission (the Commission) Inquiry into Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). The submission addresses options that improve or support developmental and educational outcomes for Australian children, including preparation for school, as outlined in the Commission's scope of inquiry. In doing so, UniSA will provide considerations to assist the Commission in making recommendations regarding ECEC sector workforce requirements and the capacity to meet these requirements within current Commonwealth, state, and territory initiatives.

The University's submission argues that to improve and support developmental and educational outcomes for young children, an early childhood workforce with specialised knowledge of children aged birth to five years is necessary. To establish such a workforce, initial teacher education (ITE) providers need to be supported by the Government to develop dedicated birth to five early childhood degrees that are registerable in every state and territory of Australia. Furthermore, graduates from birth to five degrees, must be regarded in professional status, pay and work conditions in the same way as primary and secondary degree graduates. The University argues that if the Commission was to make such a recommendation, early childhood degrees and in turn the field, will better attract and retain a knowledgeable and passionate ECEC workforce.

## Response to the scope of the Commission's inquiry

The National Skills Commission's five-year employment projections show that growth in the ECE sector will continue to increase over the five years to November 2025, with employment expected to increase by around 16,000 educators (an 11% increase) and 8,000 teachers (a 17% increase)<sup>1</sup>. Projected growth for the sector remains above the national projected employment growth of 7.8% for all occupations. Innovative and flexible approaches are required if we are to reach these targets.

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

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<sup>1</sup> 'Shaping our Future', National Children's Education and Care Workforce Strategy (2022-2031), [online](#).

heavily influenced by numerous factors - social, biological, and environmental. The competencies for Early childhood educators (ECE) are therefore also multifaceted and contextually dependent.

While these 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, proficient 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.

## Improving workforce supply

There are two accrediting bodies for early childhood Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programs –the Australian Institute for Teachers and School Leadership (AITSL) for programs primarily involving school years and primary curriculum content; and the Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) for the prior-to-school, birth to five years contexts. Programs encapsulating birth to eight years must address accreditation requirements for both AITSL and ACECQA.

As a result, much of the content in an early childhood ITE degree relates to the primary school curriculum (to cover all curriculum areas as per AITSL requirements). While elements are applicable to both prior-to-school contexts and primary school, there is less of a focus on curriculum covering the needs of children aged birth to five years. If early childhood ITE programs are to truly prepare graduates to work with children aged birth to five years, particularly within prior-to-school contexts, it is imperative that program standards for early childhood ITE be re-examined.

The University strongly supports the inclusion of early childhood (birth – 5 years) programs as a category of registration with the South Australian Teacher’s Registration Board (TRB) and nationally. There is a critical need for developing and growing the early years workforce across the country and allowing teachers to move jurisdictions without penalty as a result of a lack of recognition of credentials. The programs supporting the early childhood workforce involve TAFE accredited and ITE pathways.

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

- No cost education upskilling for active TAFE accredited graduates and future students. The pathway into specialist and qualified (Bachelor level) early childhood graduates could be supported through multiple avenues.
- As detailed below we recommend a targeted three-year ITE program specifically for prior-to-school contexts. ITE is currently a four-year degree program. This requirement reflects AITSL accreditation for birth – 8 early childhood education degrees. Graduates from the four-year early childhood program are therefore able to gain employment in both prior-to-school contexts and Foundation to year 2 in primary school contexts. Given the extent of teacher shortages across all years of schooling our graduates are quickly employed in the primary school environment. This is often a preferred space due to differences in salary and conditions between schools and prior-to-school contexts. 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 prioro-to-school contexts.

- Registered as Early Childhood Teachers - the teaching profession collectively requires an uplift in public perception. The inclusion of early childhood teachers (birth – 5 years) with the TRB can help promote and add further voice to support the sector and required 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 South Australian Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care states '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 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.

The University strongly recommends a national approach to recognising a fit-for-purpose birth – 5 years Bachelor degree. The success and long-term viability of a birth to five Bachelor degree is contingent on the degree being recognised by the Australian Government, State and Territory Governments, State and Territory Teacher Registration Boards and the relevant Departments for Education. Noting this required support, 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 Productivity Commission's Inquiry into Early Childhood Education and Care. For further information, please contact:

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