

# Review of the Universal Access National Partnership Discussion Paper

*Submission by the Early Childhood Studies Team, Flinders University, South Australia*

The Early Childhood team within the College of Education, Psychology and Social Work at Flinders University seek to make a submission to the *Review of the Universal Access National Partnership Discussion Paper*. The university's early childhood programmes in Initial Teacher Education and Continuing Professional Education are positioned with children, parents and families as central to our work. Acknowledging the classed and gendered histories of the discipline, our aim is to work collaboratively with our teaching and learning communities to explore critical pedagogies with an agentive, democratic-participation focus.

**QUESTION 1: To what extent have the UANP policy objectives, outcomes and outputs been achieved?**  
*The objective of the UANP is to “maintain universal access to, and improve participation in, affordable, quality early childhood education programs for all children”. Specifically, the purpose is to ensure that every child in Australia has access to a minimum of 600 hours per year of preschool delivered by a qualified early childhood teacher in the year before full-time school, in a way that meets the needs of families and while ensuring that cost is not a barrier. We are interested in your views about whether and how this objective has been met.*

The provision of the Universal Access National Partnership (UANP) is a sound investment in early childhood and acknowledges the importance of the early years and the widely understood benefits of quality early childhood education. Participating in high-quality early childhood education benefits young children's early development, school progress and their participation in the job market and society in the long-term (OECD, 2017) What makes this possible aside from strong financial investment, are higher staff-to-child ratios, gender diversity in the workforce and formal preschool teacher training; longitudinal studies associate these quality markers with significant improvements in child outcomes over time (Bauchmüller, Gørtz, & Rasmussen, 2014) ensure the best delivery of universal preschool programmes to young children across Australia, we recommend that you consider the following key issues:

## **Access does not equate to participation**

Access and enrolment do not equate to attendance and attendance must be the measure which we look to, to, to ensure that outcomes for children are improved, particularly those where entrenched disadvantage is present (Vinson, 2007; Wight, 2015). The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS,2019) explain that of the data collected in *The National Early Childhood Education and Care Collection*, 'The majority of children (95%) enrolled in a preschool program were enrolled for 15 hours or more per week. Of those enrolled 15 hours or more, 43% were enrolled in a preschool and 48% were enrolled in a CBDC (Centre Based Day Care) with the remaining 9% enrolled in both service types.' This dataset provides a useful snapshot on the day of collection across jurisdictions of children who are enrolled and in attendance on the day of collection. What it does not inform us about is patterns of attendance and participation. Enrolment is distinctly different from attendance and until we have measure which

reflects the complexity of children's access and experience of preschool, it will be difficult to gain a true sense of how effectively the objectives of the UANP have been addressed.

### **National Quality Standard as a compliance tool**

We argue that the National Quality Standard (NQS) is a compliance tool that measures minimum standards of service delivery; it is a tool used to mitigate risk and standardize practice, under the guise of transparency and quality assurance (Jovanovic & Fane, 2016). The NQS is not set up to collect data on the richness of EC programmes, nor measure the differences in children's experience in the year before school. ACECQA (2018) explains that, 'The NQS sets a national benchmark for the quality of education and care services and includes seven quality areas that are important to outcomes for children (p. 11).' It does not measure the political, social and intellectual dimensions of this work and its impact on young children's learning and development.

### **Inflexibility of hours when UANP is offered**

Access to preschool for many working families is understood to be challenging (Baxter, Hand, & Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2013). Universal Access delivery is often inflexible and where families are dependent on a parent or carer collecting children at the end of the day which may finish as early as 3 pm. Many families need to access the UANP in long day care settings due to inflexibility in hours and then pay additionally for care before and after the Universal Access.

### **Significant differences in the quality and delivery of UANP**

There are considerable differences in how Universal Access is delivered and the facilities to enable this to occur, particularly in long day care. We suggest a review into how the hours of the UANP are enacted by a range of rural, remote and provider type to explore differences in children's experiences of the 15 hour provision before they commence school.

### **Issues in the Early Childhood workforce impact children's experience and quality of UANP**

Quality preschool education must be delivered by early childhood teachers who are highly qualified, registered teachers, who are well-remunerated and supported in their work. Their retention enables them to offer programmes tailored to the needs of local contexts and the young children and families who attend them. A two-tiered system of teaching exists in Australia, however, with early childhood teachers having pay and condition parity with school teachers in some states with the status of teacher registration, whilst others are paid close to minimum wage in sectors like long day childcare (Clark et al., 2019). There is an urgent need to understand the barriers and enablers that support the work of the early childhood workforce – these will fundamentally affect child outcomes from preschool programme delivery nationally (Andrew, 2015; Irvine, Thorpe, McDonald, Lunn, & Brassolotto, 2016; Jovanovic, 2013; McDonald, Thorpe, & Irvine, 2018).

**QUESTION 2: What should the UANP target and measure, and how should data be collected and used?**

*The UANP's performance indicators, benchmarks and targets focus effort on maintaining universal access to and improving participation in affordable, quality preschool, particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and children experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage. We are*

*interested in your views about the focus of the UANP funding agreement and whether performance or success is being tracked and measured in the right way.*

### **Attendance far more revealing than enrolment data**

Whilst enrolment is one measure of the UANP, to understand children's access to UANP, attendance data must be pivotal in any such conversation. Young children are dependent on their parents/carers in accessing and attending preschool. Enrolment data as reported by the ABS (2019, Children – Preschool enrolments – para 1) of children in Australia in 2018, 'indicates 86% of children aged 4 and 21% of children aged 5 were enrolled in preschool programs.' We understand that there are children who are not enrolled; but also that there are many children who are enrolled and may not attend for reasons beyond their control (Wight, 2015). This may include issues associated with lack of transport, competing demands of English language classes, work commitments, possibly a lack of value placed on preschool and other factors. Many of these children may not be represented in the data.

### **The use of the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) can be problematic in decision-making**

When looking to the AEDC data for information about individual communities, there are issues worthy of consideration. The dataset shows in places a complete plateau where there are no fluctuations (Department of Education and Training, 2018). The vulnerabilities in these communities are not readily 'unpacked', and require further investigation (Chittleborough, Searle, Smithers, Brinkman, & Lynch, 2016). While the AEDC give us a snapshot on what is going on it has not helped teachers, health providers and policymakers to get in 'on the ground' and understand these individual communities. This is particularly the case in regional and remote Australia as decisions made in Australia's capital cities and metropolitan areas are routinely translated into these contexts who are seen in deficit (Halsey, 2018). We urgently need to consider how the voices of teachers and families of young children can be captured and responded to, to ensure that supports that are put in place are intentional, promote high expectations for children and community and respectfully discuss issues impacting on the experience of young children in remote Australia.

### Question 3

**Are the current UANP arrangements efficient and effective and how could the efficiency, effectiveness and equity of UANP funding be improved?**

*Notwithstanding progress to date under the UANP, there may be opportunities to improve the impact of this national funding for preschool in the year before full-time school, particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, children in regional and remote areas, and children experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage. We are interested in your views on the use of UANP funding, based on your own experience and knowledge of the system either within your local community or more broadly. We also welcome your perspectives on the appropriateness of a performance tied funding framework.*

Whilst the Early Childhood team understand the purpose of the UANP is to look at the national provision, the differences in delivery and children's experience of their entitlement of Universal Access makes this almost impossible. Inconsistencies between providers, capacity to staff programs with

qualified Early Childhood teachers and factors related to remoteness, community diversity and the complexity of the sector mean that these very issues need to be tabled and accounted for.

Within the South Australian context, we see workforce issues as having a significant impact on the realisation of quality early childhood education and care through the Universal Access National Partnership. Current workforce issues appear, in part, to be driven by legislated changes evidenced by the Australian Children's Education and Care Authority (ACECQA) requirement of a second Early Childhood Teacher from January 2020 in all early childhood sites with more than 60 children. For a comprehensive overview of the numbers see O'Connell's comprehensive piece in [The Conversation from July 2019](#).

In the South Australian context, we see the rapid expansion of for-profit providers impacting on the landscape of early childhood. Anecdotally we see through our early childhood partners, the desperate lack of Early Childhood Teachers to meet even the requirement of one ECT in each site. We have been told of the difficulties in long day care settings of not only recruiting staff, but also retaining them. This is confirmed through some of our pre-service teachers taking up positions as Early Childhood Teachers at only 50% of the way through their degrees under the provision of Actively Working Towards a Qualification (ACECQA, 2019 - Qualifications - Qualifications requirements - Actively working towards a qualification). Anecdotally we have also heard of sites limiting the number of children enrolled to attend as they are unable to recruit and retain a quality Early Childhood Teacher. This also has an impact on availability of places for children and families.

The Early Childhood team at Flinders University suggest that to ensure the UANP meets its objectives and outcomes – workforce issues must be addressed. We also suggest that analysis of data around UANP could potentially be polarising and reflect what we understand to be a higher percentage of less experienced Early Childhood Teachers in long day care and lacking the resources and systemic supports of their colleagues in state-based preschools (Millei, Gobby, & Gallagher, 2017). For the provision and quality of UANP to be further improved, professional recognition of all Early Childhood Teachers, regardless of their sector and employer, must be a priority.

Where for-profit providers are entering into this space, we also suggest careful consideration of how Government-funded provisions are executed to ensure the funded hours reach the children and the resourcing of their preschool programmes, to avoid financially supporting shareholders and investors.

We understand that there are differences in children's experiences in early childhood and differences too in how they access and experience preschool. Workplace related issues and lack of staff retention can bring about discontinuity in building relationships and learning experiences (Jovanovic, 2013). The Early Years Learning Framework (Department of Education, Employment & Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2009) explains that, 'Educators' practices and the relationships they form with children and families have a significant effect on children's involvement and success in learning. Children thrive when families and teachers work together in partnership to support young children's learning (p. 9).' The importance of these relationships and continuity for children cannot be underestimated and policies and

practices which have a detrimental impact on staff quality and retention can only significantly impact children's experience. Inequity within each jurisdiction impact children.

Differences in delivery of Universal Access also are evident in the resourcing and professional development opportunities for teachers delivering these programmes. Access to documents such as the *Preschool Indicators for Literacy and Numeracy* (Department for Education and Child Development [DECD], 2015) and accompanying supports available to government preschools, are not consistent in long day care and independent sites. The discussion around the push-down effect through such documents and programmes is worthy of consideration. What experiences do we want for children in the year before school (OECD, 2017)? Where is the school readiness debate situated in this? We recommend that teachers who deliver Universal Access are invited into discussions about how their programmes and work experiences are reflective (or otherwise) of the Practices and Principles of the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009).

**QUESTION 4: How does the preschool system operate across States and Territories and settings?**  
*The context in which the National Partnership agreement operates is important to understanding its achievements and future directions. The UANP allows for flexibility in how and where preschool is delivered; it can be delivered in schools, stand-alone preschools or within centre-based day care. It can reflect different approaches and involve connections to other services – as long as it is delivered by a teacher whose qualifications meet National Quality Framework requirements. The Review is interested in understanding more about how models of delivery vary to meet the contexts and needs of different communities or different cohorts of children. This includes understanding how that UANP funding complements other government funding (local government, State and Territory, and Australian Government) and any private investment, particularly with respect to lifting participation in quality preschool. Please note that the Review is not reviewing the specific funding and delivery arrangements in States and Territories, but how the UANP complements existing models of preschool delivery.*

Our knowledge of delivery of the UANP within the South Australian context is detailed in the points below:

- Preschools in government sites operate in a stand-alone capacity or co-located with government schools.
- Catholic and Independent schools also operate several co-located preschools.
- Long day care by for-profit and not-for-profit providers also provide UANP and the long day care sector in South Australia, as in other states and territories are struggling to recruit and retain quality Early Childhood Teachers.
- Quality and continuity of programmes are inextricably linked to quality and retention of Early Childhood Teachers (Bauchmüller et al., 2014; Jovanovic, 2013; Schweinhart, Montie, Xiang, Belfield, & Nores, 2005)
- Different models of implementation are in place for the different providers of UANP (Baxter et al., 2013). Parents who choose to send their children to preschool have less flexibility with

regards to pick up and drop off times and often work with the offering of a fortnightly rotation of 3 days/2 days of 2 and ½ days a week. Parents who access UANP but require care before and/or after preschool

- Children’s Centres (DECD) offer additional supports to families such as financial counselling, interpreters, access to specialists, such as speech therapists on site.
- Children are not under compulsion to attend preschool or school until they are aged 6 in South Australia.
- Children most at risk of entrenched disadvantage may not be enrolled or attend preschool regularly (Rosier & McDonald, 2011 as cited in Wight, 2015).
- Families of children in remote and regional areas have additional impediments in their children’s regular attendance, such as transport, distance, perhaps lack of cultural sensitivity in the structure of provision (Halsey, 2018).
- Children’s experiences in the year before school can be as diverse as they are (Wight, 2015).

**QUESTION 5: Based on your experiences, should changes should be made to future national policy on preschool for children in the year before full-time school, and why? What improvements would these changes make? What works well with the current UANP arrangements?**

*This is an opportunity to provide any additional comments that you think are relevant to the design of future preschool arrangements, including taking into account each State and Territory’s context and the interaction of the UANP funding and other funding including Child Care Subsidy payments. For example, we would appreciate any further views on how funding might be better used to maintain and improve universal access to preschool and learning outcomes for children, particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, children in regional and remote areas, and children experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage. We would also welcome suggestions on changes that could usefully be made to the UANP agreement itself (e.g. its objective, outcomes, outputs indicators, benchmarks and targets) to ensure children receive the full benefits of accessible, affordable quality preschool.*

### **Hear the voices of children, parents and teachers**

The consultation needs to hear the voices of teachers and parents as informed in children’s experiences of UANP in the year before school commencement (Wight, 2015) and to invite children also to make a contribution ‘as active participants in all matters which affect their lives’ (DEEWR, 2009, p. 5) . By placing agency back with the teachers, children and families that the UANP seeks to serve would enable a more complete picture of current delivery models and outcomes, and future considerations for its successful implementation and improvement. Research tells us that children can participate in assessment and documentation and demonstrate complex thinking, capably contributing to issues and matters of concern to them (Ey, 2016; Fane, MacDougall, Redmond, Jovanovic, & Ward, 2016). By capturing data from sites providing UANP from children, parents and teachers who **currently access** the UANP and embedding this within the period before school commencement, the likelihood of that data being representative of what actually occurs and with a richness of detail, would provide a more complete picture. Such a measure could be developed very intentionally for this purpose with the

validity required of such a data collection. Elements of the UANP could be specifically explored, such as quality of programmes which would inform such discussions and begin to address potential shortcomings with the delivery of the UANP. Our challenge is; are decisions around early childhood education being made 'with' or 'for' children, parents, families and teachers?

### **Provision of at least 18 hours of Universal Access**

The provision of only 12 hours creates difficulties in children accessing care as EC providers try to provide a compromise to the community including half days or 2 day/3 day rotations. The allocation for children needs to be at least 18 hours of Universal Access a week. Where half days and fortnightly rotations are offered, other care options are required for families for when their children are not attending, and this is an additional consideration and an impediment for children to access their full entitlement. The provision of at least 18 hours of preschool would enable families to have some constancy of care week to week and may minimise the fragmentation of children's time experiences with children moving from setting to setting across one day (Rinaldi, 2013). There is already discussion amongst preschool teachers about any provision of UANP being delivered in 6-hour increments to seek to ensure that children and families are able to access their full entitlement (Wight, 2015). This is very valid and requires consideration.

### **Provision across Australia from 3**

There is a body of international research which highlights the significant benefits of children commencing preschool from the age of 3 (Fox & Geddes, 2016), and that the number of year children spend in early childhood education and care is a predictor of later performance both in and out of school (OECD, 2017). Across Australia there are already differences in opportunities for children to attend preschool from 3. This inequality of access undermines the intent of the UANP and must be considered. Children attending preschool in New South Wales, South Australia, Northern Territory and other jurisdictions where preschool commences from 4, should be entitled to the same provision as children attending in Tasmania, Queensland and soon Victoria. The Federal Government has the opportunity to significantly improve and impact the lives of young children and their families with a commitment to the provision of UANP from 3 for all children across Australia.

### **Greater flexibility in the offerings of hours of preschool**

Please see our earlier statements, above.

### **Address issues with quality of provision**

As above, we assert the workforce issues in Early Childhood Education are key to the successful delivery of the UANP. When Early Childhood Teachers continue to be paid less outside of preschool and school settings, difficulties with the recruitment and retentions of quality staff and subsequently continuity of quality teaching and learning in long day care provision of the UANP will continue to be an issue. Equal conditions and pay for all Early Childhood Teachers must be tabled and given the consideration required to begin to redress this imbalance and lack of professional recognition. Early Childhood Teachers should be able to choose the Birth – 5 setting without negative consequences from such a decision in their pay and employment conditions. Many Early Childhood Teachers who are qualified and registered to teach

with dual qualifications such as in Birth – 5 and school settings, are likely to prefer to teach in school settings due to the better pay and conditions (Weldon, 2015). The Early Childhood team from Flinders University see similar views shared anecdotally amongst our pre-service teachers. We see this as a significant issue for the Birth – 5 landscape.

**Vulnerable populations – should we be looking a whole community approach to support the family?**

Research tells us that young children’s participation in quality early childhood education and care is important but that it has the greatest impact for children experiencing disadvantage (OECD, 2017). What protective factors can be put in place to support vulnerable populations in Australia? How can we work with communities to ensure that decisions are informed by the context and population? How can we make decisions ‘with’ and not ‘for? The Early Childhood team from Flinders University assert that significant research into barriers to attendance needs to be undertaken so that the intent of the UANP can be realised. Part of this work may consider different attendance models which reflect context and cultural sensitivity and appropriateness; and consider other supports such as assisting families in transporting their children to and from preschool.

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the consultation into the Universal Access National Partnership. We are willing and prepared to participate in further consultation.

The Early Childhood Studies Team, Flinders University

Dr Jessie Jovanovic

Dr Sarah Wight

Ms Rachael Hedger

Ms Christina Moutos

Ms Linda Gray

Ms Timna Garnett

Ms Stef Rozitis

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