

Universal Access National Partnership Review

Submission from KU Children's Services



Artwork by Maya, 4 years, KU Crusader Preschool

ABOUT KU CHILDREN'S SERVICES

KU Children's Services (KU) is one of the largest not-for-profit providers of early education in NSW. Established in 1895 as the Kindergarten Union of NSW, KU was the first provider of early childhood education in Australia and has operated continuously for 124 years, making KU the nation's most experienced provider of early childhood education.

KU's vision is that *'Every child has a right to feel safe, nurtured, valued and heard'* and KU contributes to this by providing, supporting and leading high quality inclusive play-based learning programs. KU provides opportunities for children to become the creators, thinkers and doers of today and tomorrow.

Today, KU operates almost 140 early education services in NSW, Victoria, ACT and Queensland. These services include long day care, preschool/kindergarten programs, occasional care, family programs, early intervention programs and other early childhood education services.

The organisation has a long-demonstrated history of providing high quality early childhood education programs and has long held an unwavering commitment to university qualified early childhood education teachers and their ongoing professional learning and development.

KU's achievements in the National Quality Standard Assessment and Ratings to date, far exceed the national average, with 99 % of KU services Meeting or Exceeding the National Quality Standard.

Such is KU's experience, expertise and reputation within the sector, the organisation is often requested to provide specialist advice by other providers, peak bodies, the corporate sector, and all levels of Government.

SUMMARY

KU welcomes the focus, and opportunity to comment on the Universal Access National Partnership (UANP) through this review. We are optimistic that there will be an ongoing commitment to early childhood education as a collective responsibility of Australian, state and territory governments and the prospect to consider more broadly the policy and jurisdictional intersects to create a more cohesive and equitable early childhood education sector. It is time to think beyond legacy arrangements and political divides. We need child and family focused policy that supports flexible, evidence informed service provision with sustainable funding. The review must embed the foundations made through early childhood quality reform. We believe that an effective UANP must commit to:

- ▶ Sustainable and transparent funding that provides certainty and predictability
- ▶ At least two days per week of preschool education for 2 years before school
- ▶ Programs delivered by a degree qualified early childhood teacher
- ▶ Service provision that meet the needs and preferences of children and families
- ▶ Reliable and accessible data shared between governments

ACHIEVEMENT OF POLICY OBJECTIVES, OUTCOMES AND OUTPUTS

The objective of UA is to improve participation of children in a preschool program, delivered by a degree qualified early childhood teacher, in the year before school, in a way that meets the needs of families and ensures that cost is not a barrier. Since introduction of the UANP, there has been increased participation of 4-year-old children and children from vulnerable and disadvantaged backgrounds in our preschool programs. This has supported access and in turn the provision of 600 hours of preschool program.

Research indicates a strong correlation between preschool participation and performance at school, with growing evidence that participation in high quality early childhood education improves future academic success, lifting National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) results and Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) scores. However, many children experiencing disadvantage start school educationally vulnerable and often stay behind in their schooling. One in five children start school developmentally vulnerable or at risk on one or more of the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) developmental domains.ⁱ Marginalised groups are less likely to be able to take full advantage of the opportunities school has to offer and are likely to need extra support to succeed at school. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are twice as likely to start school developmentally vulnerable. Support initiatives are needed to address barriers to participation for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, children with additional needs, children from rural and remote areas and culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. An inclusive education system will comprise culturally aware and critically reflective pedagogies that address social inequities and improve lifelong impacts on learning.

EFFECTIVENESS AND EFFICIENCY

Near-universal participation in at least one year of ECE is now the norm in Organisation for Economic Development and Co-operation (OECD) countries.ⁱⁱ Australia has made great gains towards achieving universal access to early childhood education for all children in the year before school. Many states and territories were performing well in this area and NSW has made a significant gain in recent years. Lifting Our Game, Report of the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools through Early Childhood Interventions, recommends progressively expanding access to preschool for all three-year olds.ⁱⁱⁱ

There is significant diversity in jurisdictional choices and service delivery models. The contextual differences and consequent impacts cannot be understated. It would be tempting to suggest national consistency, but the value of this approach is that jurisdictions can tailor delivery models and strategies to their own unique circumstances to achieve agreed outcomes. Flexible arrangements for implementation and delivery of early childhood education to reflect local contexts and support choice for families should be preserved.

Funding stability is critical to maintain the progress and achievements made through the UANP. Funding is needed for affordable and accessible services as well as targeted resources to improve the preschool program. Any reduction in Commonwealth funding will place pressure on jurisdictions, especially community preschools in NSW where UA made a significant contribution to this part of the sector that provides flexible options for families.

Preschool priority of access guidelines in NSW have resulted in many services where children are only attending for the year prior to school. This is not adequate for some children with learning or additional support needs. Some states have introduced funding for 3-year-old children, and it is yet to be seen what impact this policy change will make to business models. Service provision must be consistent with policy goals while being flexible to respond to local needs.

Many preschool services in NSW successfully transitioned to an operating model that increased daily operating hours to provide 15 hours of preschool per week, but some families were not wanting to attend longer days and preferring traditional attendance patterns of three days per week for 6 hours per day. Some families are impacted by younger siblings being unable to access the preschool and needing to access another service.

To what extent are preschool funding arrangements easy to understand?

The complexity of Commonwealth, states and territories funding is not well understood, nor is the distinction between jurisdictional responsibilities for preschools and other early childhood education and care services. Greater visibility of funding received and passed on through various programs is needed with greater understanding of the intricacies of funding programs and implementation through the states and territories.

It is difficult to comprehend equitable funding for all children where there are multiple funding arrangements, service types and business models. States and territories have different approaches to passing on UA funding. The ACT context for example, where preschool is free and generally located on or near school sites is very different to Victorian Kindergartens that offer 15 hours of funded preschool. Patterns of attendance look different for individual services. There is a difference in how funding is dispersed, with funding for the year before school for long day care in some jurisdictions. This is better understood by providers with tools and training offered in some jurisdictions to assist with it being operationalised.

Greater explanation is needed for families to understand Commonwealth funding that supports universal access to preschool programs and contributions made towards Child Care Subsidy (CCS) fee payments for parents that support workforce participation. State and territory governments with primary responsibility for preschool education have also invested in quality early childhood programs. A simplification of funding programs with communication about funding made through state and territory administration is needed.

To what extent do the existing preschool funding arrangements meet the needs of parents and children?

Jurisdictional funding model inducements can lead to unintended outcomes. In NSW for example, where attendance patterns of two days per week are incentivised, some children who would benefit by additional days and younger children who would benefit by longer duration cannot access the optimal dose of preschool education or early intervention that they need.

Policy incentives to reach participation targets has resulted in many preschools in NSW transitioning to fit the required 600 hours, rather than meet the needs of children or families. Some families need access to multiple care arrangements which is counterproductive to secure attachments and continuity for children, which is needed for families. Consistency of enrolment helps children develop their identity in a learning community.

What works well for you with the current preschool funding arrangements?

Participation of 4-year-old children and children experiencing disadvantage has increased under the UANP. Commonwealth funding has had a significant impact to the viability of preschool services that are not eligible to receive CCS to reduce fees for families, especially in NSW. Preschool funding has made a significant contribution to affordability and additional days attendance. Services with vacancies increased their enrolments and we have been able to offer high quality early childhood education to more children as a result. However, more must be done to improve participation of children for two years prior to school, especially for children experiencing disadvantage and vulnerability.

What does not work well for you with the current preschool funding arrangements?

Funding should be ongoing (like schools), not a decision made on a year by year basis. Adequate and permanent funding must be a commitment for universal access. Services cannot plan and invest in quality improvements with short-term funding pledges. Investment in the early years shows greater economic return than at any other time during childhood.^{iv} Research demonstrates the education, health and productivity benefits for the individual, society and governments.^v Australia's spending on early childhood education has increased, resulting in improved participation rates in early childhood education. Adequate and permanent funding is needed to sustain this advancement and for targeted intervention programs for identified groups.^{vi}

It is not clearly understood how many children are receiving UA funding specifically in a preschool or a long day care service. Philosophically, we agree that UA funding should support every child having access to a quality preschool program prior to school but only where states and territories can support currently funded services to the same or present level.

All states and territories should introduce funding for 3-year-old children at the same level as 4-year-old children. In some cases, children attend two days at one service and one or more days at another. Participation of children experiencing vulnerability is generally seen as positive but multiple services may not be in the child's best interest. Children and families benefit from trusting relationships that develop over time and building the social capital of the service. Consistency is needed for children to develop their identity and wellbeing and is especially important for children with complex needs. An additional loading is needed for children who are experiencing vulnerability.

We endorse the Early Childhood Australia and SNAICC position paper, *Working Together to Ensure Equality for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children in the Early Years* that calls for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children to access early childhood education and schooling that reflects the culture and knowledge of their Indigenous communities and funding that would ensure all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children get the opportunity to attend a minimum of three days per week of high-quality preschool.^{vii}

THE PRESCHOOL SYSTEM

What examples have you seen of innovation in a preschool setting that has shown positive outcomes for children?

Creative and flexible attendance models have seen states and territories successfully increase access to 600 hours of a preschool program in the year before school. Change to the methodology of measurement, from access to enrolment, had significant implications initially in NSW, where the typical operating hours were 6 hours per day before implementation of UA. Many providers increased service operating hours or offered variable attendances for children to attend 15 hours per week across two or more days.

Preschools in NSW have shown innovative approaches to service delivery models that help achieve the UA benchmarks while meeting their local community needs. This has had industrial implications that needed to be worked through. They have changed attendance patterns to maximise children's access to two days per week of a preschool education. This needed to be communicated to families to help them understand where other services may provide different service models, such as shorter days and additional weeks.

Targeted subsidies and initiatives from jurisdictions have promoted unique initiatives to increase access and participation of children from vulnerable and disadvantaged backgrounds, so that the children who benefit most from a preschool education have access.

What is the value of providing families and carers with different options to access preschool?

Flexible and differing models enable us to offer choice for families which can meet their unique needs.

What observations would you make about the availability or accessibility of quality preschool programs in your community, region, and/or state and territory?

UA funding through the Start Strong program made a significant impact on affordability and participation in NSW community-based preschools, which are provided by not-for-profit organisations. Funding policies impact the prevalence of certain service types, such as the prolific growth of long day care services with access to CCS to reduce fees for families. Lack of planning processes have seen an oversupply in some areas and continued undersupply in areas of socio-economic disadvantage and rural and remote areas.

Attendance doesn't measure the effectiveness of the preschool program. Increasing access and participation without giving continued attention to quality will not result in the positive child outcomes or long-term productivity benefits desired for society. Children must be placed at the centre of all educational decision making, recognising the impact of quality early childhood education on educational and life outcomes. Preschool programs build a strong foundation for life skills, especially for children experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage. The degree to which early childhood education can produce these benefits depends largely on the quality of the service and with a continued commitment to qualified early childhood teachers delivering the program. Without enough public expenditure there is a risk that access to quality preschool programs will be limited to more affluent families.

FUTURE NATIONAL POLICY

Based on your experiences, what, if any, changes should be made to future preschool arrangements at a national policy level?

We need a long term vision and ongoing commitment to funding, not year-long extensions, to support long term planning and sector confidence. Australia's complex and multi-layered system of policy development, funding and provision causes disparity that could benefit with an integrated approach and some uniformity in program provision. In addition, a national strategy is needed for a capable and sustainable early childhood teaching workforce.

Australian governments have a shared responsibility for early childhood education and national coherence to deliver positive program outcomes for children. National, state and territory Children's Commissioners could have a role in monitoring actions that are in the interests of children. A nationally agreed definition of disadvantage and vulnerability should be determined, and expanded to include migrant and refugee families, children experiencing domestic violence, substance abuse and mental health.

Based on your experiences, what, if any, changes would you suggest to preschool funding specifically, including how the UANP funding interacts with other sources of funding, such as the Child Care Subsidy?

The COAG partnering approach has been an effective model and provides a strong evidence base for the continuation of joint government funding into the future. We support a continued approach to co-investment in the delivery of preschool programs through the UANP. As part of the education system, the same arrangement as schools should apply to early childhood education. A national strategy is also needed to support a capable and sustainable early childhood teaching workforce.

We advocate for access to a quality preschool program to be extended to two years before school. This is especially important for children who are educationally vulnerable, including children from low income, migrant and refugee families, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, and children with a disability

or additional needs. An inclusive approach would see this extended to all 3-year-old children rather than screening based on disadvantage to ensure social diversity and without associated stigma.

Early childhood education needs to be adequately resourced and supported to receive children with diverse learning needs. For children with a developmental delay or disability, additional planning and support is necessary to make the process as positive as possible. The incidence of families electing to keep children in preschool for a further year is indicative of the perceived benefits of a second year of preschool participation.

Based on your experiences, what, if anything, should be retained from current preschool arrangements, including in relation to UANP funding?

UA has been one of the most successful quality early childhood education reforms in recent history. The commitment to access by children in their year before school to a quality preschool program delivered by a qualified early childhood teacher must be acclaimed and sustained to support the policy objectives of the National Quality Framework (NQF).

The Commonwealth, States and Territories have a mutual interest in improving outcomes in early childhood education and need to work more harmoniously to achieve those outcomes. A commitment to support the infrastructure and workforce needs continued investment from all levels of government. This must be ongoing and not a year to year decision.

TARGETS, MEASURES AND DATA

Funding should not be predicated on Commonwealth targets that see states and territories rewarded or penalised when children do not attend the full hours that they could access. More needs to be understood about why families are not accessing preschool programs to address those barriers to participation. We are curious about the rise in children who are eligible to attend school remaining in preschool for a further year and if this is a result of preschools being more affordable where previously cost prohibitive. This could be indicative of children needing more than one-year of preschool before commencing school. Longitudinal data may tell more about the number of children in a preschool program that are over the age eligible to commence school or compulsory school age to better understand and support successful inclusion in the preschool program, transition to school and continuity of learning.

Data and monitoring can be a powerful lever to understand and improve how policy objectives are being achieved. There must be accountability to demonstrate how the funds are meeting guidelines and objectives of the UANP.

Greater attention needs to be given to data collection and sharing between governments. Ambiguity exists in relation to enrolments of children attending multiple services that need accurate reporting. Fragmented and manual processes of data collection leave room for error. A simple and dependable way of collecting data is needed. Some jurisdictions have integrated databases that capture this data to better manage access to funding. This requires all levels of government to work on reporting systems that are not administratively burdensome and are nationally reliable and valid.

REFERENCES

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