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GPO Box 2100
Adelaide SA 5001

P: +61 8 8201 2521
cepsw.vped@flinders.edu.au
www.flinders.edu.au

Hon Amanda Rishworth MP & Hon Dr Anne Ally MP
Minister for Social Services & Minister for Early Childhood Education
Early Years Strategy
GPO Box 9820
Department of Social Services
CANBERRA ACT 2601

Dear Ministers

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission on the Early Years Strategy.

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 Panel 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.

Further, Flinders University is the sole tertiary institution in South Australia specialising in inclusive education for both initial and continuing professional teacher education.

Flinders University has strong research expertise across a range of priority areas including mental health and wellbeing focusing on children and adolescents, inclusive and special education, child development and learning/cognition.

We are well placed to build on this research to support the development of an evidence base for the Strategy as well as training and upskilling for the current teaching workforce in areas of government priority.

We look forward to welcoming you to Flinders University soon.

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Flinders University is aware that a joint submission has been provided by the Australian Early Childhood Teacher Education Network to which Flinders University has contributed, however we highlight that this submission contains the sole views of Flinders University.

Flinders University welcomes the opportunity to contribute to Australian Government's Early Years Strategy. Flinders University has expertise in the development and delivery of Early Childhood Education, 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 to establish a clear strategy for Australia's children and their families and the importance of creating an integrated approach across all areas of governance in this space. However, we are also aware of the many current reviews (as outlined in Attachment A of the discussion paper) 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 all of these reviews as well as 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.

1. Do you have any comments on the proposed structure of the Strategy?

Contemporary Early Childhood Education and Care pedagogies adopt a cyclical process of teaching, learning and reflection. The proposed structure of the Strategy is very linear and does not clearly show the interconnections between the evidence and principles with the outcomes and priorities. Flinders University suggests framing the Strategy in a cyclical or concentric design to better align with ECE pedagogies.

2. What vision should our nation have for Australia's youngest children?

Presently, there are numerous documents, policies and strategies available concerning children in their early years. This Strategy needs to bring together all of these documents to create a clear vision that can be adopted and applied in Early Childhood Education and Care settings across all States and Territories, removing the siloed approach that currently exists.

We recommend the vision considers children's individual needs in relation to play, learning and development and, where applicable, 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). With specific regard to pre-school education settings, all 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. 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 initial teacher education and professional development for early childhood teachers focus on the importance of teaching children through play, being responsive to children's needs and understanding that children learn best through play-based learning.

We feel that the Early Years Strategy should not be overwhelming but be reflective, and delineate the short, medium and long term goals. The Strategy should reflect the goals of the Mparntwe Education Declaration. Children as active participants in their own development and learning and as such, the role of their voice and perspectives in strategy design should be inclusive and transparent. Effective transitions, that are community responsive and child-centric should be a focus. Furthermore, the importance of a children's security in early learning settings hinges on establishing a stable, qualified and equitably remunerated workforce. This needs to be at the forefront of the strategy.

3. What mix of outcomes are the most important to include in the Strategy?

The provision of early education 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. There needs to be a **consistent level of meaningful education and care pedagogy** for all early childhood 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 preschool education settings.

We recommend the Strategy give careful consideration to:

- What the strategy hopes to achieve
- Equity of access and inclusion
- Coordinated efforts to support children and families at the point of need (especially in relation to children and families affected by trauma)
- Workforce issues – and how the EAP see the strategy being implemented within the current workforce shortage.
- Focus on wellbeing and trauma informed practice
- Bringing 'care' to the forefront of early learning. Clarify the socio-emotional nature of care as a critical support for effective learning.

4. What specific areas/policy priorities should be included in the Strategy and why?

Flinders University recommends ensuring clear connections from early childhood care settings (birth-5) to early childhood education settings (5-8 years) exist with the alignment of the commencement of the Australian Curriculum alongside the use of the Early Years Learning Framework for children up to 8 years old.

We also recommend that preschool should NOT be working to prepare a child for school. We are concerned of the potential for a push down of the Australian Curriculum into the preschool

environment. 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.

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.

The Early years Strategy must be grounded in a view of Australian First Nations peoples as strong, capable and competent, rather than in terms of 'gap' and disadvantage. Early education that resists normative developmental milestones and cultural stereotypes allows indigenous children to freely grow and develop. Similarly, non-aboriginal children are successful when their education is contextualised with indigenous perspectives (Staines & Scarlet, 2018). We recommend a focus on pedagogies that support and include the diversity of all children. Recognising that indigenous play and pedagogies meets the needs of all learners, allowing them to thrive in their early years.

5. What could the Commonwealth do to improve outcomes for children—particularly those who are born or raised in more vulnerable and/or disadvantaged circumstances?

Flinders University sees a need for greater awareness and education for parents in children's developmental needs and the importance of learning through play. Supported and informed parents are critical to the enhanced early childhood experiences and assist with stronger relationships with their children (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine).

Flinders University agrees that Early Childhood Education and Care should be equitable, affordable, accessible and of high quality. We see this as fundamental to all education – from the early years all the way through to secondary schooling.

We support the principle of accessibility and recommend that all children have the opportunity to regularly attend an education setting that meets their individual learning needs, whilst ensuring we do not move to a focus on prescribed content, teaching and learning. Universal access 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. Consistent and viable funding models are required to ensure affordability and accessibility for the children and families that need it most across all areas of Australia.

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.

6. What areas do you think the Commonwealth could focus on to improve coordination and collaboration in developing policies for children and families?

Flinders University see the risks of differing policies across jurisdictions not aligning or supporting one another. A key risk being inconsistency in the quality and amount of care being received by our

children across the nation as discussed above. A further risk is the development and maintenance of our teaching workforce in Early Childhood settings.

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 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 that have been raised in other forums, including the National Teacher Workforce Action Plan and the South Australian Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care, among others. 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. Establishing pay parity in Birth-5 would reduce the number of graduates preferring roles in Primary Schools over Early Childhood education settings.

7. What principles should be included in the Strategy?

It is essential that the Early Years Strategy focuses on the child and their learning, not the benefits of an Early Years Strategy for the Australian economy. Flinders University values the rights of the child and suggests a strategy that focuses on:

- Child voice and a sense of agency. Recognising the United Nations Conventions of the Rights of the Child and the universally agreed upon statements that view the child as competent and capable protagonists of their own learning. Play-based learning as essential for young children's learning and development. Understanding that children learn best through play, supported by knowledgeable and experienced educators.
- A sector of teachers and educators that work in professional groups to support and extend young children's learning. Regularly developing and reflecting on their practice.
- Equal pay for Early Childhood teachers across Birth-5 settings and the early years of school.
- Acknowledgement of parents and families as a child's first educators. Acknowledging their knowledge and competencies and what they bring to young children's learning.
- Listen to First Nations people as expert informants for ALL children, not just First Nations children.
- Aboriginal culture that is acknowledged and embedded throughout Early Childhood settings and curriculum.
- Acknowledgement of the need to support the whole child. Recognising the importance of developing a strong sense of self in the early years to support later positive mental health. Knowing that curriculum runs alongside social and emotional learning and, if we want to develop well-rounded adults, we need a well-rounded approach to early education.

8. Are there gaps in existing frameworks or other research or evidence that need to be considered for the development of the Strategy?

When discussing education and care for young children, there is a risk that too much attention is paid to the outcomes for parents, families and the economy. When the focus shifts to look at economic benefits we lose sight of the child and the benefits for their learning. Part of the Strategy (Section 2) focusses on older research which has implications that children may be commodified through 'investment'. A more compelling argument, based on contemporary literature, that highlights the importance of health, secure relationships and emotional wellbeing for children as ideal preparation for early learning and school commencement would be more highly regarded as justification for why we need the Strategy.

Flinders University recognises the importance of having a broad range of representation in the development of the Strategy however we are concerned that the Expert Advisory Panel does not include any Early Childhood academics, researchers or teachers currently working in ECEC settings. Initial Teacher Education (Early Childhood) does not have clear representation on the panel. This has significant implications for the teacher workforce shortage that we are currently experiencing. There is a need to ensure that the Early Years Strategy is research informed and aligns with Initial Teacher Education programs which support the development and supply of Early Childhood teachers in Australia.

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