

## **Submission to the decadal plan consultation paper**

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### **Introduction**

At the School of Education, Adelaide University, a group of academics came together to prepare our collective response to the decadal plan consultation paper. Before providing our responses to the specific questions which guided our discussion, it seems appropriate to share our general concerns about the consultation paper itself.

First, we note that the paper tends to define education research rather narrowly, in an instrumentalist way, as if to say that all education research would need to be immediately useful for policy problem solving. While we believe that it is important for education research communities to actively engage in policy discussion and produce research that can inform it, we also acknowledge that not all educational research should be expected to be immediately policy relevant. Instead, we take the view that our priority as education researchers is to contribute to the constitution and renewal of broader research knowledge base, which sets the parameter of education policy discussion. This knowledge base demands mobilisation of interdisciplinary approaches and as well as disciplinary knowledges, including education (curriculum, assessment and pedagogy), anthropology, economics, history, philosophy, sociology, psychology and neuroscience etc. This expansive view of what it takes to do education research suggests that part of our task is to constantly push the boundaries of the knowledge base by raising questions that are not yet imaginable within the existing policy framing. This provocative role of education researchers seems obfuscated by the rather narrow, instrumentalist definition of education research as proposed by the consultation paper.

Second, related to the first point, we are of the view that the consultation paper is premised upon the problematic assumption that the existing issues in education systems are partly caused by the lack of targeted research focus and coordination. While this may be partly true, we also believe that much of evidence required to implement more effective policy interventions are already available. It was of note in this regard that very few research literature was referenced in the consultation paper. It is our view that the problem is not just the lack of research evidence, focus and cross sector coordination but rather the absence of political will to base policy decisions on available research evidence. The plethora of policies introduced by the Federal and State governments over the last few decades seem to indicate that policy decisions were often made against the advice made by broader education research communities. While this may indicate the research dissemination and communication issues highlighted by the consultation paper, we also believe that politics and ideology are fundamental part of education policy making and that this should be acknowledged in the consultation paper.

It is with these cautionary observations and reservations that we offer our responses to the specific questions as listed in the consultation paper. Our responses are broken down into two sections, I. Compulsory Education and II. Early Childhood Education. Not all 15 questions are answered in full and our responses to some questions are more extensive than others. These variations are due to the availability of expertise relevant to the questions. We would like to take this opportunity to thank Professor Julie McLeod for taking into consideration our post-merger circumstances and granting us an extension of time. We sincerely hope that our collective inputs will assist the development of the decadal plan for Australian education research.

## I. COMPULSORY EDUCATION

### JUSTICE, QUALITY AND EQUITY FOR ALL

#### Q4. What current policy and practices enable or constrain equity and justice for all?

##### **Constricted ideas about what it means to be ‘equitable’ in education**

Contrary to the decadal plan’s characterisation that “there is *growing* recognition of the intersectional nature of educational inequalities” (p. 8; italics inserted), we suggest that research *has long pointed* to the importance of understanding the relational nature of in/equality and the cumulative effects of multiple, intersecting factors of disadvantage. Despite this understanding, education policies in Australia continue to deploy discrete ‘equity categories’ for various purposes, including the distribution of school funding. In the specific context of school funding, these categories have been left uninterrogated since the 2011 Gonski Review, where they were initially proposed.

Moreover, even with the recognition of the intersectional and complex nature of in/equity in the decadal plan, ‘equity and justice’ is often framed and understood through metrics such as student outcomes (as measured by results on large-scale testing such as NAPLAN and PISA), and broad attendance data. Similar framings prevail in various national education policies, including the recent Better and Fairer Schools Agreement (BFSA) – a major piece of National architecture which sets the conditions of possibility for schooling for the next decade. For example, the BFSA sets targets for improving ‘equity and excellence’ as a national priority area (Australian Government 2025, p. 19), as measured by performance on NAPLAN, Year 12 (or equivalent) completion, and improved attendance. Federal Government funding for state and territories is also tied to strategies such as phonics checks, early years schooling numeracy checks, and “initiatives that encourage student uptake of high-quality science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) education opportunities” (Australian Government 2025, p. 19) in seeking to achieve these targets.

The decadal plan, as well as the recent BFSA, place emphasis on ‘Closing the gap’. The continued deployment and pursuit of ‘gap talk’ in relation to Indigenous students has been widely problematised, yet it continues to feature prominently in, and indeed frame, policy approaches and discourse. Vass (2012) draws on the work of David Gilborn (2000) to explain how such framings draw on and sustain deficit thinking and can “be viewed as a strategy to position the non-Indigenous community as the normative benchmark that serves to mask underlying assimilationist ideals” (p. 90; see also Altman & Fogarty 2010).

Such strategies place responsibilities on schools, teachers and students to ‘improve’ equity, rather than looking to systemic problems. Indeed, the reduction of equity to measurable end points (like outcomes, closing gaps) have been long and widely problematised for locating the problem as being with the individuals and groups (i.e., individual deficits) rather than the organisation of schooling systems. The result of this is policy responses which direct attention and resources toward changing students’ behaviour or performance, rather than examining how resources, school composition, curriculum access, or institutional practices distribute opportunity unevenly across the system. In doing so policies appear to be addressing inequity through targeted interventions while leaving underlying structural inequalities intact. It also assumes ‘an even playing field’ in education.

## **Depoliticising questions of justice**

By framing equity as a technical problem of improving performance indicators, policy debates risk sidelining more complex questions about how inequality operates and how opportunities are distributed. One-size fits all measures of equity can therefore obscure the situated realities of in/equality that operate in different ways. Equity is necessarily situated and context dependent. Policy approaches focused on monitoring and accountability to ‘improving outcomes’ rather than redistributing opportunities or resources based on localised needs of communities serve to reinforce, rather than address, inequality.

Importantly, Molla & Gale (2024) emphasise that in seeking to ameliorate disadvantage, there is a need to go “beyond measuring opportunities and outcomes of target groups”, and instead “consider the substantiveness of opportunities as well as the subjective conditions and objective contexts that mediate how people transform their resources into outcomes’ (p. 105). This is not to suggest that improved outcomes and improved attendance are not important. Rather, narrow and deficit definitions of equity will continue to produce similarly narrow policy problems and avenues for reform. We suggest that a continued policy focus on achieving measurable targets, without similarly sufficient policy attention to the underlying and systemic patterns of inequality is highly problematic. This includes, for example, patterns of entrenched school segregation and marketisation, as well as the “effects of structural forces like racism and class dispossession” which “leave in place the structural injustices of education that produce unequal opportunities” (Sriprakash 2022, 787). To broaden opportunities for justice in education, more expansive notions of equity and justice are first required.

## **Problematic epistemic hierarchies of ‘evidence’ and ‘knowledge’**

Recent policy developments in Australian education have intensified problematic epistemic hierarchies that privilege particular forms of knowledge and evidence while marginalising others. The growing influence of, and deference to the Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) and a broader policy emphasis on ostensibly neutral “evidence-based practice” constitutes one such area of concern (Thomson 2025; Moodie 2025). We echo concerns raised in an emerging body of research that problematises the privileging of narrow, and cognitive science-based conceptualisations of ‘knowledge’ – particularly when it comes to curriculum and notions of teacher expertise (Thomson 2025; Moodie 2025; Skourdoumbis and Rowe 2025).

Moreover, the emphasis on identifying universally applicable “what works” solutions can obscure the importance of context, history, and community knowledges in shaping educational practice. Policies grounded in such approaches may encourage the adoption of standardised interventions that overlook the cultural and social specificities of different educational contexts, including those of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. In this way, the push toward narrowly defined evidence-based policy not only constrains the diversity of research informing education policy but also risks undermining efforts to recognise and value plural knowledge systems. This reproduces colonial dynamics within knowledge production.

## **Prevailing policy principles: Choice, competition and marketisation in Australian schooling**

As identified in the decadal plan paper, Australia’s schooling system has long been established as segregated along social and socioeconomic lines. Australian government schools (which are often under-resourced) continue to educate the greatest proportion of disadvantaged students. Research both in Australia and internationally has established the deleterious effects of policies and practices underpinned by the logics of school choice and marketisation, despite competing

claims that such practices can ensure improved school quality and effectiveness as schools are forced to ‘compete’ for students (Perry, Yoon, Sciffer and Lubienski 2024). The OECD has also warned against the unregulated promotion of school choice policies in Australia, noting their potentially damaging effects to social cohesion and facilitation of social segregation (OECD 2023/2024, p. 14). Despite this, successive Australian (in particular, federal) governments continue to promote and subsidise school choice and marketisation, the effects of which have been shown to “reduce educational equity” and “increase social segregation and stratification of resources” (Perry et al. 2024, p. 175).

More just approaches to the resourcing of schools would require governments to reckon with the material impacts of intersecting government funding scarcity and unregulated school choice and marketisation practices that prevail in Australia’s education system.

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**Q5. What research focus areas should be prioritised to improve quality and equity for all learners? Briefly describe the specific research investments, capabilities and relationships that would make this possible.**

Future research investment should prioritise research and forms of inquiry that extend beyond narrowly measurable and easily quantifiable indicators of educational 'success'. Unbalanced focus on these approaches risks privileging research that produces technically transferable findings over work that engages more deeply with questions of justice, context, and community experience. Investment is therefore needed in research that is community-based, relational, and community-led. Here, we are calling not just for additional financial resourcing but also strategies and approaches that *elevate and promote* research that imagines education justice differently (e.g., research that might be understood as 'outside' the constricted confines of what has been constructed as 'politically palatable'. This frame must be broadened). In addition, see response to Question 7.

**Q7. How would a more integrated approach to research across sectors, disciplines and institutions benefit the experiences and outcomes for all learners?**

Education as a sector is often shouldered with the responsibility for improving quality and equity. While it certainly has a role to play, education does not occur in a vacuum and any attempt to halt growing inequities must be considered holistically (Muller, 2018). This is critical for both researchers, and policy makers and actors. Without this, governments will continue to throw money (and this is exactly what they do currently) at initiatives designed to make Australia's education systems and institutions more equitable and improve outcomes, without success. This is backed up by current data which suggests Australia's schooling sector is working for fewer students (Armstrong et al., 2024; Leslie et al., 2025; Piltz et al., 2025; Walton Family Foundation, 2024) and for those who are at school, academic and wellbeing outcomes are stagnant or in decline (Dumuid et al, 2023; OECD, 2023). This is problematic given the strong relationship between education and life outcomes (Balaj et al., 2024).

An integrated approach to research in this space will grow our understanding of the reciprocal relationships between education and the many factors that sit around it. Without this, the changes we attempt to make to education policy and implementation will not have the impact they could if considered within the broader ecosystem. Education outcomes are inextricably entangled with other aspects of life – health, socio-economic status, and geographic location are just a few. Health remains a critical determinant, as students experiencing physical or mental health challenges, including higher rates of psychological distress, often demonstrate reduced attendance, engagement, and academic performance (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2022). The increasing number of students in Australia experiencing School Can't (Leslie et al., 2025) is a concerning trend that highlights this point. Socio-economic status continues to be one of the strongest predictors of educational achievement in Australia, with students from disadvantaged backgrounds facing limited access to educational resources, lower levels of parental educational attainment, and increased exposure to financial and social stressors (Bonner, 2019; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2019). Geographic location exacerbates these inequities, as students in rural and remote areas often encounter reduced access to qualified teachers, limited curriculum offerings, and infrastructural barriers such as poor digital connectivity (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021). These factors

frequently intersect. For example, students in remote areas are more likely to experience socio-economic disadvantage and poorer health outcomes, compounding educational inequities. This brief exploration highlights the importance of a more integrated approach to educational research across sectors, disciplines and institutions; an approach that must challenge current discourses, policies and practices that attempt to bound education into a narrow set of isolated measurable outcomes.

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## **A PREPARED AND WELL-SUPPORTED EDUCATION WORKFORCE**

### **Q8. How can teachers and early childhood educators be attracted to and retained in the profession, particularly in areas in greatest need?**

The use of standard 'HR' derived approaches to attracting and retaining a highly skilled educational workforce in all sites has been inadequate and that new approaches to both research and practice are needed. Promising lines of research will drill into the wider scholarship of careers thinking and careers motivations, which is increasingly informed by the scholarship of complex systems (Pryor & Bright, 2014). The application of new models of careers development into the education sector is nascent (Smith et al., 2025) but offers promising ways forward.

### **Q10. What are the priority areas for evaluation in educational practice? Briefly describe the specific investments, capabilities and relationships needed for effective evaluation.**

The evaluation of the development of educational practice has been overly dominated by a concern for teacher knowledge and played insufficient heed to the development of integrated, adaptive and context-constitutive capabilities. Over the next decade, the need for evaluative methods that will account for education as a complex practice will be even more important (see, for example, Johnson, 2024).

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## **CROSS-SECTOR COLLABORATION AND SHARED UNDERSTANDING AND KNOWLEDGE**

The Australian education sector and workforce have a wealth of knowledge and expertise that can be harnessed to inform impactful research, practice, and policy. Yet siloing and barriers to research-practice collaboration contribute to duplicated effort and prevent opportunities for shared learning. A nationally joined-up approach to research which is genuinely collaborative can help the education ecosystem connect to identify its priorities and chart a path towards opportunities for shared knowledge and understanding.

**Q11. What are the most effective ways in which cross-sector research can help address contemporary challenges in the education sector?**

Contemporary challenges include:

- Cultural diversity – one in five students has parents born overseas (ABS, 2021; Gibbs 2023; Schwarzenhal et al., 2020; Tamadoni et al., 2024);
- Neurodiversity and learning disorders and disabilities impact more than one in four students (ACARA, 2024; Alcorn et al., 2024; Mirfin-Veitch et al., 2020; Morrison et al., 2019).
- Trauma and its sequelae – three in four students have at least one experience of trauma. Trauma can have lasting impacts on health and learning (Haslam et al., 2023; Joshi & Truong, 2024).
- Consequent complexity of families, communities – more than two in five households (Baxter 2016) have multiple intersecting circumstances [e.g. parental separation, domestic and family violence, child maltreatment, poverty, cultural and linguistic minority, disability, neurodiversity, chronic illness] which affect students' access to education.
- Workforce development, burn-out, retention issues (AITSL, 2025).

These challenges require research approaches which make connections between institutional allies including neurodiversity support and disability services, health and allied health services as well as family support and child protection services responding to issues including domestic and family violence, homelessness, poverty and parental mental illness.

For example, children whose families are homeless are at higher risk of losing connection with their schooling (Batterham et al., 2023). Homelessness services are not obligated to support children's school attendance and schools can exclude children who are no longer within their geographic zone. Cross-sector research can identify the impacts of these provisions on children's education participation and strategies to optimise children's experiences of education whilst homeless. This might include changes to policies, regulations addressing child-centred decision-making across institutions, professional development to improve supports for children and families, including trauma-informed approaches and practices with the goal of reducing risks of homeless children's detachment from schooling.

Without cross-sectoral research the actions of different agencies and institutions remain siloed and focused on separate elements defined by the relevant system. The flow on effects on students' education are often either invisible to each other or categorised as outside each institution's remit. Cross-sectoral research can bring an enabling dimension to poly-directional system reforms (Gooch et al., 2017; Selsky & Parker, 2005) with benefits for the systems and institutions, their workforces and the children and families who engage with them.

**Q12. How would a more joined-up approach to research across different sectors, disciplines and institutions benefit the education workforce across their career?**

The identified challenges are 1. Significant and substantial and 2. Likely to persist. They therefore require intentional responses which enable students and families to equitably access education. Educators across the education system similarly benefit when students are able to meaningfully participate in their learning. Undertaking interdisciplinary research across institutions in a systematic way has potential impacts including:

- Improved academic outcomes for students
- Increased awareness and knowledge across relevant professions

- Co-ordinated responses which increase alignment and efficacy and thus also improve efficiencies
- Cumulative gains at different levels of schooling
- Increased opportunities for skilled leadership in education and other institutional stakeholders.

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## **A WORLD-CLASS CONNECTED RESEARCH CAPABILITY (Q13, 14 & 15)**

To assist researchers to form and maintain strong productive relationships across international and disciplinary boundaries is of critical importance for the future of Australian education research workforce. The experience of effectively networked education researchers suggests that building relationships across boundaries of distance, culture and discipline requires considerable investment of time, training and financial resources. Researchers need to identify, invest in and create mutual advantage through networks (Q13). To support this kind of networking and thus maximise chances of positive outcomes, organisations, institutions, departments should consider:

- Supporting graduate students and ECRs to identify, approach and create connections with education researchers in other institutions, countries and/or disciplines. This requires specific training by senior researchers (Q14).
- Networking narratives are a potential resource, providing stories of successful practice. Approaching individuals or groups outside one's immediate context can be intimidating and possibly more so if excluded on the basis of culture, language, class or gender/sexuality. Sustaining relationships when roadblocks occur can be challenging. AARE could initiate and coordinate the creation of such a resource, drawing on the experiences of members (Q13 & Q14).
- Providing targeted funding for network building for ECRs, not tied to project funding, is critical for this workforce capacity building. Funds could be used for visits to research centres, co-presentation at conferences, and progression of funding proposals. Individuals seeking such funding should be required to write robust proposals and provide evidence of support from hosting institutions/centres (Q13).
- Research administrators are essential resources in universities, supporting researchers to identify, access and navigate funding opportunities. Education researchers would benefit from access to administrators with specific expertise in education research funding, including international funding sources. For instance, new opportunities are currently opening in Europe. Being sent lists of links to online resources is no substitute for a conversation with an informed person. Therefore, it is recommended that universities ensure that schools/departments of education (or the social sciences) are provided with dedicated, trained research administrators, who remain in their positions long enough to consolidate their expertise (Q 15).

- Research impact is a complex, multi-layered concept (Q15). One aspect that could be much more effectively managed in Australia is *research translation*. Dedicated funding for research translation ([translational grants](#)), awarded to researchers who have successfully conducted research with potential for translation, would be a constructive strategy. Doctoral researchers could be encouraged to include an impact plan in their proposals and provided with training on how to plan for impact (Q13). Tracking impact of a project which has not been designed for impact, is not an effective strategy.

## II. EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

### JUSTICE, QUALITY AND EQUITY FOR ALL

#### Q4. What current policy and practices enable or constrain equity and justice for all?

##### Current policy and practices constraints:

Critique of The Strong Beginnings (TEEP) report illustrates how policy has constrained equity and justice for all. Scholars argue that the report's narrow emphasis on neuroscientific evidence (Skourdumbis & Rowe, 2025) and a standardised core curriculum significantly constrains equity and justice by privileging a restricted definition of "what works" (Deuchar, 2025) and marginalising sociocultural, Indigenous, and critical knowledges that are essential for teaching in diverse contexts. This reductionist framing risks reproducing deficit understandings of learners, particularly those from low socio-economic or marginalised backgrounds, by locating educational disadvantage within individual cognition rather than broader structural inequalities (Mills, et al. 2025). The alignment of curriculum mandates with accreditation and performance-based funding introduces a punitive accountability regime that limits professional judgement. The compliance paradigm within the report (McCandless, et al., 2024) reduces the capacity of teacher educators to design context-responsive programs that address justice-oriented educational goals and participate in related research.

In the context of Early Childhood Education, the constraining influence extends beyond the content that preservice teachers (PSTs) are required to learn to the reflective practices they are expected to undertake. Reflection is framed in ways that discourage critical interrogation and instead positions PSTs within a narrow, technocratic view of data that privileges value judgements about diversity as individual learner characteristics. This constrains what counts as legitimate student data and disadvantages ECE PSTs, for whom observational analysis, documentation of learning, and relational assessments are recognised as central sources of evidence to inform ethical and responsive practice. The privileging of pre- and post- test templates over observational, pedagogical, and narrative assessment practices marginalises key early childhood repertoires and limits professional judgement. As a result, current policy settings risk constraining the development of an early childhood teacher workforce capable of making informed, contextually responsive, and justice-oriented professional decisions.

Furthermore, current policy orientations shape research funding mechanisms in ways that further constrain equity and justice-oriented inquiry. Through competitive tenders, targeted grants, and strategic partnerships, State Departments of Education tend to prioritise research that aligns with predetermined policy agendas, accountability metrics, and standardised notions of evidence. Funding criteria often privilege larger-scale, evaluative, and quantitatively oriented studies that can demonstrate measurable impact within short time frames, while qualitative, participatory, and practitioner-led research (particularly in Early Childhood Education) is less likely to be funded or scaled. This narrows opportunities for critical, observational and relational research that values children's lived experiences and educators' professional judgement. As a result, funding mechanisms function not only as a resource allocation tool but also as gatekeepers that shape whose knowledge is counted as legitimate and which equity concerns are deemed fundable and visible.

Narrow and technicist paradigms of educational research risk perpetuating deficit views of culturally, linguistically, religiously, ability and socio-economic diversity of children and their families. The narrow focus of the "The Strong Beginnings" (TEEP) is a major constraint for

future development of innovative pedagogical practices which include multiple perspectives, and this in turn has potential to constrain future policy.

**Q5. What research focus areas should be prioritised to improve quality and equity for all learners? Briefly describe the specific research investments, capabilities and relationships that would make this possible.**

**Research focus areas to improve quality and equity for all learners:**

Research which reflects a range of methodological and theoretical perspectives and interdisciplinary paradigms is needed to understand the complexity of educational issues impacting on a wide range of learners (Ryan & Grieshaber, 2024). This includes:

- Research on inclusion of children with special rights or additional needs.
- Research which seeks to understand families' perspectives of education and explores how to support educators' partnerships with families, building in a range of perspectives.
- Research into how policy is constructed and translated in practice, mapping impacts on equity, workforce development and leadership.

Furthermore, a recent report on Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Pedagogies in Early Childhood (Sisson et al., forthcoming, June, 2026) identified the following focus areas for further research to improve quality and equity for all learners:

- Strengthen partnerships with Aboriginal and Zenadth Kes (formally known as Torres Strait Islander) communities. Further research is needed to explore how such partnership can be strengthened to grow in contextually meaningful ways.
- Prioritise practice-based research to expand and refine robust, co-constructed examples of culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogies across all key curriculum and learning areas.
- Explore culturally and linguistically responsive transitions to school and how ECE professionals across sectors can collaborate to tailor learning experiences to reflect local cultural knowledges, histories, and perspectives, and foster deeper connections, continuity and engagement for all children as they transition between settings.
- Build shared understandings and sustainable practices to foster collective understandings of barriers, enablers and opportunities relevant to embedding culturally and linguistically responsive practices across sites, systems and organisations and to develop coherent collections of policy and practice that can support long-term sustainability.
- The ECE workforce is rich with diversity. Research which explores how policies and practices could build on the cultural and linguistic repertoires embedded within the early childhood workforce is needed to leverage the workforce diversity in productive and meaningful ways that lifts the professional status and recognition of the ECE field.

**Specific Research Investments**

- Fund strategic research projects that are led by and/or co-designed with local Aboriginal and Zenadth Kes people through targeted grant funding.
- Invest in case study, longitudinal, mixed-methods and participatory critical action research that captures the complexity of learning, teaching, and equity over time, and in multiple contexts.

- Establish targeted grant funding for research focused on equity-oriented assessment and evidence practices, expanding what counts as legitimate data beyond standardised assessments and explicitly including ECE practices.
- Fund sustained research partnerships between departments of education, universities, early learning services, and communities, enabling co-design, shared capability building and ethical knowledge production. This investment will strengthen qualitative, justice-oriented, and culturally responsive expertise within government and the early childhood workforce.
- Support system capability building by investing in research programs bringing departments of education in partnership with universities to strengthen qualitative, justice-oriented, and culturally responsive expertise within government and the early childhood workforce.
- Invest in raising the representation of diverse early childhood research paradigms in the ARC College. This may include a review of the requirements, and mechanisms for electing College Experts to ensure a more robust representation of research methodologies and paradigms.

**Q6. What systematic changes are required to embed First Nations perspectives and practices into curriculum and learning frameworks? Please share examples of effective research-based, community-led and culturally responsive approaches that could be scaled.**

Systematic changes to embed First Nations perspectives and practices into curriculum and learning frameworks requires a deliberate commitment to decolonise education at structural, pedagogical, and relational levels. This begins with strengthening educators' critical consciousness of the historical, social, and political forces that produce inequity (Morrison et al., 2019) and attention to the equitable restructuring of power relationships (Burgess, Bishop, et al., 2022). Indigenist epistemologies articulated by Indigenous scholars (Arbon, 2008, Martin, 2007, Moreton-Robinson, 2015, Rigney, 2006, Smith, 1999) provide essential conceptual resources for advancing a strong form of decolonisation, one that moves beyond inclusion or representation to challenge dominant knowledge systems, institutional authority, and policy assumptions that continue to marginalise First Nations knowledges in Australian early childhood education.

Effective and scalable approaches consistently foreground community-led, co-constructed leadership models that position First Nations families, Elders, and communities as decision-makers rather than consultees. This includes co-constructing curriculum and pedagogy with First Nations families in ways that dismantle hierarchical leadership structures that implicitly position families at the margins of educational decision-making (Sisson et al., 2025). Research demonstrates that when curriculum design is grounded in local Country, language, and community priorities, children's learning is strengthened and educator practice becomes more culturally responsive and accountable. Scalable partnerships between services and local Aboriginal and Zenadth Kes organisations, supported through long-term researching thran than short-term initiatives.

At a system level, embedding First Nations perspectives also requires reforming research and knowledge-production practices. Ensuring that First Nations researchers are embedded within research teams, and that Elders are involved throughout the research lifecycle supports ethical practice, local relevance, and indigenous knowledge sovereignty. Investing in Indigenous-led and co-designed research programs enables education systems to generate evidence that is culturally and contextually responsive, and capable of informing curriculum reform at scale. These changes shift the focus from tokenistic inclusion toward relational,

place-based and justice-oriented approaches that can be embedded across curriculum and learning frameworks nationally while remaining accountable to local communities.

Recent and successful examples of effective research-based, community-led and culturally responsive approach is the Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Pedagogies project conducted in South Australia and New South Wales over three years (See: Rigney et al., 2020 and Sisson et al., 2026)

### **Q7. How would a more integrated approach to research across sectors, disciplines and institutions benefit the experiences and outcomes for all learners?**

A more integrated approach to research can improve experiences and outcomes for all learners *only if* ECE is positioned as epistemically equal rather than as a stepping stone tailored to align with schooling priorities. The pushing down of school curriculum into the early years has been a historical issue. Without deliberate safeguards, integration risks further marginalising ECE by subordinating early childhood research to dominant school-centric, outcome-driven logics. Rather than describing as “integration” we suggest “coordinated” or “co-constructed” approach would be more beneficial. This allows for:

- Linked research agendas across sectors
- Distinct but connected methodologies
- Shared ethical commitments to equity and justice
- Recognition of ECE as a specialist field, not a preparatory stage

## **A PREPARED AND WELL-SUPPORTED EDUCATION WORKFORCE**

### **Q8. How can teachers and early childhood educators be attracted to and retained in the profession, particularly in areas in greatest need?**

Strengthening professional identity and status is central. Educators and teachers in early childhood education have a long history of being viewed as less professional than their teaching peers in primary and secondary school (Woodrow, 2007). Attracting and retaining people into the profession will require re-imagining the image of the early childhood teacher. Important to this endeavour is making their intellectual work visible. Creating a profession that is respected for their intellectual contributions to the field, trusted to make creative and autonomous decision based on theory, research and contextual knowledge and trusted to be responsible for creating engaging, meaningful and responsive curriculum and pedagogy is important to retaining early childhood teachers. Improving employment conditions and workload sustainability are also foundational (Fenech et al., 2021).

Research consistently shows that secure employment, competitive remuneration, reduced administrative burden, access to non-contact time, and realistic workloads are key to both attraction and retention (Rowe et al., 2026; Sullivan et al., 2022). In addition to these factors, for ECE teachers, structured induction, mentoring, and protected time for learning significantly are shown to reduce attrition, especially in high-needs and geographically remote settings. For continued professional growth, there needs to be clear development of pedagogical leadership within the early childhood sector (Gibbs, 2022; White, 2023). The university sector has a role in strengthening leadership by offering post graduate opportunities for EC teachers and leaders, including post graduate research degrees.

Investing in long term research such as nested professional development within critical participatory action research is necessary. Educators are more likely to remain in the profession when they have access to meaningful professional learning that is embedded in practice, collaboratively designed, and responsive to the communities they serve.

Aligned research investment can strengthen these efforts by identifying which recruitment, retention, and professional learning strategies are most effective for different contexts.

**Q9. How can those from diverse backgrounds be encouraged and supported to join and stay in the profession? Please share examples and strategies to help identify successful case studies that can be learned from and scaled.**

People from a range of backgrounds can be encouraged and supported to join and remain in ECE profession through intentional policies and research that recognise workforce diversity as a core professional strength rather than a deficit to be managed. Priority research should focus on how multilingualism, cultural knowledge, and community connections can be leveraged within pedagogy, leadership pathways, mentoring structures, and assessment practices.

Supporting diversity requires addressing structural conditions that disproportionately impact educators from minoritised groups, including job insecurity, limited career progression, and experiences of cultural exclusion. Research that foregrounds educator voice and examines how workplace cultures, governance arrangements, and accountability systems enable or constrain inclusion is essential. When diversity is recognised as a professional and pedagogical asset, and where teachers see their identities reflected, respected, and rewarded within the system, ECE will become a more attractive, sustainable and high-status professional.

**Q10. What are the priority areas for evaluation in educational practice? Briefly describe the specific investments, capabilities and relationships needed for effective evaluation.**

- Research that enables teachers as knowledge and curriculum workers who are intellectual leaders and decision makers.
- Research into workload issues and inequities.
- Research into professional learning and identity of those within the early childhood field.
- Research into how policies and regulatory frameworks are enacted in practice, including how inequity and workload impact across settings.
- Research into how ECE professionals create meaningful partnerships with families and communities and how these impact on educators' professional identity and family and community agency.
- Research into how learners experience continuity across early learning, school and other services.
- Research into how Aboriginal knowledges, priorities and partnerships are being valued, engaged with and fostered in meaningful ways to co-construct pedagogy and practice.

## **CROSS-SECTOR COLLABORATION AND SHARED UNDERSTANDING AND KNOWLEDGE**

### **Q11. What are the most effective ways in which cross-sector research can help address contemporary challenges in the education sector?**

Cross-sector collaboration will be most effective when ECE is valued, recognised, and respected as a critical contributor to knowledge production, rather than positioned solely as a preparatory stage within the education system, or as an economic lever for society. Research funding mechanisms should ensure early childhood research is not out-competed by larger schooling or tertiary initiatives and can sustain partnerships, workforce engagement and community-based inquiry over time.

### **Q12. How would a more joined-up approach to research across different sectors, disciplines and institutions benefit the education workforce across their career?**

A more joined-up approach to research across different sectors, disciplines and institutions has the potential to improve the professional identity and status across sectors as they engage in understandings of the complexities across the field. This can lead to more collaborative research which focuses on improving policy and practices for all children, families and educators.

## **A WORLD-CLASS CONNECTED RESEARCH CAPABILITY**

### **Q13. What are the capabilities and relationships required to enable educational research to impact change over the next decade?**

To create a world-class, connected research capability in Australia, educational research must be underpinned by strong international connectivity and purposeful researcher mobility. Supporting sustained engagement with global research communities will enable Australian education researchers to both contribute to and learn from international advances in theory, methodology and practice.

Structured international visiting scholar and exchange programs that support Australian early and mid-career scholars to spend extended periods embedded in leading and working with international research and practice-based networks are needed. Such investment in reciprocal arrangements will attract international scholars to Australian institutions, embedding global expertise within local research ecosystems and strengthening Australia's visibility and leadership internationally.

### **Q14. What is working in current approaches to research training? What isn't working?**

Tailored approaches to wrapping research training around individual and small group of researchers based on their interests and needs have worked well. The inclusion of ECRS on larger funded projects as part of mentorship has also worked well.

What is not working well, is that ECE academics are disproportionately positioned in teaching focused roles with little to no protected time for research, research training, or research development. Those ECE academics who do hold a balance research and teaching position are frequently required to absorb additional teaching loads to compensate for ongoing workforce shortages in ECE academic staffing, further eroding their research capacity. This structural imbalance limits opportunities for sustained research programs, mentoring of early-career

scholars, and engagement in national and international research networks. The lack of dedicated funding, institutional recognition, and targeted support for ECE research has constrained both the depth and visibility of ECE scholarship, reinforcing its marginal status within universities and cross-sector research agendas. Research workloads across disciplines remain problematic with universities frequently failing to provide appropriate teaching release for academics who are leading or contributing to large, externally funded research project that exceed their workload allocation. As a result, research training in ECE is fragmented and inequitable, with limited pathways for emerging scholars to develop research leadership, secure competitive funding, or participate in international collaborations that are critical for building a robust, future- focused research workforce.

**Q15. How might a national approach increase the impact of education research and build research relationships, both across sectors and within Australian and international research communities?**

A national approach can increase the impact of education research by providing strategic alignment, predictable investment, and shared infrastructure that supports collaboration across sectors and strengthens connections with international research communities. Greater national coordination can reduce fragmentation, enable long-term research planning, and support structured partnerships, including visiting scholar exchanges that build global capability and influence.

For Early Childhood Education, a national approach could elevate the profile of ECE research, strengthen cross-sector understanding of early childhood pedagogies, and address long-standing capacity constraints through sustained investment and visibility. However, nationally coordinated research also risks limiting responsiveness to local cultural, linguistic, and contextual diversity, particularly in ECE, where pedagogy and practice are contextual. To avoid these risks, a national approach must not subsume ECE within schooling agendas, but instead, acknowledge and value the multiple pedagogies and paradigm's that are unique to ECE. A national approach must be underpinned by inclusive co-design, shared governance, and built-in flexibility that values methodological plurality and community-led priorities. When designed in this way, national coordination can enhance research impact without homogenising practice, enabling both coherence and contextual responsiveness across Australian and international education research communities.

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