



South Australian Aboriginal Early Childhood Co-Design Project

WORKFORCE REPORT - MAY 2025

Strong voices, strong futures.
Community-led growth and
success in the Aboriginal Early
Years workforce.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

MTL Consulting Services and Kimberley Wanganeen Consultancy acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the lands of which we travelled.

We pay our respects to Elders past and present, along with future leaders, and extend our respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People.

We recognise the role of family as first teachers and respect the unique value of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child-raising practices.

We acknowledge and thank all those who participated in this project. Your knowledge, experiences and expertise were heard, felt and appreciated.



ABOUT THE ARTIST:

Daniel Giles, Blak Scarlett

Ngintait, Nganguruku and Yankunytjatjara man Daniel Giles lives on Erawirung Country (Riverland) and supplied some of the imagery for this report. Daniel is an accomplished artist and leader in his community where he provides educational and positive role modelling opportunities for future generations through his art and his shared knowledge and culture.

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Terminology

Throughout this report, the term Aboriginal respectfully applies to people who identify as Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander, or both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. First Nations, Aboriginal and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people may be used interchangeably throughout this report to reflect the terms used by participants or where referenced from other sources.

Glossary

Cultural safety: In the context of this report, cultural safety is understood to encompass Aboriginal cultural safety, recognising the importance of creating environments that are spiritually, socially, emotionally, and physically safe for Aboriginal peoples.

OECD: Office for Early Childhood Development

ECEC: Early Childhood Education and Care

ACGG: Aboriginal Co-Design Governance Group

ACCO: Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation

SAACCON: South Australian Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation Network

Engagement Consultants: MTL Consulting and Kimberley Wanganeen Consultancy

Executive Summary

The South Australian Aboriginal Co-Design Project in Early Childhood Education is gathering valuable stakeholder insights to enhance access to and initiatives for 3-year-old Aboriginal children to attend preschool and to support efforts to attract, develop and retain Aboriginal staff in the Early Childhood Education and Care sector.

Through carefully structured in-person and virtual engagement with stakeholders across all six South Australian Voice to Parliament regions, we gathered valuable insights from early years educators, parents, students, ACCO representatives and government staff. The key themes identified through these conversations are outlined in this report to inform the development of the South Australian Aboriginal Early Childhood Workforce Strategy. This strategy aims to address both practical and systemic barriers faced by Aboriginal people entering the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) workforce.

We heard many stories of success, where Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal staff are working in partnership with communities, families and local services to provide culturally safe, holistic care for children. With some communities having benefited from nearly 30 years of Aboriginal-led preschool education, it is important to recognise and build upon the strengths and achievements already in place.

There are many compelling reasons for Aboriginal people to join the ECEC workforce. Strong kinship ties provide a supportive and culturally-grounded foundation that enables Aboriginal teachers and educators to thrive in the sector and serve as positive role models for all children.

However, this success will likely be aligned with the growth of an Aboriginal workforce that is supported, connected and equally valued in their vital roles. The development of communities of practice, the creation of diverse and meaningful roles and a continued commitment to culturally safe and culturally aware practice will be essential for this workforce to flourish.

Access to fee-free or fee-reduced training must remain a long-term focus, alongside addressing logistical barriers that limit workforce participation. Whilst scholarships and grants can support immediate entry into the sector, long-term, systemic change in training access and delivery will be required to create pathways into the profession.

Efforts must be increased to attract and retain Aboriginal men into the ECEC workforce. Their presence not only enriches the diversity of the sector but provides powerful opportunities for role modelling and connection for all children. Working together with local schools and community services will assist with the understanding of what draws people to work in the sector, allowing for targeted recruitment and role development.

Throughout the engagement period, we also heard a strong call for ongoing and genuine co-design. This reflects past negative experiences with government-led reform, which have at times excluded Aboriginal voices. Collaborating meaningfully with communities, ACCOs and existing Aboriginal early childhood centres will lead to stronger, more respectful and effective reform that is designed with communities, not for them.

Background

Aboriginal Australians represent the oldest living continuous cultures in the world, comprising approximately 3.8% of the total Australian population and 2.4% in South Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics). After 37 years of access to Government preschool for Aboriginal children, it is imperative that the focus on Closing the Gap remains during the universal rollout of 3-year-old preschool, a point highlighted in our engagements across all regions. Early preschool education is shown to have long-term positive effects, with children benefiting from early learning experiences, better health outcomes and increased chances of success throughout their educational journey.

By 2032, every child in South Australia will have access to 15 hours of preschool per week with a program that includes teacher-led quality preschool, support from allied health professionals and organised family and community supports. There is no change to the inclusions for Aboriginal children and families, but with the universal rollout the program will be enhanced for the benefit of all, and the long-term benefits realised by all communities in South Australia.

Aboriginal children are currently eligible for 15 hours of preschool from three years of age, continuing until they start school. This initiative was introduced in 1988 as part of efforts to improve early childhood education outcomes and support Aboriginal children's development. Despite this initiative, Aboriginal children remain disproportionately represented among those who are developmentally vulnerable, while Aboriginal people remain underrepresented within the early childhood education and care (ECEC) workforce. These concerns highlight the importance of a considered Aboriginal Early Childhood workforce strategy. Investment in the Aboriginal workforce in all areas of the state will lead to increased engagement by families, increased self-determination and improved cultural understanding for the wider community.

In 2023, the Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care released its final report detailing recommendations to the South Australian State Government on planning and delivering quality universal preschool programs for three and four-year old children from 2026. South Australia is now implementing significant reforms to its early childhood education system, focusing on enhancing developmental outcomes for all South Australian children.

Key initiatives include:

- **Universal three-year-old preschool** - Ensuring all three year old children in South Australia have access to preschool education through a staged rollout (2026 - 2032), commencing in regional and rural areas.
- **Support for Aboriginal children** - The reforms include initiatives that empower Aboriginal children and communities, ensuring they receive support that respects and integrates their cultural knowledge and pedagogies.
- **Workforce development** - The government is investing to develop and support the early childhood education and care workforce. This includes financial and wrap-around supports to attract, retain and develop Aboriginal workers.
- **Infrastructure investment** - The government is also investing in preschool infrastructure.

The scope of this report addresses The Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care Report's Recommendation 22: Establishing an Early Childhood Workforce Fund, including the Aboriginal Early Childhood Workforce Strategy and underpinning initiatives. This report has been prepared alongside separate reports into the 3-year-old preschool program for Aboriginal children, further enhancing the connection between the need for an Aboriginal workforce to support the growth and development of children in early years education.

What does the ECEC landscape look like for Aboriginal workforce participation?

According to the 2024 ECEC National Workforce Census report (March 2025), there were 5,131 Aboriginal paid contact staff in ECEC services nationally (up 26.7% from 2021). They represent 3.5% of the total paid workforce at all service types, an increase from 2021 census results (2.9%). South Australia has 4.2% of the total Aboriginal ECEC workforce, and should look to other jurisdictions for learnings and opportunities, particularly following the universal 3-year-old preschool rollout in other states.

Aboriginal staff were most represented in Centre Based Day Care settings. Of note however, there are seven Indigenous-focused integrated early years services in South Australia, four of which are ACCO services, a figure that hasn't grown for more than 10 years.

One in four paid childcare staff working in remote areas nationally were Aboriginal, while the figure was one in sixteen in regional Australia. 37.2% of Aboriginal children attending ECEC services had access to at least one Aboriginal paid contact worker.

The census data also highlights that about 73% of Aboriginal teachers and educators in the state held an ECEC related qualification (compared with 81% of the total South Australian workforce) reflecting a positive trend since 2021 data and indicating progress in workforce development and training

initiatives. It is notable however that only 54% of Aboriginal staff working in remote or very remote Australia hold a formal qualification.

Nationally, 4.4% of children attending childcare services during the 2024 census period were Aboriginal (up from 3.8% in 2021), with Centre Based Day Care services having the highest proportion (5.1%). It is also important to note that the number of Aboriginal children attending childcare services increases relative to the level of remoteness. This aligns with findings from our engagements which suggested that engagement in regional and remote communities was higher due to community connection and a greater understanding of available services. Despite the limited availability of services, a higher level of awareness of the preschool offering was noted. However, substantial work is needed to ensure that all Aboriginal children have access to and families understand the benefits of 3-year-old preschool. The OECD's continued work and integrated hub model seeks to address this and should improve service connectivity whilst encouraging community engagement. These findings also align with our observation that there is no uniform approach to these issues and that a universal rollout does not mean that the same outcomes should be sought in every location.

Throughout the duration of the Phase One engagements, our team regularly provided feedback to the OECD summarising insights we were hearing from workshop participants. This immediate feedback mechanism provides the OECD with a real-time platform to ensure the genuine application of co-design principles, allowing workshop input to be captured and acted upon instantly to support an authentic co-design approach. We acknowledge that the IAP introduces several initiatives that will start to address the challenges we heard about throughout the engagement period.

Engagement methodology



DESIGN

Our consultation was methodically designed to align with project objectives and to ensure the comprehensive documentation of relevant findings.

Workshops were designed to prioritise Aboriginal culturally-safe environments for attendees to share stories and experiences.

A tailored consultation approach, adapted to suit metro, regional and remote community needs, was regularly reviewed based on feedback throughout the engagements.

ENGAGE

Our flexible approach utilised various workshop styles, such as mixed group conversations and one-on-one sessions, delivered both in person and online.

Co-design is an iterative process built on continuous feedback. Workshop questions were refined as insights emerged, and data collection methods were adapted to meet the needs of each group. Throughout, a strong focus was placed on maintaining consistency across engagements to enable meaningful thematic analysis.

ENHANCE

Extensive data and trend analysis occurred throughout the consultation process. Where gaps or assumptions were identified, these were addressed in real time as consultations progressed.

This awareness ensured that we remained mindful of the unique needs and nuances of each community, tailoring our approach and delivery as needed.



Cultural engagement principles

Guided by strong co-design principles¹ and our collective lived experience, our engagement approach ensured that the foundations for this work reflected authentic co-design. Cultural considerations were central throughout, with engagement methods tailored to suit each group and community. We recognised that building long-term, respectful relationships is essential. Co-design requires respectful, sustained relationships grounded in trust, transparency and shared accountability. Throughout our workshops and in different regions of South Australia, the messaging from participants was clear: the South Australian Government and OECD must commit to continuing authentic co-design and clearly communicating outcomes and learnings to ensure real and sustained change.

Our core principles for engagement were:



Self-determination

Self-determination features at the core of our co-design philosophy, ensuring that Aboriginal people influence and shape the design process. Co-design should support community control over decisions that affect the lives of Aboriginal children and families, empowering their right to define priorities and outcomes.



Cultural integrity

Respect for cultural protocols, knowledge systems and ways of being is essential. Our process upheld and reflected Aboriginal values and connection to Country, kinship and community.



Culturally-appropriate communication

Initial communications were tailored to a broad stakeholder group, however we adapted to a more targeted approach for different regions and groups by minimising jargon and incorporating appropriate language.



Integrating a trauma-informed approach

Facilitation must recognise and build on the strengths and resilience of Aboriginal communities and their diverse experiences. Co-design must not be problem-focused but driven by community strengths and aspirations. Avoiding deficit language and negative focus allowed engagements to be respectful and highly valuable.



Cultural empowerment

Throughout engagements, we sought to empower participants and support deeper cultural understanding with non-Aboriginal attendees. As our workshops were conducted on the lands of different Aboriginal peoples, we encouraged Aboriginal participants to “yarn up” about their communities and experiences, providing us with a highly contextualised summary from across South Australia.



Remaining agile and culturally responsive

As the engagement period progressed, the consultants adapted to the cultural needs of each community including changing dates and workshop format to ensure barriers to involvement were removed.

¹ Articulation of co-design for engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, SAACCON and the South Australian Public Sector

Engagement analysis



Maintaining co-design fundamentals in our approach, we facilitated direct communication and engagement with diverse stakeholders representing a wide range of organisations aligned with the ECEC sector. Balancing the project timeframes and scope of the stakeholder landscape, initial communications were fast-tracked and our team utilised multiple connection channels to engage with our target cohort. Given the positive engagement and willingness to remain connected from workshop participants, we encourage the OECD and ACGG to continue building on these connections through ongoing engagements.

Phase One Engagement Summary:



19

In-person workshops and roundtables facilitated



301

Individual stakeholders identified and sent project communications



400+

Project website visits



118

Attendees at engagement session (all formats)



6

Virtual sessions facilitated



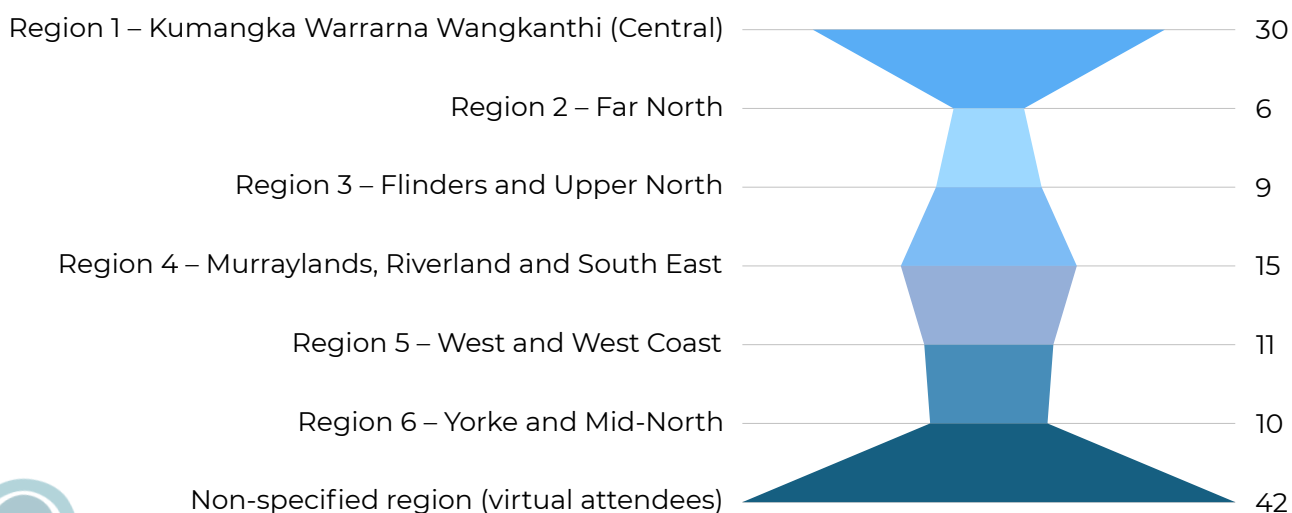
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Online surveys completed

Stakeholder analysis

A stakeholder analysis provides a critical entry-point for effective community engagement. During this process, we identified individuals, groups and organisations impacted by and influential within the sector and their communities, ensuring diverse perspectives. Through understanding stakeholders' interests and relationships, our engagement efforts were adapted and focused. This process has supported stronger decision-making and engagement uptake throughout the project's early phase.

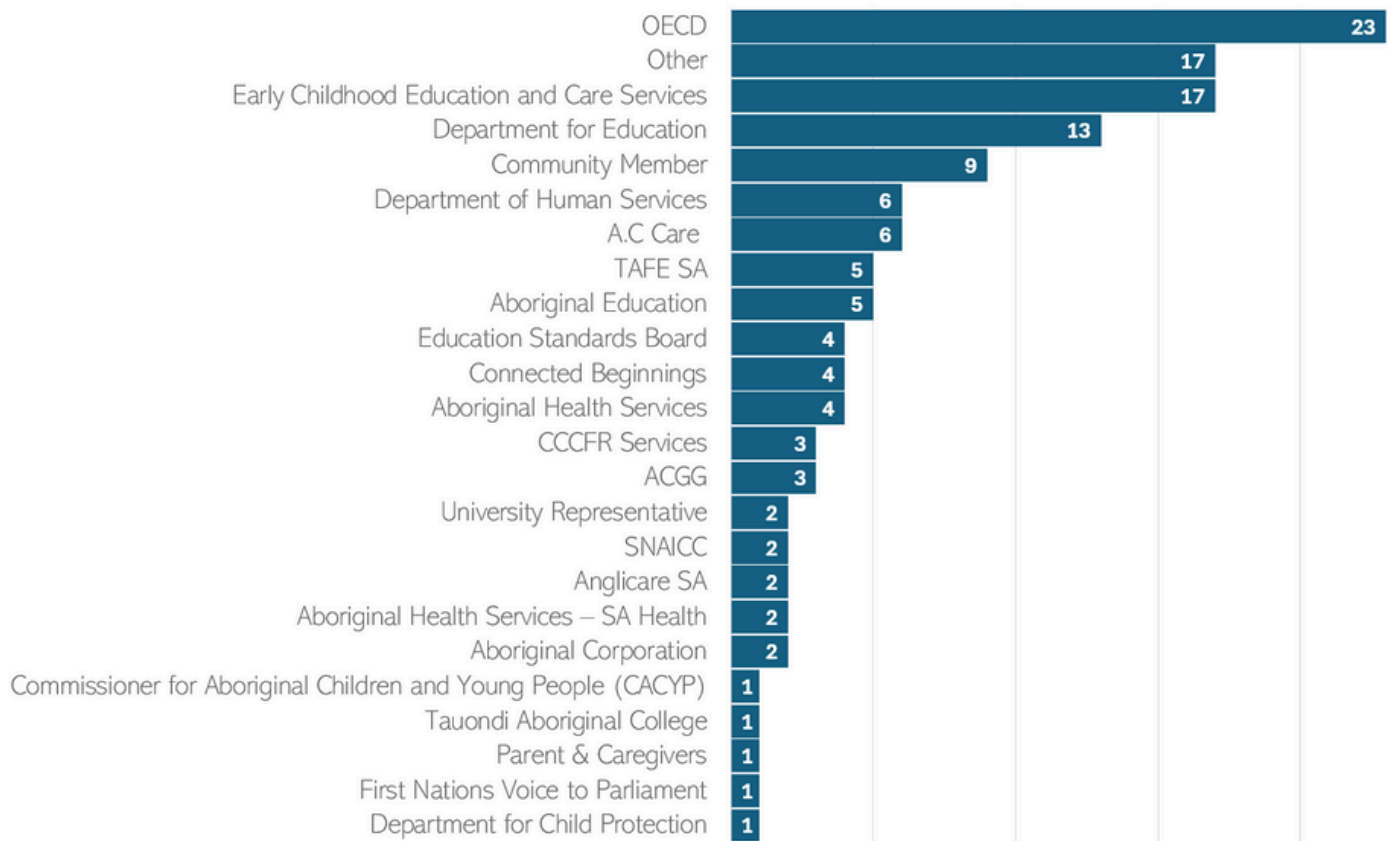
Engagement Attendance by SA Voice to Parliament Region



“I really enjoyed our collaboration today, thank you for the opportunity to connect and share insights and ideas.”



The following graph provides a representative summary of stakeholder groups that showed interest in engaging with the project. We note that many representatives offered multi-faceted views, drawing on their experiences as parents, community members and service workers. Whilst OECD representation at our workshops may be perceived as high, we note that many of these participants were Local Team representatives who based their feedback on past work and personal experiences, adding a unique level of insight to these engagements.



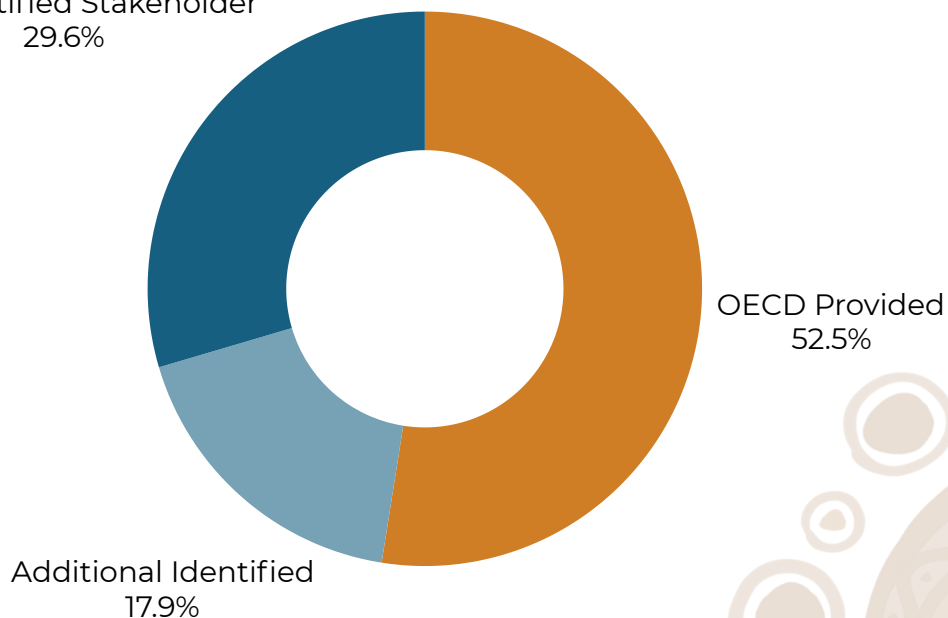
The following representative groups were identified as high-value stakeholders and invitations were also extended to participate in this project:

- Aboriginal Community Child Parent Centres (ACFC)
- Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations (ACCHOs)
- Aboriginal Health Council of South Australia Ltd (ACHSA)
- Aboriginal Registered Training Organisations (RTO's)
- Australian Government Funded Community Child Care Fund- Restricted (CCCCFR)
- Local Health Networks (LHN)
- Office of the Guardian for Children and Young People (OGCYP)
- Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Education Committee (PYEC)
- SAACCON Members
- The Minister's Early Childhood Advisory Forum (MECAF)
- KKY Aboriginal Corporation

We expanded the initial contact list by drawing on our professional and personal networks, enabling broader promotion of our engagements. This approach helped maximise reach, particularly through social media and established information-sharing networks.

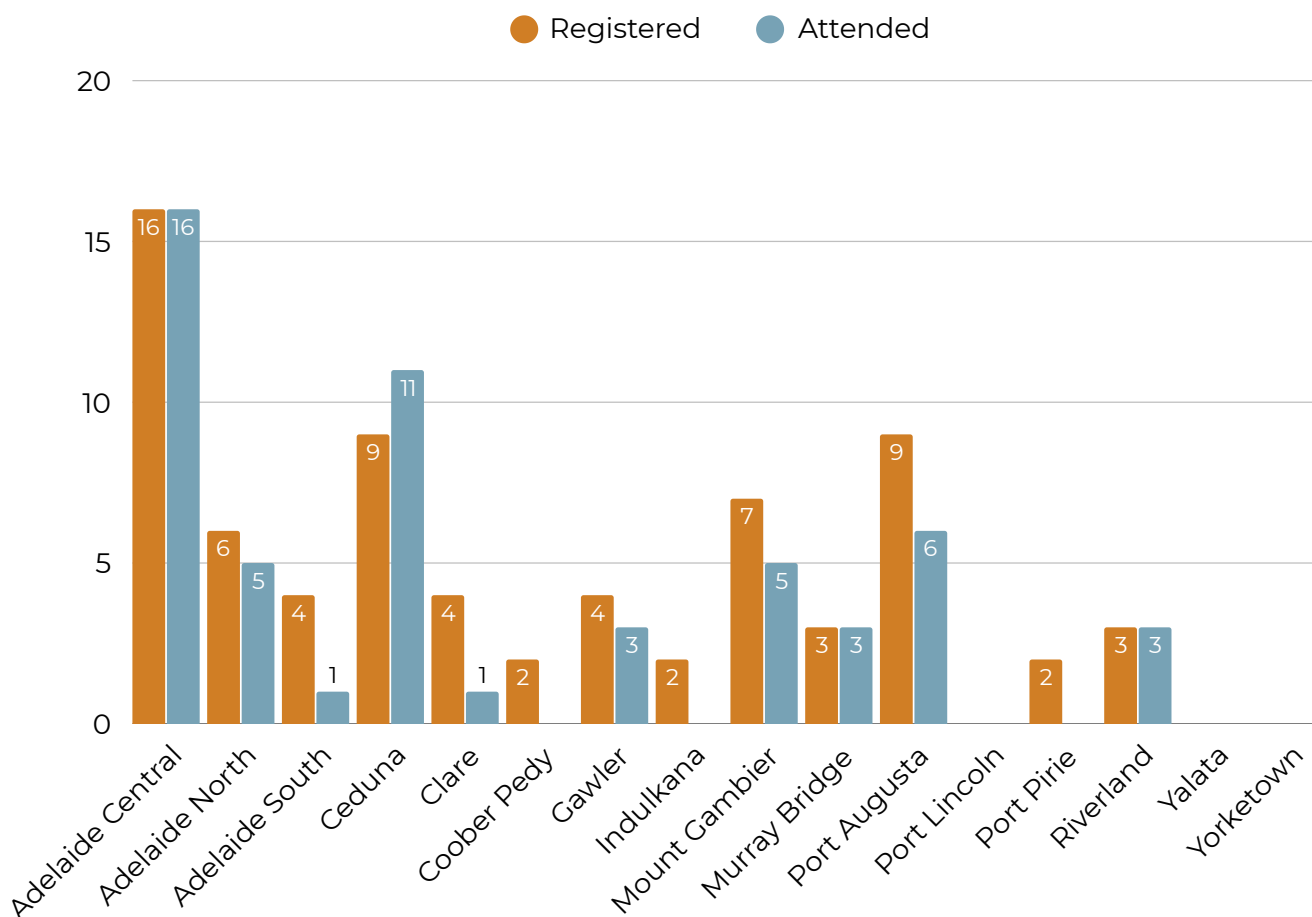
Stakeholder list acquisition

Self Identified Stakeholder
29.6%

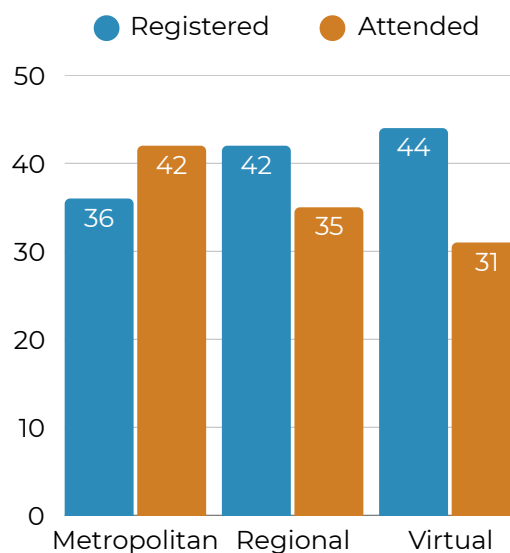
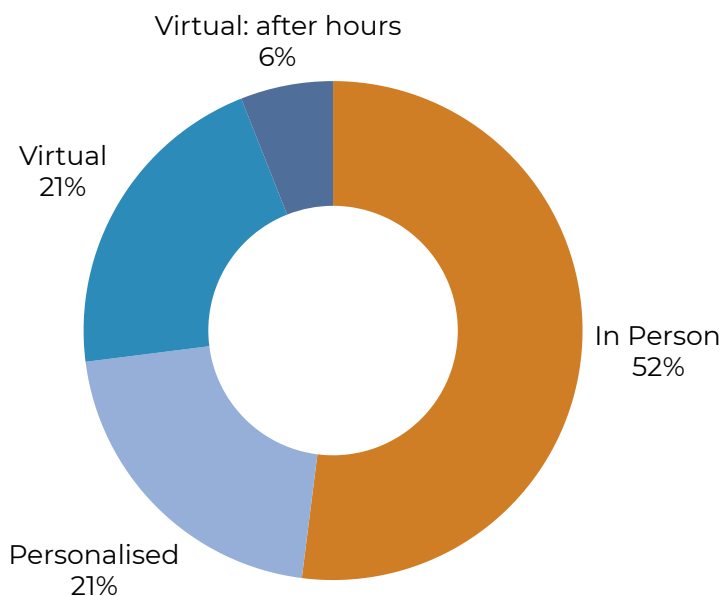


Throughout the Phase One engagements, regular analysis of stakeholder engagement data demonstrated the need for a flexible and responsive approach, tailored to the competing demands of work commitments and cultural obligations. Weekly virtual sessions were broadly promoted to ensure that regional stakeholders were aware of multiple workshop options. Furthermore, towards the conclusion of Phase One, our engagement incorporated additional personalised sessions to maximise stakeholder participation.

Attendance at each location against registrations received



Method of engagement



Engagement insights - by region

Through place-based engagement, our learnings from each region provided unique geographical, cultural and service delivery insights specific to that region. Our focus on prioritising face to face engagements ensured that diverse voices and cultural contexts were heard respectfully and these are reflected in our captured insights. We noted the distinctiveness of different Aboriginal communities, often drawing on their own history, priorities and ways of working. Genuine co-design efforts promote equity by giving all communities, particularly those in remote and regional locations, the opportunity to influence decisions that impact them, leading to stronger and more effective outcomes shaped with community.

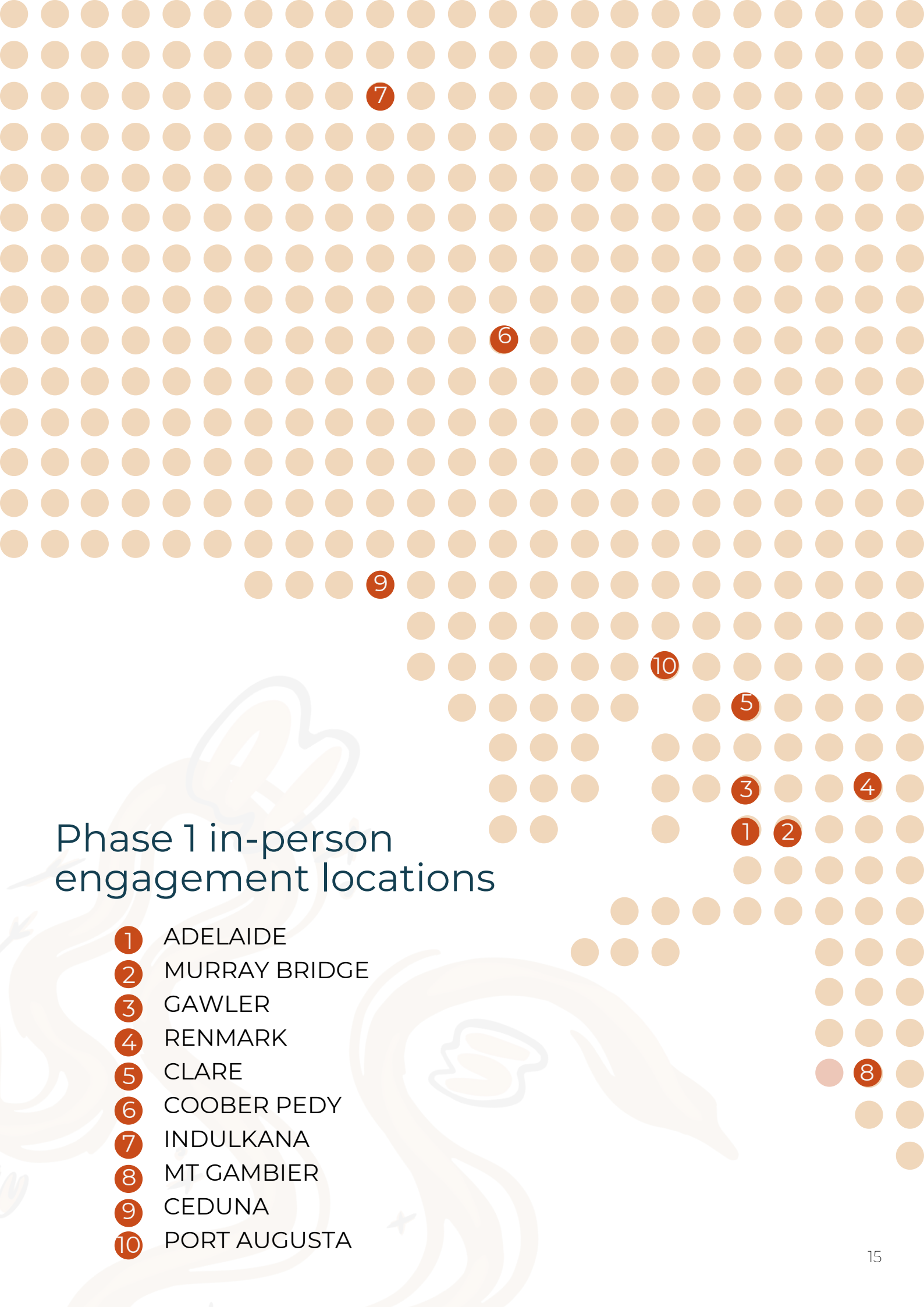
Wide-reaching insights were heard throughout engagements across the state, with key themes emerging regarding training and development, workplace culture, professional development and Aboriginal cultural safety. These themes are explored further throughout the report, but to highlight the regional nuances and differing priorities, these themes are presented here also by location.

Our target engagement locations were selected based on stakeholder analysis and aligned with the six South Australian Voice to Parliament regions. Ongoing engagement by the OECD should ensure that more locations are considered to further understanding the diversity of experiences.

Location plays a crucial role in developing the Aboriginal Early Childhood Workforce Strategy, as workforce needs vary significantly across metropolitan, regional, and remote areas. Access to training and professional development also differs widely depending on location. The OECD's commitment to reflecting this diversity through co-design and the introduction of Integrated Hubs and Local Teams will help strengthen this work further.

“Aboriginal people must be at the table as part of this reform. If we are not, our communities and our people will miss out.”





Phase 1 in-person engagement locations

- 1 ADELAIDE
- 2 MURRAY BRIDGE
- 3 GAWLER
- 4 RENMARK
- 5 CLARE
- 6 COOBER PEDY
- 7 INDULKANA
- 8 MT GAMBIER
- 9 CEDUNA
- 10 PORT AUGUSTA

Through our thematic analysis, it was important to highlight the localisation of feedback, recognising that the needs of communities and families varied between locations. At each workshop we offered participants an opportunity to consider one immediate change in regards to the Aboriginal workforce project.

These responses were captured and are summarised for each region:

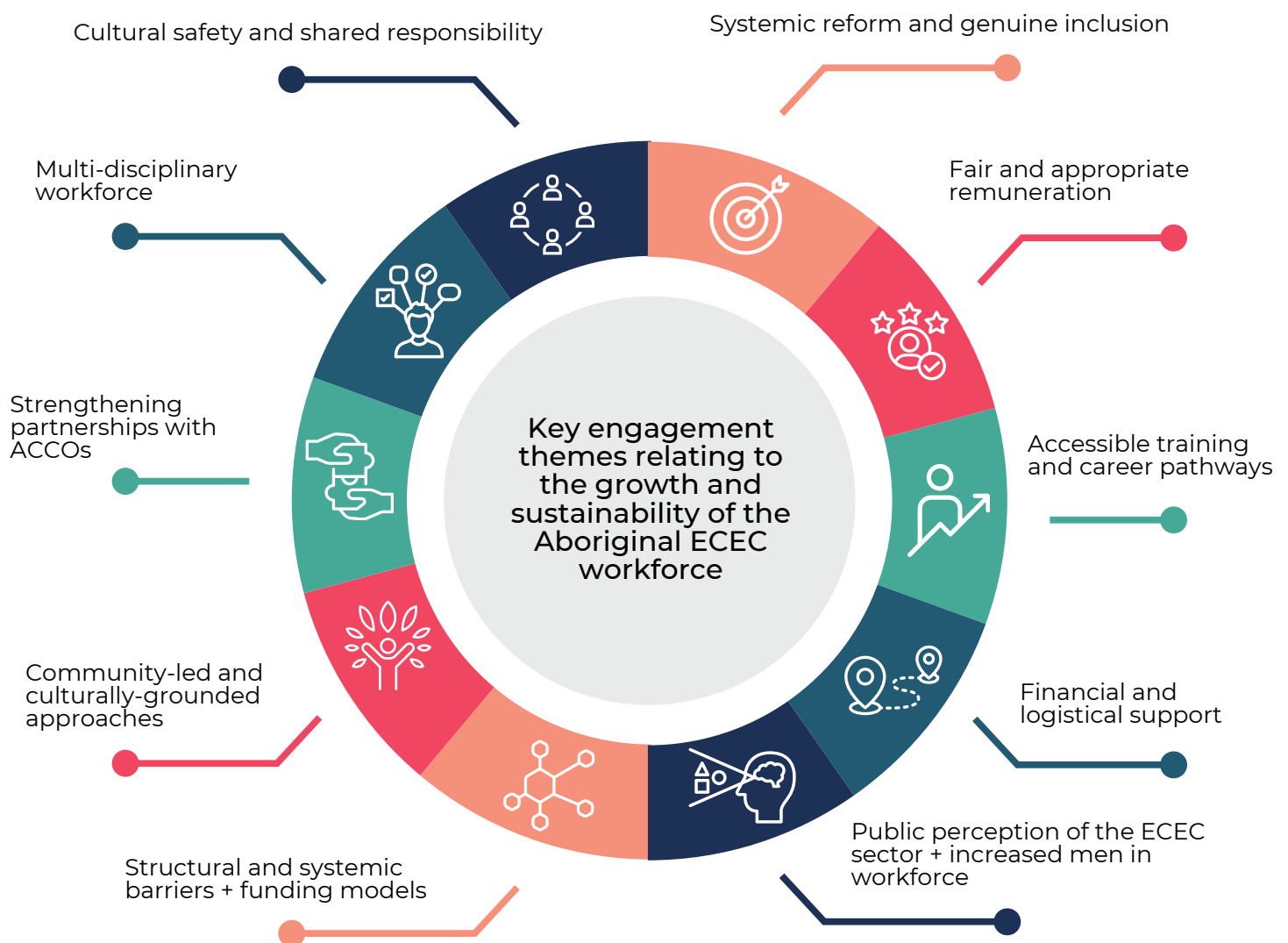
ENGAGEMENT LOCATION	PRIORITIES: If you could make one immediate change to the existing offer, what would it be?
ADELAIDE - central, north and south	• Challenge institutional structures that don't serve community interests • Support Aboriginal-led models that reflect community needs and cultural perspectives • Support Aboriginal people to engage with education, early childhood centres and study • Provide opportunities for interested potential workforce applicants to try without bureaucratic red tape (for example, WWCC as an immediate barrier for some) • Consider local training opportunities to maximise local workforce • Focus on holistic play-based learning rather than school readiness • Address cultural competency as a shared responsibility, not solely borne by Aboriginal staff
MURRAY BRIDGE	• Further develop an appreciation for the importance of early years education in supporting Closing the Gap • Early intervention is important in so many ways across many factors, including health and wellbeing and relationship development • Fee free training would encourage more people to pursue ECEC as a career pathway
GAWLER	• Paid training to enter workforce and better paying wages that fully value the importance of roles • Cheaper childcare could encourage more parents to enter the workforce • More promotion direct to the target cohort about career opportunities and pathways • More sharing of positive stories of those already working in the sector and the impact they are having
RENMARK	• Allocate and support dedicated Education Care Worker positions • Provide clear, consistent and simple transition through career levels/pathways • More resourcing for existing centres • More access to mentors and localised supports

CLARE	• For the region to have a better connection with Aboriginal communities and Elders • Improved respect, connection and trust between communities and ECEC sites
MOUNT GAMBIER	• Establish an Aboriginal Childcare Centre with a program designed by Aboriginal community and staff • Aboriginal sub-committee within existing centres to support governance and strategic decisions and to support Aboriginal staff • Transport as a key concern for access to services and training, including accessibility and connections to other transport services • Increased holistic support systems for families
PORT AUGUSTA	• Opportunity to self-select placement location, aligned with culturally-safe centres and community recommendation • Decision makers in centres are provided more education to do so in a culturally safe and informed way • Improved salary for ECEC workers • Promotion of grant opportunities (ie. worker retention grants), ensuring applications are easier to navigate • Improve public perception of ECEC sector
COOBER PEDY	• More staff, at minimum 1 x SSO and 1 x Aboriginal Education worker in childcare settings • Offer better incentives and salaries that reflects Aboriginal people's cultural knowledge and expertise • Sharing cultural knowledge with non-Aboriginal staff and being valued for this as an additional skill • Flexibility for ECEC workers with days/times that suit their lifestyle
INDULKANA	• Access to training, understanding location context and making training accessible • Affordable housing options and equitable access for staff • Ensure that children feel their responsibility and their worth through cultural programs and education • Recognising that education is not just play • Respect and value the workload of ECEC workers
CEDUNA	• Better pay to respect value of the role • More support and promotion to Aboriginal young people to enter the workforce • Locality payments not available in education but are to other government departments

Engagement insights - by theme

The thematic analysis offers an opportunity to reflect on the key issues raised during the engagement process. Based on participant feedback, as well as our own research and insights, we've outlined a series of suggestions. While not an exhaustive list, these recommendations offer a starting point for addressing current challenges faced by the Aboriginal workforce, highlighting both immediate actions and longer-term systemic reforms.

As evident in the South Australia's Early Childhood Workforce Strategy (June 2024), many of these challenges presented are not unique to the Aboriginal workforce. They are however exacerbated for this priority group, particularly in remote and regional areas. These persistent challenges include cultural load¹ expectations, limited career advancement, low pay and poor conditions, limited access to flexible education, and poor societal attitudes.



¹ We acknowledge that the term colonial load is increasingly preferred over cultural load by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. This is to ensure that it is recognised that the burden comes from colonial constructs, and not on Aboriginal culture. For the purposes of this report, we have used these terms interchangeably, based on participants' preference.



Cultural safety and shared responsibility

- Cultural safety must be embedded at all levels across early childhood services and education pathways, extending from training courses and into centres.
- Work towards making cultural responsiveness a shared responsibility, not solely borne by Aboriginal staff.
- The importance of cultural safety frameworks and practical applications must be emphasised to ensure Aboriginal perspectives are respected and integrated into educational practices.
- Participants who were connected with education courses were aware of the Certificate III module: *MACLE CHCECE054: Encourage understanding of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples' cultures* which is often taught by non-Aboriginal educators and there is no recognition for Aboriginal people to receive Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) or Recognition of Prior Experience (RPE).

What could reform look like in this area?

- Co-design development of a culturally-safe workplace policy framework specifically tailored to the ECEC sector, to provide minimum standards and best-practice examples for centre leadership and governance groups.
- Employing Elders as consultants could provide valuable insights and support for educational programs and enhance cultural safety through cultural mentorship.
- Review of policies and support mechanisms for staff to attend cultural events, particularly through a cultural leave framework that staff are aware of and encouraged to use.
- Recognition for cultural expertise whilst being aware of cultural load.
- Framework for culturally safe recruitment, including Aboriginal representation on panels and throughout the recruitment process.
- Establish and promote centre grants to create and purchase Aboriginal educational resources.
- Review cultural competency modules, ensuring they are only taught by local and reputable Aboriginal RTOs and establish RPL procedures.
- Cultural safety quality framework development for promotion and visibility of approved centres.

Systemic reform and genuine inclusion

- Representation of Aboriginal culture within preschool settings helps children connect with their culture and establishes pride in their own identity. Educators play a crucial role in creating an inclusive environment where children's cultural backgrounds are acknowledged and celebrated.



What could reform look like in this area?

- Implementing strong governance structures ensures accountability and support for Aboriginal staff, including having Aboriginal people involved in the recruitment process and decision-making.
- Review state policies to ensure they align with the human rights of Aboriginal children.
- Conduct surveys of current Aboriginal staff and their managers to understand current issues and seek localised solutions.



Fair and appropriate remuneration

- Remuneration for cultural expertise, and knowledge sharing is important for retention of Aboriginal workers. This was raised as a key concern across the state.
- Location-based incentives are limited in the sector.

What could reform look like in this area?

- Creating opportunities for Aboriginal workers to develop their own workplace awards can acknowledge their unique contributions and career pathways.
- Development of an Aboriginal employment and retention strategy, including locality and retention allowances, can incentivise people to remain in the sector.
- Salary review frameworks based on capability and cultural knowledge.
- Leadership KPIs to include directives to support the development and progression of Aboriginal staff.

Accessible training and career pathways

- It is acknowledged that new initiatives are being rolled out to address this barrier to entry into the workforce. However we heard across engagements that many people were not aware of what support was on offer, nor knew where to look.
- Concerns were raised about the accessibility of courses in regional and remote areas and the need for continued upskill in formal qualifications in order for career progression. The recently announced degree apprenticeships present an opportunity to combine structured on-the-job training, mentoring and supervision with degree-level study. This will add another study pathways for students.
- Persona analysis will support tailored opportunities for promotion to target cohorts - for example, understanding the motivations and priorities for career changers, parents already connected with centres, young people, Elders, retired community members.
- We heard from a number of participants that one of the ECEC online bachelor degrees of choice was via Deakin University's NIKERI Institute which incorporates Indigenous knowledge with flexible, community-based education. Students were unable to access South Australian scholarship and sector incentives while studying at an interstate institution.



What could reform look like in this area?

- Paid placement opportunities for young people to experience the sector alongside their studies without financial burden.
- Working alongside TAFE SA's Centre of Excellence in Early Childhood Education and Care to develop new initiatives using their existing extensive networks.
- Promotion direct to Aboriginal communities with localised messaging, using local voices and organisations.
- Respected RTOs to deliver training in-community alongside local ECEC workers who understand community needs.
- Expansion of fee-free ECEC courses via TAFE SA to include Certificate III in Early Childhood Education and Care.
- Partner with TAFE SA to promote their upcoming Early Childhood and Care Degree Apprenticeship.
- Review opportunities for financial support for those studying with an interstate institution but working or looking to work in South Australia.



Financial and logistical support

- Scholarships and grants are important to remove cost barriers to training access including covering tuition fees and materials.
- Additionally, financial support for transport, childcare and living expenses during study or placement will support Aboriginal people to balance important family and learning responsibilities.
- A number of regions cited transport as a major logistical barrier to both study and also to work. A community-driven solutions approach will be helpful to understand these barriers and possible solutions.
- On the job learning and career progression will support Aboriginal people to earn while they learn, improving retention.
- Many Aboriginal people already have the passion and lived experience needed to succeed in the ECEC workforce. Financial support ensures these strengths aren't held back by systemic disadvantage.
- Access to housing is an issue in some regional and remote areas and prevents people moving for work opportunities. We heard of concerns in Clare where there were few rental properties and in the APY Lands where the lack of housing options meant staff were sharing or disincentivised from working in areas of need.

What could reform look like in this area?

- Promotion of scholarships in regions through social media with localised case studies through local media and publications.
- Financial incentives or allowances such as cultural load payments, regional allowances or paid study time recognise the additional value and responsibility Aboriginal educators often carry and out of hours work completed as connected community members.

Public perception of the ECEC sector

- Efforts should be made to improve public perception of early childhood education as a viable and rewarding career path, particularly for men. Changing the negative perception of early years educators requires a combination of public awareness, policy change and continued sector-led advocacy to highlight the value and impact of the profession.



What could reform look like in this area?

- Sharing success stories and positive experiences from the sector can inspire others to consider careers in early childhood education.
- Early childhood settings to be supported to engage with and collaborate with local schools early to identify opportunities for students and share information about the sector based on what motivates Aboriginal people to work in ECEC.
- Promote campaigns and messaging that celebrate early childhood education as foundational to lifelong outcome.
- Perception is closely tied to value which includes fair wages, secure jobs and professional recognition which can be addressed through many other reforms.
- Encourage community champions and cultural leaders to speak to the importance of early years education.
- Create opportunities for families and communities to see educators in action and understand the breadth of their work through community events and open days.



Structural and systemic barriers

- Compliance hurdles are preventing Aboriginal people from applying for roles, namely the Working with Children Check and Police Clearance. A common misconception exists that individuals with any history are automatically ineligible to work in the ECEC sector. Despite increased awareness of the actual requirements of background checks, stigma around police histories continues to act as a perceived barrier. This underscores the importance of localised, culturally informed recruitment led by trusted Community members who are better positioned to understand personal histories and the often complex impacts of intergenerational trauma within Aboriginal communities.

What could reform look like in this area?

- Video campaign explaining how compliance checks work, what employers are looking for and case studies to show real life examples of overcoming these barriers.
- Providing accessible support for queries on these sensitive matters can empower workplace staff and decision-makers to navigate regulations.

Community-led, culturally grounded approaches

- Support is required for Aboriginal-led models that reflect community needs and cultural perspectives. This includes holistic, play-based early learning that centres social and emotional wellbeing, not school readiness, and respects when children are developmentally ready to start school. This aligns with the Royal Commission's recommendation to broaden the definition of early childhood education.



What could reform look like in this area?

- Forming working groups that include community members can help establish solid foundations for sustainable practices rather than temporary solutions.
- Continued funding for localised initiatives and solutions will support community ideas and empower local staff.



Funding models for Aboriginal workforce

- There is a clear opportunity to reform workforce funding models to better reflect the unique and valued contributions Aboriginal people bring to the ECEC sector. While individual centres retain discretion over employment, changes to role descriptions and remuneration structures could formally acknowledge non-accredited skills, lived experience and cultural knowledge. This aligns with a growing recognition across both public and private sectors of the distinct value Aboriginal staff contribute beyond formal qualifications. Such reforms would also help address the cultural load frequently raised by participants during the engagements, ensuring that this responsibility is appropriately recognised and supported.
- Review existing education models such as Aboriginal Community Education Officer (ACEO) to identify opportunities for improvement and better support for Aboriginal workforce development in non-degree qualified ECEC roles.

What could reform look like in this area?

- Create dedicated funding for additional roles such as Cultural Leads, Elders in Residence, and Aboriginal Community Education Officers (ACEOs) as central roles in centres and members of the leadership team.
- Focus on long-term secure funding models as a shift away from short-term or project-based contracts.
- Guarantee secure funding for identified Aboriginal positions.
- Ensure funding models are co-designed with Aboriginal communities and ACCOs, not designed within Western frameworks.

Increased opportunities for Aboriginal men in ECEC

- Aboriginal men remain a minority in the workforce. It is recognised that it is hugely positive to have males working in childcare centres. In some cases these males may be the only positive role model some children will have.
- Some stigma exists for males to be caring for children and more work needs to be done in this regard and depends largely on the service and how males are supported.



What could reform look like in this area?

- Communications and media campaigns should feature males equally alongside women in the workforce.
- Share stories and case studies of Aboriginal men succeeding in early childcare roles to break down outdated perceptions.
- Promotion of ECEC more broadly as a respected career path.
- An expansion of roles within ECEC would see increased opportunities for men to take on different roles within centres focused on role modeling and teaching.
- Ensure workplaces are inclusive of Aboriginal male perspectives, with connection to Communities of Practice and networking opportunities to avoid isolation.
- Consider a male-specific mentoring program, particularly for students or early-career professionals.
- Promote alternative entry points to the profession, such as recognising lived experience or caring responsibilities within community and family.
- Develop Aboriginal male-identified roles, supported by wraparound mentoring and cultural supervision.



Strengthening partnerships with ACCOs

- Successful early childhood education for Aboriginal children relies on establishing trust between service providers and Aboriginal families. This trust is built through consistent, respectful communication and genuine engagement with the community, so investing in ACCOs is crucial, as they already understand the unique cultural context and needs of the families they serve.
- Establishing Aboriginal childcare centers can provide culturally relevant education.
- Initiatives like Connected Beginnings and the Early Years Support Program (not currently available in SA) seek to create partnerships that enhance support for Aboriginal children and families.

What could reform look like in this area?

- Among other established ACCOs, Aboriginal Family Support Services (AFSS) are well-placed to partner with OECD in the establishment of community-led Aboriginal childcare centres in areas where they already operate services. This could present a cultural model of care including learning and teaching.
- ACCO partnerships would maintain a focus on keeping and connecting families and communities together.

Multi-disciplinary workforce

- The growth of Aboriginal allied health professionals should be seen alongside development of the ECEC sector.
- The OECD's Integrated Hub model brings together professionals from diverse fields to work collaboratively to support children's development.



What could reform look like in this area?

- A review of roles within the sector to be broader than qualified educators. Role models, cultural mentors and multi-skilled professionals can be equally valued.
- Identified roles could include coordinators or Hub leaders who facilitate partnerships across sectors and professions. Additionally, program officers can be embedded in local teams and centres to help implement unique programs to address community needs.



Case studies

Aboriginal childcare centres are often leading the delivery of culturally-relevant education. Our stakeholder analysis identified a number of Aboriginal childcare centres and programs which should be used as models of success for non-Aboriginal centres looking to expand their cultural competency or for the OECD to consider expansion of these program models.

Some of these centres have been operating successfully for many years, offering Aboriginal 3-year-old preschool since the 80s. The educators we spoke with have seen the positive impact that early years education in a culturally-safe environment with connected communities and strong Aboriginal workers.

Playgroup and Occasional Care models can be used to connect with Aboriginal families in the early years in a more flexible way. This early building of trust can enhance opportunities to educate families about childcare and preschool services available in the area and also connect with potential Aboriginal workforce members through non-teaching roles.

“The HIPPY Program in Murray Bridge is working extremely well. This program provides work pathways for people that are disengaged (flexible career entry points), and has a positive impact in the community.”

PORT LINCOLN CHILDREN'S CENTRE

Port Lincoln Children's Centre is a great example of Aboriginal-led best-practice, the staff understand the needs of their community and workforce and as a result have some of the highest attendance for Aboriginal preschoolers in the state.

HIPPY PROGRAM *Murray Bridge*

Programs like ASQ-Trak and the Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters (HIPPY) in Murray Bridge demonstrate the potential for early intervention to support Aboriginal children and their families.

HIPPY is a fun, free home-based early learning and parenting program working with young children in the preschool years.

The ASQ-TRAK Training Program's core mission is to improve equitable access to culturally-appropriate developmental monitoring services and child development support.

We also heard about the HIPPY program in Davoren Park which trained mums who are now qualified educators.

KURA YERLO *Adelaide*

The Kura Yerlo Children's Centre exemplifies a community-driven approach that prioritises Aboriginal leadership and support structures. Operating as an ACCO since 1983, Kura Yerlo provides services including childcare, youth case management and mentoring, adult disability and aged care.

Kura Yerlo offers the Connected Beginnings program which provides support to families and children aged 0-5 years and seeking to strengthen families and communities more holistically.

TAIKURRENDI *Christies Beach*

The Taikurrendi Children and Family Centre is a model for wraparound services and community connection.

With speech pathologist and occupational therapy support services available to children, their focus is on providing education, health and wellbeing support.

They offer a Nunga Mi: minar playgroup for Aboriginal mums and carers as an opportunity to connect with community.

MINYA BUNHII *Ceduna*

As a community Children's Centre, Minya Bunhii provides childcare services to families experiencing financial or family-related pressures so that their children are ready for school entry.

As a respected centre with strong ties to the community, they are an example of supporting the growth of their Aboriginal children through cultural safety, belonging and strong relationships.

CHILDREN'S GROUND

"Children's Ground," also known as "Ampe-kenhe Ahelhe" in Arrernte, is a First Nations-led organisation in Central Australia that focuses on empowering children and their families through education, culture and community development, working with the Arrernte people and their traditional lands.



Early childhood education should be about supporting our kids and their families to thrive, strong in culture and connection to family and kin.



Benefits of an Aboriginal workforce for communities

An Aboriginal workforce in the ECEC sector offers impactful and wide-reaching benefits for communities and all children. Aboriginal educators offer deep cultural insights and wisdom into early childhood settings which benefits not only children, but adds value to organisations and staff. These educators teach culture and language in ways that are meaningful and respectful, sharing generational knowledge that connects children to identity and Country. Their presence ensures cultural authenticity in centres and creates safer and more inclusive environments, building trust between families and centres which is critical to ongoing relationships. A culturally diverse and safe workforce helps break down institutional barriers and prepares children for a more culturally inclusive world beyond their early years, supporting efforts to close the gap by embedding Aboriginal leadership where it matters most.

Beyond the notion of recruiting additional Aboriginal people into the ECEC workforce, systemic changes and a broader view of ECEC roles are required to ensure those staff are afforded every opportunity for long term success. This includes appropriate remuneration and managing the increasing cultural load aspects that many Aboriginal people discussed in our workshops. While our engagements highlighted a number of centres and leadership teams demonstrating strong practice in retaining and respecting Aboriginal staff, these examples were the exception rather than the rule. The broader sector still requires significant effort to strengthen Aboriginal workforce participation and embed culturally safe and supportive employment practices across all centres.

→	Culturally-safe learning environments	Aboriginal educators and administrators bring cultural knowledge, language and identity into early learning settings, encouraging Aboriginal children to feel safe and proud in their own identity which strengthens wellbeing, confidence and readiness to learn. This contributes to intergenerational healing.
→	Local employment and leadership	Growing a local Aboriginal workforce creates career pathways and community leadership, enabling people to work close to home, contribute to community wellbeing and be role models.

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| → Empowerment and self-determination | An Aboriginal-led workforce supports self-determination by ensuring services are community-informed and shaped. It shifts power and strengthens local voices in early childhood decision-making and program design. |
| → Cultural authenticity | Continuous engagement with Aboriginal communities ensures that educational practices remain relevant and beneficial. |
| → Greater parent engagement | Providing end-to-end support for Aboriginal children involves collaboration between families, educators, and community members. By establishing trust early, educators are better able to engage with parents and support them as they navigate life with their children. |
| → Breaking down institutional barriers | Role modeling by Aboriginal educators encourages children to pursue careers and education, challenging stigma around education that may exist in Aboriginal communities. |
| → Breaking cycles of disadvantage | Empowered children grow into confident adults who contribute positively to society, breaking cycles of disadvantage. It is evident that children who feel connected to their culture are more likely to succeed academically and socially. |
| → Education for all | Increased awareness of Aboriginal culture among non-Aboriginal educators and students promotes respect and understanding. Meanwhile, cultural events and activities provide opportunities for all children to learn about diversity and inclusion. |



"[We need] culturally safe, holistic teaching and learning shared and passed down through generations of our own First Nations people"



Attracting Aboriginal people to the workforce

Attracting additional Aboriginal people to the ECEC workforce is essential to improving outcomes for Aboriginal children and strengthening the sector. Aboriginal educators offer valuable cultural knowledge and lived experience that create culturally-safe and inclusive learning environments where children feel connected and supported. Their presence supports stronger relationships with families, builds community trust and provides positive role modelling for children. Increasing Aboriginal representation also promotes workforce diversity more broadly, challenges systemic inequities and opens meaningful career pathways that contribute to self-determination and community wellbeing. Aboriginal people discussed how they are drawn to the early childhood workforce through a strong alignment of cultural values, personal fulfilment, family-friendly conditions, and perceived career growth. To maintain and grow this workforce, continued investment in culturally safe environments, flexible study and career pathways, and equitable employment conditions is essential.

Throughout our engagements, we heard about strategies to attract Aboriginal people to the ECEC workforce which are further explored below.

→ Cultural connection

Cultural representation is an important factor in working with health and education services. Many Aboriginal people are motivated to be trusted and familiar faces in their communities, therefore being role models and cultural leaders.

We heard that many people had a strong desire to ensure Aboriginal culture and perspectives are embedded in early learning environments, often driven by the desire to pass down cultural knowledge.

→ Sense of purpose

Being able to make a meaningful difference in community settings, especially in the lives of Aboriginal children gives strong job satisfaction.

→ Kinship culture

We consistently heard about the strong sense of kinship that forms Aboriginal culture. Many people grew up caring for younger family members, making early childhood a natural career path when training and qualifications are accessible.

→ Desire to break the cycle

Economic independence and improved life outcomes through employment are strong motivators. We also heard about the desire to create better futures for the next generation which is a strong principle for early years education.

→ Culturally safe workplaces

Centres and leadership teams that actively work towards cultural safety through inclusive policies and practices are more attractive. This includes equitable work conditions, including recognition of cultural responsibilities and sincerity for embracing reconciliation.

→ Opportunity for influence

The ability for Aboriginal staff to shape curriculum is a strong motivator, ensuring that Aboriginal perspectives are included and celebrated.

→ Inclusive recruitment practices

Increased community outreach, and a move away from traditional recruitment approaches will help with attraction to the workforce. More promotion across all media, not just for Aboriginal programs is vital for visibility and raising awareness of the opportunities within the sector.



Aboriginal staff bring more to a role than an SSO would – [we] bring kinship and culture, community knowledge – and this is undervalued. It is not a 9 - 5 job, we are community leaders.

Addressing barriers to employment

Despite strong cultural and community motivations to work with children as outlined above, Aboriginal people face multiple barriers that limit entry to the ECEC workforce. We heard about many of these during engagements and those working in the sector shared their own experiences and how they navigated career progression. The barriers to Aboriginal employment in early childhood education are intrinsically multi-faceted incorporating various historical, social and systemic factors. Addressing them requires a community-led approach that improves training access, strengthens career pathways ensures workplace inclusion.

→ Low wages

As a key priority across all areas of the state, we heard that increased wages and recognition of cultural expertise would be highly regarded.

Location allowances and regional and remote rent assistance were cited as incentivisers, particularly in regional and remote areas.

→ Training and development

Another barrier is the lack of local training opportunities, particularly in remote and regional areas. Aboriginal people were less likely to relocate for study, preferring to remain connected with their community. Additionally, for those who do commence study, there can be a lack of study support although we acknowledge there are positive examples such as the University of South Australia Aboriginal Pathway Program that supports Aboriginal people with entry into university and beyond. This program is offered in a number of regions we visited, including Mt Gambier, Ceduna and metropolitan Adelaide.

Whilst such programs exist, we also listened to the lack of cultural safety in some university or TAFE settings, including dismissive attitudes to Aboriginal knowledge and values.



Accessible career pathways

We heard that there should be clearer and supported pathways from entry-level roles to leadership or teaching positions. Although infrequent, we observed encouraging examples where Aboriginal staff were highly regarded and supported into leadership and positions of responsibility; however, this was entirely dependent on individual managers and their commitment to culturally responsive leadership.



Targeted recruitment

Whilst RAP targets and employment targets are evident, challenges were discussed regarding the effective recruitment of Aboriginal people into the sector. Advertising roles in culturally relevant spaces is important to increase awareness, alongside additional promotional work of centres that are welcoming to Aboriginal staff. Promotion of traineeship or taster opportunities in culturally-safe centres presents an opportunity to connect with and mentor Aboriginal people into the workforce. Furthermore, improved connectivity and engagement with schools would yield clarity for school leavers regarding ECEC employment and career pathways.



Personal barriers

Many Aboriginal people were already informally caring for family and community members, which limits capacity to work or study formally, and when roles and hours are rigid, this can present ongoing barriers. Additionally, negative experiences with the education system can be a deterrent from re-engaging with it as students or educators. The complexity of Aboriginal family structures and community dynamics requires tailored approaches to workforce development.

→	Insufficient influence	Initiatives or programs may fail to reflect Aboriginal values and needs if Aboriginal people are not actively involved in their design and leadership.
→	Societal issues	Tall poppy syndrome and lateral violence within communities were cited as a hindrance for the effective recruitment and longevity of Aboriginal staff in the workforce.
→	Logistical barriers	Geographic isolation in rural or remote areas present fewer opportunities to engage with the sector. Additionally, poor transport infrastructure can make study or employment harder to access. Housing accessibility and affordability can restrict the ability for workforce growth in high-need areas. In some cases housing is not available for non-qualified staff, further limiting who can move to regions to join the ECEC workforce.
→	Job security	The high rates of casual employment, and identified roles that are linked to student numbers creates a lack of job security and contributes to staff not feeling valued for the work they do.

Knowledge
sharing

Attracting to
the workforce

Addressing
barriers

Sustainable
workforce

Building a sustainable workforce

We heard at many engagements that current Aboriginal ECEC staff sought greater recognition for their cultural expertise and knowledge. This recognition follows examples of additional cultural load that they had taken on, often without question. Whether this recognition is financial or personal, or a combination, requires additional analysis, however this is a growing systemic concern that requires immediate consideration.

→ Centre support

The OECD and Department for Education must ensure that centres and centre leadership are supported and provided the resources needed for success. Communities of Practice can be an effective mechanism for centre staff to connect about common issues and have access to support outside of their own centre.

→ Networking and professional development

Aboriginal people consistently expressed that they feel better supported when connected to a broader network of other Aboriginal people. Establishing networking and development sessions specialised to the ECEC sector would be beneficial, in a similar way that the Office of the Commissioner for Public Sector Employment facilitates their own Aboriginal Leadership Program. Resourcing and allowing staff time to engage in a culturally-safe space will support personal development.

→ Leave and entitlements

Ensuring staff are aware of leave and entitlements, particularly with regards to cultural leave, will support staff to find a healthy work life balance, vital in any workforce but perhaps more prevalent for Aboriginal staff who may require support to return to country or participate in cultural or Sorry Business.

Looking forward

There was a strong call for continued engagement with communities across the state to ensure that the foundations of young people's education are robust, culturally informed and grounded in a holistic understanding of the diverse experiences and identities of Aboriginal peoples. The focus on early years education as a pathway to healthy futures reflects a broader commitment to community wellbeing, connection and long-term development.

Sustained, engaging co-design

The goal of co-design is to create a safe space to understand all perspectives and collectively shape solutions. Ongoing efforts to partner with ACCOs and community stakeholders to deliver early years reform will enable the OECD to support Aboriginal leaders and communities in the development of these important programs. Continuous evaluation and adaptation of programs are necessary to ensure they meet the changing needs of Aboriginal communities.

Continued engagement

It is important to continue engaging with the sector at a state-wide level. Our Phase Two approach will help maintain strong relationships with stakeholders and support ongoing, collaborative conversations. However, continued feedback and co-design are essential to address the complex issues affecting Aboriginal people in the ECEC workforce.

Culturally-responsive communication

In conjunction with this project, the OECD has developed valuable initiatives and opportunities such as the scholarships and training opportunities. The importance of continued promotion, in a manner that reflects culturally-appropriate language, should be prioritised and consideration given to targeting regional and remote communities through local events and community social groups.

Truth telling

Truth-telling acknowledges the historical and ongoing injustices experienced by Aboriginal people. It helps identify the structural roots of current inequalities and lays the groundwork for meaningful reform. Without an honest awareness of the past and genuine attempts to listen and engage, reconciliation cannot progress. Our engagements highlighted many positive examples of positive work taking place in childcare centres and communities, but it should not rely on the work of a few individuals. Systemic and policy enablers must continue to be reviewed to ensure Aboriginal people have access to fair and just opportunities that promote self-determination. With the early childhood reforms, the South Australian government has a prime opportunity to lead the way in co-design and support for Aboriginal children, families and communities.



Young children need to grow up strong in their families and culture. Most early childhood services lack cultural insight and separate children from their families rather than strengthening the family unit. Holistic family supports are needed and education for family on how to best support the learning and development of their young ones.

About us



Marius Liddle

*Founder and Managing
Director*



Marius is a proud Arrernte person living on Kaurna Country. Having grown up in the Riverland, Marius values the inclusion and diversity of regional representation and maintains connections with the various regional communities throughout South Australia and beyond.



**Kimberley
Wanganeen**

*Owner and Principal
Consultant*



Kimberley Wanganeen is a proud South Australian First Nations woman, born and raised on Boandik Country, and living and working on Kaurna Country since 2005.



Jamahl Liddle

Consultant



Jamahl is a proud Arrernte man who has been living and working on Kaurna country since 2011. Growing up in a country town, Jamahl is committed to ensuring Aboriginal communities voices are heard and valued.

MTL Consulting Services (MTL) and Kimberley Wanganeen Consultancy (KWC) have formed a consortium to deliver this project, combining their unique strengths and extensive experience in working with Aboriginal communities and organisations. This partnership leverages their complementary expertise to deliver comprehensive and culturally sensitive solutions.

MTL has six years of dedicated experience in effectively engaging with a diverse range of Aboriginal stakeholders across South Australia. The consultancy has built a strong reputation for culturally appropriate, efficient, and goal-oriented project co-design, community engagement, and strategic planning.

KWC, established in 2022, brings specialised knowledge in Aboriginal engagement, workplace Aboriginal cultural safety initiatives and sector knowledge of domestic and family violence, child protection and housing.

Together, MTL and KWC bring expertise across various social issues, seeking to create impactful, culturally appropriate and sustainable outcomes for Aboriginal communities in South Australia. Their collaboration for this project underscores a commitment to empowering communities and fostering long-term partnerships that address critical needs and enhance the well-being of Aboriginal people.

