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Early Childhood Education and Care
Productivity Commission
Locked Bag 2, Collins St East
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Dear Commissioners,

RE: Submission on the inquiry into Early Childhood Education and Care

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission as part of the public consultation on the Productivity Commission inquiry into Early Childhood Education and Care.

Flinders University has a keen interest in the development and maintenance of a secure pipeline of early childhood education and care educators and stands ready to upskill the existing workforce in addition to training additional educators.

However, the greatest barrier to achieving a sustainable workforce supply both immediately and into the future is the conflicting regulations of the teaching workforce in the ECEC sector.

By addressing South Australian teacher registration requirements to enable registration of teachers with birth-5 qualifications, the industry can focus on the delivery of enhanced pedagogy to maximise the quality of the care provided to our youngest children.

For further information, please contact Professor Deborah West, Vice President and Executive Dean of the College of Education, Psychology and Social Work

Yours sincerely,

Professor Mary Katsikitis
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Productivity Commission Inquiry into Early Childhood Education & 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 & Mallee region, Jawoyn, Kaurna, Larrakia, Ngadjuri, Ngarrindjeri, Ramindjeri, Warumungu, Wardaman and Yolngu people.

We honour their Elders past, present and emerging.

Introduction

Flinders University welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Productivity Commission's Inquiry into Early Childhood Education and Care.

Flinders University has expertise in the development and delivery of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), offering undergraduate initial teacher education and post graduate qualifications in this space. Our approach is learner centred, inquiry driven and uses critical and reflective pedagogies. With an agentic approach, we create relational dimensions that are foundational to our work in the early years, and our programmes are intentionally designed and delivered to not privilege any one age-group or size-type above another. The success of this approach is modelled at [Flinders University Child Care Centre](#) which is an exceptional example of what could and should be the level of provision given to young children across Australia.

Flinders University agrees with the need for reform in the Early Childhood Education and Care sector to address the barriers parents and carers face in accessing ECEC in addition to ensuring the provision of ECEC supports for the developmental, social and educational needs of our youngest children. However, we are also aware of the many current reviews ([South Australian Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care](#), [National Children's Education and Care Workforce Strategy](#), and [Department of Social Services The Early Years Strategy](#) plus others) with strong overlaps concerning Education at both a Commonwealth and State level, particularly in the Early Childhood Education and Care space. Flinders University has provided submissions to each review and has been invited to present evidence to the South Australian Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care. We suggest clear consideration and alignment of the recommendations and outcomes from these reviews to support a cohesive and evidence-based strategy and implementation plan.

The most significant matter in implementing Child Care reform is the distinct lack of Early Childhood educators across the sector. In 2022, there were an estimated 6000 vacancies for educators in birth-5 settings, with a predicted 39,000 educators needed by 2023. Any reform will be directly dependent on a strong Education and Care Workforce Strategy that recruits and retains Early Childhood educators. At present, the lower-than-average pay and conditions results in huge staff turnover as they leave the sector to look for more prosperous opportunities. This greatly impacts children's learning as they cannot establish and build meaningful, positive relationships with a consistent caregiver (Hedger, 2022).

Early Childhood educators should focus on meaning making through responsive and considered relationships with children, families, and colleagues. The South Australian Royal Commission ECEC outlined their approach to “reflect the most contemporary thinking in early childhood education and care policy, operations and outcomes” (Royal Commission Newsletter December 2022). If the Productivity Commission wishes to mirror this approach, then it must reconsider the term ‘quality’ and how this is used to define Early Childhood Education and Care in Australia. If the Productivity 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. Meaning making offers educators opportunities to combine theory with practice, researching young children, their interests, learning processes, developmental needs and perspectives and incorporates these into a rich environment of play experiences that optimise children’s learning and development. **We recommend that the Productivity Commission ECEC challenge approaches to ‘quality’ and the restrictive nature of this term when used in the context of ECEC.**

Our response is built on the following key points:

- **Pedagogical approach to Early Childhood Education**, including:
 - Pedagogical approaches to effective childhood education
 - Relational approaches to Early Childhood Education
 - Preschool programs and school preparation
 - Effective Early Childhood Initial Teacher Education
- **State and National Frameworks regulating Initial Teacher Education**, addressing interactions with existing and planned ECEC policy settings, and required regulatory setting:
 - Registration of birth-5 qualifications in South Australia
- **Immediate response to workforce shortage**, addressing interactions with other incentives / disincentives to join/increase participation in the workforce:
 - Teams of Early Childhood Teachers in birth-5 settings
 - Pay parity for Early Childhood Teachers working in birth-5 settings
 - Raising the status of the profession
 - Professional experience placements and mentoring of pre-service teachers
- **Workforce pipeline** including:
 - Professional development in birth-5 and preschool pedagogies
 - Upskilling educators as Early Childhood Teachers

Pedagogical Approach to Early Childhood Education

1. Philosophical Approaches to Effective Early Childhood Education.

Effective Early Childhood educators are critical in nature. Flinders University Early Childhood pre-service teachers (PSTs) develop the skills to critically reflect on curriculum initiatives, new policies and educational advice that is published through various channels. They connect to educational theory and evaluate the effectiveness of any new strategies that they come across. Critical reflection of this kind is an underpinning philosophy of the Early Childhood degrees at Flinders 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 that they are working in. Flinders Early Childhood graduates are critical in their approach to teaching to ensure that any pedagogical resource or strategy that they adopt can be adapted to meet the needs of the children that they are teaching.

2. Relational Approaches to Early Childhood Education.

Early Childhood educators represent a family's first relationship with the teaching profession. As a child's first teacher, Early Childhood educators are trained to focus on developing effective relationships with children and families, to establish a sense of belonging. Only when we have established effective relationships, can learning commence. By connecting with colleagues, observing and reflecting on children's play and learning, teachers build a picture of the child and their learning needs. Flinders University Early Childhood pre-service teachers develop their skills in professional communication and practice to develop healthy relationship with colleagues and families. They specialise in leadership skills to be able to support teams of educators working to effectively educate children during the most important and influential time in their lives.

Flinders University believes that we must work within culturally responsive pedagogies if we are to offer authentic Early Childhood education for all indigenous children. With many State Governments focussing on 3-year-old preschool recommendations, we must consider that "the preschool years are crucial in shaping cultural and racial understandings and are critical in forming attitudes toward diversity and difference" (Hawkins 2014, p. 727). Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families' historical and contemporary experiences of colonisation greatly impact their engagement with early childhood education providers (Rigney et al, 2020). Early childhood services "must accept, understand, respect, and reflect the cultures of Aboriginal people if they are to be 'culturally safe'" (Martin, 1999, p. 6). To acknowledge and value Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families, we need to ensure that Early Childhood Teachers (ECTs) engage in effective indigenous pedagogies within teacher education. Flinders University embeds Indigenous pedagogies within the Early Childhood degrees throughout teaching and assessment practices.

3. Preschool Programs and School Preparation.

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, Australian Early Development Census (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 across 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, ensuring alignment of the commencement of the Australian Curriculum alongside the use of the Early Years Learning Framework for children up to 8-years-old. For the Productivity 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. This includes ensuring that approaches to transitioning children to school has a focus on supporting neurodiverse children using appropriate strategies.

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.

4. Effective Early Childhood Initial Teacher Education.

Participation in in-effective early childhood education leads to poor outcomes for young children (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2021). Researchers, practitioners and policy makers believe that sound Early Childhood education depends on experienced and skilled teachers. Moreover, research suggests that children receive better outcomes in environments where qualified teachers support effective teaching and learning as a result of superior pedagogical approaches (Manning et al, 2017).

The OECD (2019a) identifies that:

Pre-service education and training is central to the construction of a skilled and knowledgeable ECEC workforce. Although qualifications by themselves do not guarantee high quality teaching, studies from across the OECD demonstrate that better educated staff are generally better able to deliver effective early childhood education and care (p. 14).

Research suggests that employees value ECTs that can make clear connections between theory and practice (Boyd et al., 2020). Flinders University offers a unique space for pre-service teachers to do this through learning in their specially designed Early Childhood Teaching Space – [Pintya Kuu](#) (Creative Room). In this space, pre-service teachers have the opportunity to learn about early childhood theory and transfer this to their practical experiences by setting up learning opportunities and resources within Pintya Kuu. In addition, learning provocations are presented on a weekly basis in Pintya Kuu for pre-service teachers to observe as examples of practice. They have the opportunity to analyse these resources and consider the teaching theory that underpins them. Our pre-service teachers can then analyse these resources and consider the teaching theory that underpins them. For example, [looking at an arrangement of resources and seeing how it connects to Piaget's schema theory](#).

With high student satisfaction and graduate employment rates, Flinders University has a strong reputation for developing skilled and knowledgeable ECTs who are ready to make a valuable impact on young children's learning in South Australia.

State and National Frameworks Regulating Initial Teacher Education

1. Registration of Birth-5 Qualifications in South Australia

Universities are highly regulated entities at state and federal levels, yet there is inconsistency across the country with regard to registration of the teaching workforce in the Early Childhood space. In South Australia, there is a current supply of Early Childhood teachers with birth-5 teaching qualifications that cannot register to teach and subsequently work in SA due to the Teachers Registration Board of SA (TRBSA) only recognising Australian Institute of Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) approved qualifications for registration. South Australia currently does not recognise the role of the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) as the accrediting body for early childhood teaching qualifications. This means that graduates holding a birth-to-5 early childhood teaching degree cannot be registered as teachers in South Australia, even when they have registration in another state. We raise this issue as a matter of urgency in addressing the workforce shortage. To mitigate the workforce shortage, we need to establish birth-5 qualifications in (South Australian) universities now. **We recommend that there be national consistency for teacher registration with graduates of birth-5 qualifications able to register as a teacher.**

Research outlines that universities prefer preparing ECT graduates in birth-5 degrees than birth-8 qualifications (Boyd, 2020). AITSL sets requirements for all teaching degrees in Australia. Birth-8 qualifications must meet both AITSL and ACECQA requirements. The expectations set out by AITSL for school-based teaching degrees mean that it is not possible to include sufficient birth-5 content to fully prepare ECTs to teach in birth-5 setting. Birth-5 qualifications are also 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 to support the South Australian Royal Commission's 3-year-old preschool recommendation.

Immediate Response to Workforce Shortage

1. Teams of Early Childhood Teachers in Birth-5 Settings

The South Australian Royal Commission ECEC Interim Review reported a 268% increase in waiver applications from 2019-2022. This means that approximately 160 services are without a registered ECT at any one time (Government of South Australia, 2023). Whilst one of the main issues behind teacher retention in birth-5 settings is the lack of pay parity, another significant issue is the lack of collegial, professional support for ECTs, and the lack of opportunity to develop these relationships. In school settings, teachers collaborate to educate children across classes and year groups. When an ECT finds themselves as the only registered teacher in a birth-5 setting, there is little opportunity for them to develop the same collegial relationships that occur in school settings. This lack of professional and pedagogical support leads ECTs to seek employment elsewhere.

Registered teachers should not be working alone in birth-5 settings as the only registered teacher. To establish and maintain effective education for 3-year-olds, we recommend teams of registered teachers who 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. We acknowledge and value the work of Diploma and Certificate III qualified staff in long day care settings but recognise that ECTs also require professional and pedagogical support from other teachers in these settings. Registered teachers are more likely to maintain a career in the sector if they work in collegial and supportive environments. We advocate for a strategy that makes this a reality for registered teachers employed in ECEC settings.

2. Pay Parity for Early Childhood Teachers Working in Birth-5 Settings

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). The **pay scale between birth-5 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.

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. ECTs will consistently seek employment in the early years of school to gain a higher income. Concerns have been raised about the value of birth-8 qualifications across Australia, suggesting that Primary teachers can do this work in the early years of school and ECTs can teach in the prior-to-school years (Fenech et al., 2022). However, ECTs develop a deep understanding of children within 4-8 years and are well-prepared to support children transitioning into school. Primary trained teachers are not trained in understanding 4-year-old children and their differing learning needs, whereas Early Childhood trained teachers are. Their pedagogy, experience and practice are needed in the early years of school to understand and teach young children. Establishing pay parity in birth-5 would remove any concern around birth-8 qualifications and whether they are warranted. Whilst Flinders University supports affordable and accessible childcare for all Australians, this must not come at the expense of an appropriately paid and incentivised workforce.

We recommend a collective effort between State and Federal Governments to resolve this important issue and build a strong national Early Childhood workforce.

3. Raising the status of the profession

The shortfall of ECTs in the sector is also the result of teaching being viewed as a low status profession (Fenech et al., 2022).

The ACECQA (2021) national work-force strategy, Shaping our Future (SOF), focuses on growing and sustaining the Australian ECEC workforce across the next decade. The Strategy holds 6 focus areas, the first one being: Professional Recognition. Under this focus area, the strategy suggests:

- *Investigate options for improving workforce pay and conditions*
- *Implement early childhood teacher registration in every state and territory*
- *Enhance mentoring and induction support for new teachers*
- *Promote the importance of a career in children's education and care through a national communications campaign*
- *Agree and consistently use contemporary terminology to describe the children's education and care sector, and its workforce*

- *Develop options for a national registration system for educators who are not teachers (pp.40 - 44).*

We suggest that this document sets a firm foundation for raising the status of ECTs within the profession.

If the Productivity Commission can engage in political advocacy to raise the profile and status of ECTs, they will affirm ECTs' own professional identity and inspire hope for improved wages and professional status across the sector (Sumsion, 2004). This is a prime opportunity to raise the profile of Early Childhood Education within South Australia and within Australia.

4. Professional Experience Placements and Mentoring of Pre-service Teachers.

ECT graduates are better prepared for teaching young children if they engage in sufficient teacher education and professional experience opportunities within their degree (Boyd et al., 2020). In the Eastern States, there has been a policy focus prioritising increased supply of early childhood teacher graduates through accelerated programs. The accreditation of these programs has been made without evidence demonstrating the quality and graduate preparedness of its curriculum. These programs run high risk in jeopardising the effectiveness of ECTs and go against the research in this area. 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). Additionally, funding for ECT qualifications that is based on graduation rates can encourage institutions to push pre-service teachers through the system regardless of their success, graduating ECTs that are not adequately prepared for the profession. To avoid this, we caution against the recommendation for Early Childhood pre-service teachers to undertake the proposed fast-tracked study programs. As a provider of Initial Teacher Education (Early Childhood) we recommend careful research and evidenced effectiveness of shortened degree pathways before scoping implementation.

To meet accreditation requirements, all pre-service teachers need to engage in professional experience placements; 80 days for Undergraduate degrees, and 60 days for Master of Teaching degrees. At present, it is becoming increasingly difficult to secure professional experience placements for Early Childhood pre-service teachers. There are several reasons suggested by schools and sites as to why they will not accept pre-service teacher placements, including:

- Teacher fatigue post Covid-19.
- Teacher fatigue due to increased workload pressures.
- The South Australian Department for Education mid-year preschool intake – preschools view a pre-service teacher as extra work rather than an extra support person.
- No registered teacher on site (in long day care settings).
- Schools not supporting Master of Teaching students as they only complete 1 placement in school and 1 placement in a birth-5 setting. They feel that PSTs are not experienced enough to manage a school placement.

At Flinders University, we position Early Childhood pre-service teachers as competent professionals ready to translate learned skills into practice in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) settings. Our PSTs make valuable contributions to teaching young children, with guidance from the mentor teacher. In partnership with colleagues and children, they share the responsibility for teaching, offering support, resources, and teaching ideas to the mentor teacher through their planned experiences. These pre-service teacher teaching opportunities lighten the teacher's load. If we are to mitigate the workforce shortage in SA and Australia, universities need schools and ECEC settings to support professional experience placements for pre-service teachers. **We recommend the Productivity Commission investigate ways in which schools and sites are encouraged to support professional experience placements, recognising that it simultaneously supports their own professional learning and development and is essential for workforce supply.**

It also needs to be acknowledged there is a cost to all parties involved in placements. The funding higher education providers receive from the Australian Government to reimburse mentor teachers for their time supervising pre-service teachers does not accurately reflect the increased load these teachers undertake during this process.

For the University, this funding does not cover the cost of employing liaison staff, additional support for students (and the liaison staff) undertaking rural, regional or remote placements, nor does it reflect the increased costs of moderation of Teaching Performance Assessment (TPA) (to meet accreditation requirements).

Students bear the biggest cost of placements, primarily in the form of lost income. This can be particularly felt by mature age students upskilling from their current level of ECEC qualification or pursuing a career change. There needs to be a change in the approach to placements to increase the attractiveness of all teaching degrees. Flinders University would support more relaxed requirements around the time and intensity of placements to accommodate part-time or longer placements that provide greater ability for pre-service teachers to balance their study and work / family commitments.

ACECQA recognises that if a pre-service teacher is 'actively working towards' an ACECQA approved qualification (ECT) in a centre-based service, they may be counted towards qualification requirements and be considered an ECT for employment purposes. This means that pre-service teachers can work towards their teaching qualification and work as a preschool teacher in a birth-5 setting. We propose supporting pre-service teachers to carry out this work by creating supportive learning environments and qualifications that facilitate employment in the sector and the upskilling of educators at the same time. However, Education Ministers would need to continue to extend **Regulation 242 of the National Regulations** past the end of 2024 for this to be a reality.

The Productivity Commission could investigate opportunities for pre-service teachers to undertake paid employment and complete work-based professional experience at the same time. Many pre-service teachers sacrifice the ability to work to focus on studies and some individuals cannot afford to take time off work to study a teaching qualification. Innovative ways that support pre-service teachers to study whilst working would support workforce development and supply.

Flinders University would support the introduction of paid placements to assist both undergraduate and mid-career cohorts to increase the attractiveness of the teaching profession to a broader range of potential students. Any revised placement model needs to ensure support for all three groups (Placement provider, student and Higher Education Provider) is provided.

Workforce Pipeline

1. Professional Development in Birth-5 and Preschool Pedagogies

The Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration recognises the critical role quality early childhood education plays in the meeting of its vision for “a world class education system that encourages and supports every student to be the very best they can be, no matter where they live or what kind of learning challenges they may face” (Education Council, 2019, p. 3). It follows that the commitment made by all governments in this Declaration to “strengthening early childhood education” (p. 7) should include attention to supporting the excellence of the whole of the early childhood teacher workforce, not just teachers employed in schools. We therefore need to consider the needs and professional learning of all educators of young children, not just registered teachers and we need to value the work of Early Childhood teachers in birth-5 settings in the same way that we do teachers in school.

3-year-old children need and deserve specialist early childhood education that supports their learning and development. 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). A program for 3-year-olds needs to differentiate from existing 4-year-old kindergarten programs by focussing on the developmental needs of 3-year-olds in terms of their physical, social, and emotional needs, the types of play they engage in and the differing level of care they need at this age. 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. This approach requires preschool educators who are confident and knowledgeable to deliver a pre-school program that meets the needs of 3-year-olds.

Research suggests that teachers who have attended professional learning related to teacher-child relationships and emotional support tend to conduct more child-sensitive, emotionally supportive learning environments to meet children’s interests and needs (Siraj et al, 2022). The South Australian Royal Commission into ECEC Interim Review recognised that “Continuing professional development is a necessary component of enabling best practice and quality improvement” (Government of South Australia, 2023, p. 59). As a higher education institution, we support the professional development of ECTs in the sector and are open to developing and offering professional learning opportunities that support the roll-out of 3-year-old preschool programs across South Australia. Should birth-5 graduates be able to register to teach in SA, they will need specialist support in meeting their professional learning needs required to maintain teacher registration. Specialised birth-5 professional development programs are lacking in South Australia due to a lack of State Government support of early childhood teachers in the long day care and non-government preschool sector (Government of South Australia, 2023). Flinders University is willing and ready to offer professional learning and upskill opportunities for ECTs. With various campuses located in rural locations across South Australia and Northern Territory, Flinders University can offer the unique opportunity to deliver professional learning in rural, regional and remote settings to ensure consistency and equality across early childhood education settings. Furthermore, the Flinders University Early Childhood academics are award winners in delivering online teaching and learning, meaning that we are well positioned to offer online professional learning to teachers and educators working in rural, regional and remote settings. Offering effective, wide-ranging professional development of ECTs is likely to support collegiality and staff retention, subsequently reducing staff turnover.

2. Educational Leadership in Birth-5 settings

The South Australian Royal Commission Interim Review reported that “the preschool workforce is much more highly qualified than the long day care workforce” (Government of South Australia, 2023, p.33). ECTs working in long day care settings need further opportunities for professional learning on a regular basis. In addition, giving teachers the freedom to take on leadership responsibilities has a positive impact on their motivation and self-esteem, which raises teacher retention and improves the quality of teaching (Siraj et al., 2022; Muijs & Harris, 2003). Furthermore, Snell and Swanson (2000) suggest that leadership emerges when educators attain strong pedagogical and content knowledge, collaborative skills and the ability to influence their colleagues. Flinders University welcomes the opportunity to upskill ECTs in long day care settings by offering professional learning and post graduate qualifications in leadership.

Flinders University offers an Early Childhood Minor within the Master of Leadership in Education post graduate degree. Flinders University is the only institution in South Australia offering a Leadership Masters degree that includes Early Childhood education. This qualification offers the learner the opportunity to select study options to tailor their degree towards their learning needs and areas of interest. The Master of Leadership in Education also offers the opportunity to complete coursework and dissertation components that can lead to PhD entry. In addition, Flinders University offers a range of graduate certificates and Masters' programs to upskill across areas of inclusive and specialised education, research, mental health and wellbeing, as examples. With the current offerings in post graduate leadership, Flinders University is well-positioned to offer professional development and upskilling qualifications to ECTs looking to develop their leadership capabilities as soon as possible.

Flinders University would recommend upskilling the workforce to further research in the Early Childhood Education space, and to generate a better appreciation of the role and value that research plays in understanding how young children learn and behave from an educational context.

3. Upskilling Educators as Early Childhood Teachers

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.

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.

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.

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