



Charles Sturt  
University

# Development of a National Early Years Strategy – Response to discussion paper

28 April 2023

Office of the Vice-Chancellor  
Charles Sturt University



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Professor Sharon Goldfield  
Chair, Early Years Strategy Advisory Panel  
Department of Social Services  
GPO Box 9820  
Canberra ACT 2601

Dear Professor Goldfield

**Teacher Education Expert Panel discussion paper**

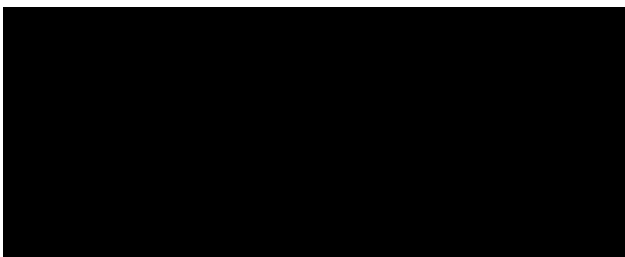
Charles Sturt University welcomes this opportunity to provide feedback on the discussion paper on the proposed National Early Years Strategy. We are contributing to this consultation as Australia's largest regional university and an essential provider of skilled graduates for all stages of the education system, including Early Childhood Education.

Charles Sturt University offers undergraduate and postgraduate programs in Birth to Five, K-12, Early Childhood, Primary and Secondary Education. Every year around 1,000 students complete undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in Education at Charles Sturt University. During their studies more than 80 per cent of our Education students undertake placements in rural, regional and remote schools and childcare centres. Around 70 per cent of the University's education graduates go on to careers in education and training, with about half taking up positions in regional and remote areas – though for students who come from regional and remote backgrounds themselves, this proportion increases to more than 85 per cent.

The post-graduate employment rate for our Early Childhood Education students is more than 90 per cent, with many of our graduates going on to careers with the University's industry partners in regional NSW and Victoria, providing long day care and family day care, or working in community pre-schools and primary schools.

The University's response to the discussion paper has been prepared by a team of staff from Charles Sturt University's Faculty of Arts and Education. It reflects their extensive experience in teaching and research in Early Childhood Education, and offers various recommendations for reportable targets on ECE participation for children in rural, regional, and remote areas; an interdisciplinary approach to ECE teaching and delivery; measures to boost the ECE workforce including a sustainable pipeline of students; and an evidence-based approach to ECE policy and programs that draws on the expertise of the nation's early childhood educators and researchers. We would be more than happy to provide the Panel with more information on relevant projects at Charles Sturt University or any of the other ideas raised in this submission.

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this important work.





## Response to National Early Years Strategy discussion paper

### About Charles Sturt University

Charles Sturt is Australia's largest regional university, with more than 36,000 students and approximately 2,000 full time equivalent staff. We have campuses based in some of New South Wales' most vibrant regional communities: Albury-Wodonga, Bathurst, Dubbo, Goulburn, Orange, Port Macquarie and Wagga Wagga. The University supports and hosts a range of social, cultural and sporting activities, including school events and exams, and like our colleagues in other regional universities we played a critical role in helping local communities deal with the challenges of bushfires, floods and the pandemic.

Established in 1989 following the Dawkins reforms but tracing its roots back over more than a century, Charles Sturt has a long and proud history in providing access to higher education for students who might otherwise miss out on the opportunities it provides. The University Strategy 2030 continues this tradition with clear goals for students, research, and the wider community.

We are particularly proud of our track record in boosting higher education participation and attainment for those living in rural, regional and remote areas, for those from disadvantaged backgrounds, and for First Nations peoples. Every year at least 45 per cent of Charles Sturt's students are the first in their family to go to university. Among our domestic enrolments, around 16 per cent come from low SES backgrounds, and almost four per cent are from First Nations backgrounds.

Charles Sturt consistently ranks as Australia's top university for full-time graduate employment according to the Graduate Outcomes Survey, with 84.7 per cent of 2020 graduates in full-time employment four months after graduation – well above the sector average of 68.9 per cent. The University also ranks in the top three for medium-term graduate employment.

More than 75 per cent of Charles Sturt's graduates go on to work in regional areas, placing the University at the centre of efforts to address regional workforce shortages in a wide range of industries, including health and allied health, aged care, engineering, and education.

Charles Sturt University offers a full range of education courses for early childhood education, K-12 and specialist teachers. In 2023 we have more than 1600 students enrolled on the Bachelor of Education (Birth to Five Years) degree. Most go on to work in careers in Early Childhood Education, with a post-graduation full-time employment rate of 91.5 per cent in 2021, underscoring the University's significant contribution to the early childhood workforce in regional NSW and Victoria.

Enrolments have increased steadily over the past few years. The continued high demand for the course is testament to the relevance and quality of the course content and the positive reputation the course has in the ECE sector. Relationships with regional providers extend beyond Workplace Learning placements and involve a range of ECE services in regional areas of NSW and Victoria including long day care; community preschools; Family Day Care; and early primary through an Early Years Collaborative Network that involves communities in ECE pedagogy and teaching.



## CSU alignment with the aims of the Early Years Strategy

The Strategy will create an enduring vision for Australia's children and their families which should include regional, rural and remote Australians. As a road map to guide early years' policies and programs across the Commonwealth for the next decade, Australia's vision for children and families in the early years should be relevant and effective for families and communities in rural, regional and remote areas as well as metropolitan centres.

Charles Sturt University is a leading provider of regional, rural and remote early years initial teacher education through its delivery of a Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood and Primary) that supports both preservice teachers and early childhood education (ECE) settings in remote areas of Australia that would otherwise have limited early years professional experience and development. The University provides further opportunities to support regional, rural and remote initial teacher education and ECE workforce by having an online degree Bachelor of Education (Birth-5 years) with, as noted above, 1,600 students currently enrolled.

In addition to aligning with the aims of the Strategy to meet the diverse needs of a range of geographically located Australian children and families, Charles Sturt's past and current research excellence in the earliest years of ECE supports a focus on breaking down silos in the provision of quality early years experiences to Australia's youngest children. Significant Australian Research Council (ARC) funded research projects at the University focusing on ECE have included:

- leading the consortium to develop the first [Early Years Learning Framework for Australia](#),
- investigating [infants' lives in ECE](#),
- examining [exemplary educator practices](#),
- investigating [maths education for children aged birth to 3 years](#),
- developing [resources to stimulate enhanced practice](#) with children aged under 3 years old,
- Identifying enacted and shared practices between young children, their families [and educators in digital society](#), and
- Australian approaches to [early years curriculum on transition to school](#).

We agree that as a framework for action and reform the Strategy keeps the youngest children in ECE and their families at front of mind.

Charles Sturt University engages in significant external partnerships with interdisciplinary professionals and local, state and national ECE providers, governments and community groups to achieve beneficial outcomes for children. The University's work on the 'Art of Integration' (Wong & Press 2012) can support the intention of the Strategy to create an integrated approach to the early years that reduces program and funding silos across Commonwealth departments and better integrating and coordinating functions.

We wholeheartedly support increasing accountability for the wellbeing, education, health (including mental health), safety and development of Australia's children.

## Our approach

A report on children's wellbeing in Australia (UNICEF, 2023) aims to describe how Australian children are faring across all aspects of wellbeing. The report provides an insight into how Australian children experience



wellbeing in comparison with other countries included in the OECD and this report provides some guidance on focus areas for an Early Years Strategy.

Where young children are concerned Australia is doing well in some areas. More than four in every five children attend preschool. 91 per cent of children are fully immunised at age 2. Nonetheless there is still a need for urgent action in some domains. For example, one in six children live below the national poverty line and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children under 18 years are seven times more likely to be in out of home care than the population average.

The authors of this submission are professional early years researchers and teachers with collective expertise in infant development and pedagogy, ECE leadership, transition to school, who were each supervised and guided in their early career research by some of Charles Sturt University's esteemed education Professors. The UNICEF report (2023) and our own professional ECE teaching, leadership, research and academic expertise has informed our responses to the questions posed and the need to highlight and address some significant challenges to achieving the Early Years Strategy via a focus on:

- children in rural, regional, and remote contexts,
- interdisciplinary early years practice and integrated services,
- early childhood education and workforce,
- early years professional qualifications and preparation,
- inclusion of and for all,
- early years evidence, agendas, and on-going evaluation
- policy co-ordination and research

Our response foci are aligned with the discussion paper questions as indicated below.

### **A focus on rural, regional, and remote areas (Question 2)**

*The provision of quality ECE and allied health services to children and families in rural and remote regions is compromised.*

The most recent Report on Government Services (2022) notes that the quality of ECE services is lower in regional, rural, and remote locations compared to metropolitan areas. There are many barriers to ECE access in regional, rural, and remote communities including cost, a lack of availability and choice in providers within a reasonable distance, lack of transport, staffing issues (including the lack of trained Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff), and ongoing concerns about quality.

There are also significant concerns with the recruitment and retention of education and allied health staff in regional, rural and remote communities, and with the cultural competency of staff working in Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander communities.

The challenges of remoteness cannot be ameliorated by services delivered directly to towns or virtually. Mobile services have high transport costs and require greater flexibility and surety in their funding and very few families access recognised early childhood programs in their homes through distance education.



### **Recommendations:**

A vision that considers all of Australia and all Australians by including regional, rural and remote children and families in explicit ways that demonstrate acknowledgement and value for the unique demographic challenges and opportunities regional areas afford.

Specifically, the government can take into account current rural, regional and remote participation/attainment rates and levels of ECE quality and have stepped targets to meet national targets and consider annual reporting to Parliament through the Regional Education Commissioner.

Finally, the government can specifically target First Nations staff to build capacity in regional, rural and remote areas that break down cultural silos.

### **A focus on interdisciplinary practice (Question 3)**

*Creating an integrated approach to the early years reduces practice silos.*

Outcomes that address a holistic, place-based and child-centred focus represent the mix of outcomes that best suit an integrated and inclusive Early Years Strategy. This means outcomes for children, professionals who work to optimise their wellbeing learning and development in a range of professions, and the families who are children's first teachers (AGDE, 2022) and create the environments in which children (and they) can thrive.

To support children we must support families. According to Wong and Press (2012) the most effective way to support families facing multiple challenges is for professionals from diverse disciplines to work collaboratively and consistently to provide access to the range of services and supports families may need. Successful integration, however, requires thoughtful and targeted action at multiple levels, from legislation, through governance, to front line service delivery (Press, Sumsion & Wong, 2010; Whalley 2006). The potential for challenges when previously siloed policies, professional knowledge, and resulting practices come together to agree on a shared \*direction for, and with, children and families can be difficult to overcome as pre-conceived ideas/assumptions about 'other' professionals can impact on effective professional relationships.

### **Recommendations:**

Focusing on interdisciplinary practices in the early years can produce excellent strategies to break down silos at all levels, including bipartisan policy and funding. While the outcomes proposed in the discussion paper (p.12) are important examples of child related outcomes, to promote children doing well in life the government must also consider outcomes for the range of professionals who are wrapped in a web of integrated services around the child. The Strategy could thus include outcomes that support a range of early years professionals to overcome the barriers to interdisciplinary work. This could be related to professional training and development (see below re *Question 5*) or the way services are separately funded by different levels and areas of government.

### **Continued focus on ECE (Question 4)**

*ECE plays a key role in children's well-being now and into the future.*

High-quality ECE programs have a formidable impact on children's academic, emotional, and social outcomes and life trajectories and therefore play a role in the development of civil and economically productive societies.





In 2019 almost one million children, from birth to school age, accessed early childhood education (ECE) within an array of long day care and pre-school settings within Australia (Australian Education and Care Quality Authority, 2019). The quality of early childhood education contributes to children's learning and developmental outcomes (McCoy et al., 2017).

The quality of ECE settings in Australia is measured through an evidence-informed system of rating and assessment that focuses on seven areas comprising: educational program and practice, children's health and safety, the physical environment, staffing arrangements, relationships with children, collaborative partnerships with families and communities, and leadership and governance (Australian Education and Care Quality Authority, 2019).

### **Recommendations:**

To ensure the quality of early childhood education, the integrity of the National Quality Framework and the accreditation system must be sustained. While moves to the current quality assurance and accreditation system have been welcome, evaluation of the efficacy and relevance of critical elements of the Framework, such as child staff ratios and workforce qualifications in relation to increasing participation rates of younger children in ECE, require significant attention from the sector and government.

### **A focus on ECE workforce (Question 5)**

*Early childhood education promotes children's well-being-but we have a workforce shortage.*

The National Early Years Workforce Strategy (2012-16) (Standing Council of School Education and Early Childhood [SCSEEC], 2012) laid out a strategy for the approximately 118,000 educators and staff of ECE. This response to widespread sector concerns that workforce preparation was inadequate was rooted in a longstanding problem of educator shortages.

In 2011 the Productivity Commission estimated that an existing shortfall of 16,000 educators would accelerate due to the growing demand for ECEC. In 2023, the predicted workforce shortages have been exceeded, with notable workforce challenges amplified through the COVID-19 pandemic (McFarland et al., 2022; Thorpe et al., 2020, 2023) and associated international economic.

It is estimated that 37,000 additional educators (includes 7,000 early childhood teachers) are needed by 2024 (ACECQA, 2023). Australia continues to be unprepared for the shortage. A national strategy, Shaping Our Future (ACECQA, 2021), was released in 2021 to address attraction, retention and quality of educators. The time frames of the strategy may not adequately address the shortages and qualification requirements.

### **Recommendations:**

- Fast track strategies within Shaping Our Future, particularly those strategies addressing pay and conditions. Reduce HECS payments for ECT degrees.
- Support Universities with funding to attract and retain students and to mentor ECTs in their early years of teaching.
- Provide professional development to sustain the integrity of qualifications post completion.

### **A focus on early years professional qualifications and preparation (Question 5)**

*"Our future teachers: Duty bearers, activists and advocates" (Mitchell, 2022, p.41).*



We agree a siloed approach risks missing opportunities to work collaboratively and improve outcomes for children, and this includes initial teacher and interdisciplinary early years professional preparation. Educator and teacher quality for children of all ages in all places can impact positive outcomes for children in the present and in the future (AGDE, 2022) by developing the critical and collaborative skills needed to remove barriers and silos of knowledge and integrated professional practice.

Quality early years professionals advocate for social justice and act to uphold the rights of all children to quality early years experiences. This contributes to shifts in societies' attitude towards, and valuing of, the early years which is arguably at the heart of breaking down siloed practices. These efforts must start with supporting universities to attract and retain quality ongoing academic staff who incorporate their research expertise, experience and passion into their discipline related teaching to inspire students (Andersen et.al., 2020) and in turn contribute to growing contemporary and skilled interdisciplinary professionals.

### **Recommendations:**

Support initial teacher education providers to train, retain, and support students by funding innovative projects that attract and retain students in education degrees and create opportunities to conduct interdisciplinary professional early years placements and workplace learning initiatives where students from a range of disciplines e.g. ECE, speech pathology, occupational therapy, nursing etc. complete early years professional experiences together to break down silos at their professional roots.

### **A focus on inclusion of and for all (Question 7)**

*Inclusion to guide policy and implementation under the strategy.*

Authentic inclusion means empowering and including all people, who have rights to experience the sense of wellbeing, security and joy that comes from belonging to a rich and diverse community, as equitable and contributing citizens (Salamon & Farrell, 2016). Inclusion of diverse children and families as stated in the Strategy (p.12) via culture and background is one thing, but the principle of inclusion is more than that.

Within mainstream society and ECE there are exclusions to equitable access to quality early years experiences. Children aged 0-2 years, for example, are classically the least valued and resourced in ECE with university qualified teachers considered to be 'wasted down there' in 0-2 ECE spaces (McDowall Clark & Baylis, 2012). With the new stated focus on universal preschool this divide is likely to increase. Similarly, it could be argued at the other end of the ECE spectrum when five-year-old children leave early years learning settings, the culture shock to children and families of different philosophies, partnerships, and subsequent practices in primary school settings, sets many on less-than-optimal trajectories.

As cited by Dockett and Perry (2014, pp.13) "transition from home to school, or from a prior-to-school setting to school, is often characterised by discontinuity across the areas of relationships, pedagogy, curriculum, resources and support (Dockett & Perry, 2007; Podmore, Sauvaio, & Mapa, 2001; Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000, as cited by Dockett & Perry, 2014)".

### **Recommendations**

To meet the stated focus in the Strategy on the first 1000 days (0-2 years), research is needed to identify the qualifications and experience of those working with children aged 0-2 years. Value and resources must also be afforded to higher qualifications in 0-2 ECE spaces rather than under the roof standards (ACECQA, 2023b) where qualified early childhood teachers are usually placed in preschool aged rooms.

Additionally, the government could better support initiatives for connecting professionals in a tangible way during the transition to school process, rather than disconnected ways i.e. Transition to School statement.





This will break down silos and help translate a more inclusive principle of inclusion into policy and implementation under the strategy.

### **A focus on early years evidence, agendas, and on-going evaluation (Question 8)**

*Breaking down funding and program silos and acknowledging what has been done is a great start.*

There are gaps in existing frameworks and the research evidence that could be considered for the development of the Strategy. Many of the frameworks that guide policy and practice for the early years are based on siloed knowledge.

The developmental research and theories many of the public health models and even ECE resources are founded on, are arguably outdated, westernised (Ryan & Grieshaber, 2005; Fleer, 2020) and do not reflect the contemporary Australian communities the Strategy aims to support. Critical attention must be given to the knowledge being drawn on so that the intentions of respect, diversity and inclusion of the Early Years Strategy are realised. This is important given drawing on predominantly westernised knowledge is at direct odds with the aim of the Strategy to support First Nations peoples, and past and ongoing efforts for 'closing the gap' (Commonwealth of Australia, 2020). There have been many government inquiries, strategies, recommendations and policies that could act as evidence to support implementation of an Early Years Strategy.

#### **Recommendations:**

If the collective purpose of the evidence used is to show important elements and interconnections of early childhood development, the government must critically draw on sound and relevant frameworks and contemporary developmental knowledge.

Additionally, all past and present inquiries should be interrogated to audit government agendas, goals and targets that have already been set, identify what works and what doesn't, and evaluate the efficacy of the implementation strategies to support plans for their execution.



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