EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR EARLY START UPDATE

Professor Paul Chandler, Executive Director

Time sure does fly when you are having fun! The Early Start Project Team has been working tirelessly to build and maintain the strong momentum of the Early Start initiative. It is timely in this 3rd newsletter for me to provide you with an update on where we are at. Early Start’s national and international reputation is growing by the day and we are being inundated with requests to be involved with Early Start – it is a nice problem to have!

Construction of the Early Start Facility is progressing well towards the end of 2014. Following the outstanding success in securing competitive external research funding, the University has acknowledged the importance of Early Start to its overall research profile and has created the Early Start Research Institute.

The re-design of the Early Years program with an emphasis on flexible delivery is tracking well. There is much enthusiasm for the development of the Bachelor of Social Work and the Bachelor of Social Sciences which will be offered from 2015 - socialsciences.uow.edu.au/about/courses

The design of the Early Start Discovery Space and the innovative experiences that it will offer is complete. The University is currently supporting Early Start through a fundraising campaign to secure donations to support the Early Start Discovery Space - www.uow.edu.au/donations/annualappeal

The roll out of the technology bundles to the Early Start Engagement Centres is on schedule with 4 of 38 now completed and 10 ready for installation. To support our Early Start Engagement Centres a Forum was held at the University on Friday 7 February and this was a great success. The positivity of all involved was very evident and this bodes well for the development of an active and sustainable network of early years educators.

In summary, it is all systems go at Early Start and I hope that you enjoy our latest newsletter!
THE VERY FIRST EARLY START FORUM

The inaugural Early Start Forum was held in February at UOW’s Wollongong campus and proved to be a great success for all involved. The forum was the first opportunity for senior staff from the 38 Early Start Engagement Centres across regional and rural NSW to meet. It provided an opportunity for all involved to learn more about the Early Start initiative, networking opportunities across the Engagement Centres and sharing ideas with the Early Start team for future collaboration.

The forum began with a traditional welcome from Executive Director of Early Start, Professor Paul Chandler to the 51 participants and this sense of excitement and camaraderie marked the two days of the forum.

Highlights from the forum were enthusiastic presentations on Thursday evening by some Early Start supporters setting the scene. Mr Bill Feld (CEO of Big Fat Smile) and Ms Jane Morgan (Director of the Bellambi Point Community Pre-school, BFS) talked about the significant outcomes experienced by children and families through being the pilot Early Start Engagement Centre at Bellambi since 2011. Ms Morgan mentioned that when the new interactive technologies were first provided to her Centre through the Early Start project the technologies seemed almost revolutionary at the time. Ms Morgan’s team quickly integrated seamlessly the technologies into centre activities and now are a pivotal part of the day to day life of their preschool community.

Representatives from Electroboard, Ms Sue Beveridge (National Education Advocacy Manager) and Ms Helen Lacey (Education Consultant National Manager), noted the close relationship they have had with the Early Start team from the beginning, ensuring that the technology being delivered to the 38 Centres represents industry ‘best practice’.

The second day of the Forum was taken up with a range of activities in the morning: a ‘hard hat’ tour of the Early Start Facility currently under construction; a ‘demonstration’ Early Start Engagement Centre containing the IT bundles to be supplied by Electroboard to each Centre as well as furniture and resources provided by ‘Educational Experience’.

A presentation by Mr Dan Day (Founder) of Kinderloop highlighted the opportunities for parents and caregivers to use technologies to connect with their children at pre-school and a presentation by Mr Shane Hill (Founder) of the learning experiences offered by Skoolbo to facilitate numeracy and literacy skills with children. Both Kinderloop and Skoolbo have recently commercially partnered with Early Start, ensuring that the 38 Early Start Engagement Centres have direct access to their resources for no cost.

As Friday continued, a presentation by two researchers from the Faculty of Social Sciences, Dr Irina Verenikina and Dr Rose Dixon, focused on the value of digital technologies for children with special needs and also the importance of opportunities for ongoing professional development for educators. Professor Tony Okely (Director of Research – Early Start) presented an overview of the research agenda that is currently being developed, gathering information about the Centres through a survey designed to identify baseline data. Professor Eeva Leinonen (Deputy Vice Chancellor – Education) also spoke.
briefly and welcomed all participants to the University.

A final interactive presentation was provided by Mr Adam Selinger (Project Officer ESDS) and Ms Michelle Gregory (Early Start Learning Technologist). Participants were provided with an opportunity to take part in ‘Kids Dig’, a simulated archaeological dig experience designed by Adam. The presentation demonstrated how technology may be integrated into the learning experience and participants were provided with ideas that will allow them to replicate the experience on return to their Centres.

To close the Forum, questions and suggestions directed through a panel discussion were raised by participants about the ongoing involvement of their Centres with Early Start and also with the broader University. The enthusiastic spirit of the Forum pervaded the discussion with a commitment from all involved to strengthen the relationships that were established.

It was a very productive two days and we thank all participants for taking time out of their busy schedules. Many participants covered significant distances to attend the forum and for everyone in attendance this meant disruptions to family and work commitments. We sincerely thank those who were able to participate – their involvement enriched the forum – and we look forward to catching up in the near future with those who were unable to attend. We would also like to express our appreciation to UOW Faculty of Social Sciences and Electroboard that made the Forum possible and all the presenters who made such valuable contributions to the Forum.
KINDERLOOP & SKOOLBO PARTNERSHIP AGREEMENT

On 7 February 2014, Early Start entered into a commercial partnership agreements with Skoolbo and Kinderloop. These software programs will be rolled out to the 38 Early Start Engagement Centres in conjunction with the IT packages they will receive at no cost to Centres.

The Skoolbo learning software will be available free of charge and will assist children in gaining and developing literacy and numeracy skills through game-play on interactive whiteboards and SMART screens, while at the same time providing teachers and parents with a range of data collection tools that will assist in improving the learning experience for children.

A separate program called Kinderloop is a SMART phone application that connects parents with preschools, allowing them to see photos and updates direct from the classroom in real time.

The agreement with the educational software providers will build on Early Start’s strategic teaching, research and community engagement initiative to drive positive social change by enhancing the learning and development experiences of children, families and communities. Both partnerships drew huge national attention and local and national media and we are pleased that there is now a growing and substantial support base for all aspects of Early Start, particularly our connections with communities.

BARRACK HEIGHTS PRESCHOOLERS TRAVEL TO ANTARCTICA FROM THEIR CLASSROOM

James MacDiarmid had been working as a curriculum consultant for Big Fat Smile when he briefly mentioned his upcoming Antarctica trip to staff at Barrack Heights Preschool. The preschool had been trialling Kinderloop and recognised the technology could be used to follow James’ Antarctic journey in real-time through videos and photos. Kinderloop is a secure network that allows families to remotely view children’s learning and content uploaded by educators.

It also created an opportunity for James to later visit the preschool in person, providing children with an opportunity for deeper thinking or to ask burning questions about life on the continent. Preschool director, Fay Gowers, stated it was an ‘exceptional opportunity’ for the children and staff of Barrack Heights to follow the expedition and learn side by side. ‘The children really enjoyed the journey which allowed them to learn many new things and experience an opportunity many adults can only dream of.’
The Early Start Research Institute (ESRI) is one of 11 Research Strengths at the University of Wollongong (UOW). ESRI’s vision is to be a leader in conducting and disseminating interdisciplinary child, youth, and family research that has a real impact on people’s lives, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds and communities.

ESRI’s current research focuses on three intersecting themes:
- Public Health
- Social Inclusion
- Learning, Design, and Cognition

ESRI researchers are from diverse disciplines such as education, psychology, public health, paediatrics, linguistics, sociology, nutrition and dietetics, and information technology. ESRI has 25 members and over 90 HDR students. In 2013, ESRI researchers were awarded over $5 Million in competitive grants from the ARC, NHMRC, and National Heart Foundation; were authors on over 100 peer-reviewed publications, and supervised 20 HDR completions. ESRI has a vibrant visiting scholars program, hosting up to 10 international researchers each year, including several Endeavour Fellows.

Seven of our members (30%) are full professors and are internationally recognised for their expertise in education, cognition, health, and physical activity. In the past two years, ESRI has recruited five new professors: Iram Siraj (University of London); Edward Melhuish (Birkbeck and Oxford); Ian Wright (Newcastle); Fred Paas (Erasmus); and John Sweller (Honorary). In addition to existing Profs Anthony Okely, Paul Chandler, and Jan Wright and senior researchers with extensive ARC success, Valerie Harwood (current ARC Future Fellow), Sue Bennett, and Garry Hoban (current ALTC National Senior Teaching Fellow), ESRI has a critical mass of senior researchers who provide career development and mentoring to junior researchers.

Cullunghutti Opening

Early Start is proud to have Cullunghutti Aboriginal Child & Family Centre as an Early Start Engagement Centre. Cullunghutti was officially opened on 20 January 2014. In attendance were members of the Early Start project team along with community members, state and national government representatives and corporate and not for profit organisations involved with young children and families.

It was a great day which also provide an opportunity to showcase to the public the opportunities of technologies provided by Early Start. It was refreshing to watch children “demonstrating” the use of smart tables and interactive whiteboards to the adults. Those attending were impressed by the Early Start technologies and the powerful potential of Early Start to connect communities. Further details can be found in the monthly Cullunghutti newsletter at the following link:

www.cullunghutti.org.au/?page_id=248
DISCOVERY SPACE UPDATE

The Early Start Discovery Space is rapidly coming together with the building works now forming up walls and the experiences starting to be constructed.

Testing and prototyping our proposed experiences is an important aspect of our current program, and we are busy doing just that both on and off campus.

Our proposed ‘digital media space’ is being put through its paces in the same room on campus that houses technology being studied for our Early Start Engagement centres. We are experimenting with tables and chairs, iPad stands, digital camera docks and stop-motion props to determine the ideal configuration where both adults and children can be creative with technology. UOW students and researchers, as well as Kids Uni pre-schoolers, are involved in testing our ideas – and their own!

In May we are out and about in the community with Kids Dig – our simulated archaeological dig site. Working with our friends from UOW’s In2Uni unit and the Centre for Archaeological Science, we will be at KidsFest Shellharbour between 18-24 May (check KidsFest website for details in May www.kidsfestshellharbour.com.au).

Look out for guest-spot ‘real-life’ archaeologists as they share their stories.

Come along and play with us! For those of you further afield – we will be experimenting with some remote access (web-based) interactions.

CONNECTING WITH EARLY START AS AN ENGAGEMENT CENTRE

The Early Start Engagement Centres (ESECs) play a key role in the vision of Early Start. The network of ESECs will work collaboratively with each other, their families and communities and also with UOW staff and students on a range of endeavours.

Whilst each of the initial 38 ESECs will be receiving an IT bundle to assist in establishing the ESEC network, this by no means makes it exclusive to other early childhood education and care settings. The Early Start team will be happy to assist anyone interested in self-funding any or all of the IT bundle for their centre. For example, three Centres have recently joined the Early Start group simply by purchasing their own equipment will the assistance of our team. For more information on this issue, please contact Michelle Gregory in the Early Start team.

In addition, there will be a number of avenues through which other centres may engage and work with the Early Start team. These may include any of the following:

• Should the centre be using any similar technology equipment, the sharing of resources, learning experiences, apps and more through an online blog or wiki space.

• Keep updated on Early Start milestones and key achievements through our regular Early Start newsletter.

• Potential involvement in wider research projects if the centre is identified as a suitable and willing participant.

• Interaction and engagement with the new Early Start Discovery Space on the University’s Wollongong campus, opening in January 2015. This may include excursions, virtual sessions and much more. The Early Start Discovery Space promises to be an Australian first for children’s learning.

• Networking with the Early Start team at professional development events, research conferences and other events relevant to the early childhood education sector.
EARLY START RESEARCH INSTITUTE UPDATE

Professor Tony Okely, Director Research

I am currently working on the baseline data collection in the Early Start Engagement Centres project. Questionnaires have been completed by all the Centre Directors and data are currently being entered. This questionnaire sought to gather data on a range of centre characteristics such as parent involvement, conditions for educators, leadership, perceptions of important indicators of quality, and child and parent demographics. Instruments and measures are currently being collated for the second phase of this project which will involve collection of data from children and parents. This is scheduled to commence in the second half of 2014.

Recently, a post-doctoral position was advertised in Early Start. This position will be a Project Manager for the second phase of the baseline data collection. I am delighted to announce that Dr Eva Craig was the successful applicant. Dr Craig (nee Forbes) completed her PhD at the University of Glasgow. She has worked as a child health researcher in developing countries in Africa and has strong skills in overseeing data collection and analysis of child and parent level data. It is hoped that Eva will be able to join us in mid 2014.

Professor Edward Melhuish

Edward Melhuish is Professor of Human Development at Birkbeck, University of London, and Research Professor at the University of Oxford. He has undertaken research in 12 countries, including the Effective Pre-school, Primary & Secondary Education (EPPSE) and the National Evaluation of Sure Start (NESS) projects. His research in the 1980’s influenced the 1989 Children Act, and later research has influenced the 2005 Children Act, 2006 Childcare Bill and policy on childcare, early education, child poverty and parental support in the UK and other countries. He has served as an expert witness to several House of Commons Select Committees. He is an internationally recognised expert in the study of child development and social policy and has been a scientific advisor in Norway, Finland, Portugal, South Korea, Chile, Australia, Canada, the European Commission, OECD and WHO. He has over 200 publications.
Professor Fred Paas

Fred Paas is a professor of Educational Psychology at Erasmus University Rotterdam in the Netherlands, and a long time collaborator of the UOW. He is currently visiting UOW as a Professorial Fellow, and involved in the start-up of the educational and developmental psychology research within the Early Start Research Institute. In addition, he collaborates with UOW staff on multiple research projects, grant acquisition initiatives and PhD supervision. He considers his contribution to realising the goals of Early Start as ‘a great honour and his biggest challenge ever’.

Professor Iram Siraj-Blatchford

As Professor of ECE at the Institute of Education, University of London, Iram’s recent research projects have included leading on the ‘Evaluation of the Foundation Phase across Wales’. She is a principal investigator of the major DCSF 15-year study on Effective Pre-school, Primary and Secondary Education (EPPSE 3-16, 1997-2013) and of the influential Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years project (REPEY).

She is an expert in mixed method and qualitative research design and analysis, and is currently working on longitudinal studies/RCTs as a principal investigator in a number of countries including the UK, Australia and Ireland. Her recent DfE publications on effective pedagogy in primary schools (EPPSEM study, Siraj-Blatchford et al 2011) and ‘unpacking’ the influences on the trajectories of children performing ‘against the odds’ (Siraj-Blatchford et al 2011) have received international recognition.

She has always been particularly interested in undertaking research which investigates disadvantage and to give children and families from these backgrounds an equal start. She is a specialist, early years advisor to governments and ministers in the UK and internationally and has advised UNESCO, World Bank and UNICEF on early education and care.

She has published over 60 major research reports, monographs and books and over 200 peer reviewed articles and chapters in scholarly books. Currently, Iram is an Honorary Visiting Professor at the University of Melbourne. She is a specialist adviser to the House of Commons Select Committee on Education and undertaking a stocktake of the Foundation Phase for the Welsh government.
EARLY START PHD SCHOLARSHIPS

A total of four PhD scholarships were offered within Early Start within the following research areas: cognitive development and learning, healthy lifestyles and social transformation.

Karen Tonge
Karen’s research is in the Early Start theme of Healthy Lifestyles. Her topic is ‘The Relationship between Educator Engagement and Interaction and Children’s Physical Activity in Early Childhood Education and Care services’. In particular, the research will determine the influence that educators have on children's physical activity, in regards to their own physical activity and involvement in experiences.

Karen’s supervisors are Professor Tony Okely and Dr Rachel Jones.

David Hammer
David's research title is 'Social Transformation as the Interplay between the Family System and the Social Community in Relation to Physical, Mental and Emotional Health and Wellbeing of the Child'.

The research intends to research the executive functioning and self-regulation of families with children from 3 to 5 years on. Initially, the project will commence with a broader review of literature and current studies, looking at social, physical, and psychological factors to inform aspects of self-regulation. This review will then provide frameworks for testing and review within focused sample populations within the Illawarra Region.

Research has focused on maintaining the integrity of the family system, as well as providing a supportive scaffold for the parent’s ability to form and manage the family’s psychological and emotional health and well-being. This research reflects the outcome of population health and wellbeing research identified in the Strategic Research Priorities released by the Federal Government in June 2013. The proposed research findings will inform the effective delivery of health care and support services, and support the development of strategies to increase the family’s community participation in a way that enhances human potential.

David’s supervisors are Dr Gerard Stoyles, Dr Peter Leeson and Dr Edward Melhuish.

Yvonne Ellis
Research topic: Acute effects of ‘reduced sitting pre-school day’ on energy expenditure, musculoskeletal health, and executive function in pre-schoolers: a whole room calorimeter study.

In the first phase of the project it was shown that 3-5 year old children spend around 50% of their day at childcare (≈180mins) sitting. The overall aim of this research is to examine the acute effects of a sit less, stand and move more pre-school day on energy expenditure (EE) in pre-school aged children. The whole-room calorimeter will be used to measure the effects of a “modified” day at pre-school (25% of time sitting) on the energy expenditure, musculoskeletal health, and executive function of 4-5 year old children when compared with a typical day (50% sitting). The Calorimeter Room allows energy expenditure to be calculated based on measurements of air samples (indirect calorimetry).

Yvonne’s supervisors are Professor Tony Okely and Dr Dylan Cliff.

Myrto Mavilidi

My project is focused on investigating whether physical activities that are integrated into learning tasks are more effective for preschoolers’ learning performance, than non-integrated physical activities. The project is expected to advance theories on the relationship between physical activity, fitness, and cognitive performance, and result in an intervention program for integrated educational and physical activities for preschool children.

Myrto’s supervisors are Professor Paul Chandler, Professor Fred Paas and Professor Tony Okely.
THE TEAM

Professor Paul Chandler – Executive Director

Professor Chandler holds a Science (Honours) from Sydney University and a Master of Science in Psychology and PHD in Education. In 1993, for his research in human cognition and learning, he became the first person to ever receive an Australian Research Council (ARC) Fellowship in education. Professor Chandler completed two terms as Head of School of Education at UNSW before being appointed Dean of Education at the University of Wollongong in 2007. In 2008, he was officially awarded as one of Australia’s ten most prominent researchers and to date is the most cited educational researcher appointed at any Australian University. In 2012, Professor Chandler was appointed the Executive Director of Early Start and Pro-Vice Chancellor (Inclusion & Outreach) at University of Wollongong.

Associate Professor Pauline Lysaght – Associate Director

Pauline Lysaght is an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Wollongong. Her background is in educational psychology and her research interests focus on narrative, visual literacy and social justice. Following a successful application by the University of Wollongong for Federal Government funding through the Education Infrastructure Fund, the Early Start concept is becoming a reality and Pauline is very excited to be working as the Associate Director on this important project.

Mr. Peter Maywald – Senior Project Officer

Peter Maywald holds a Bachelor of Arts from University of Wollongong. Peter is a highly experienced Higher Education manager and has previously held the positions of Faculty Executive Manager, Deputy Director – Human Resources and Manager Employee Relations. He is member of the NSW ACT Region Committee of the Association for Tertiary Education Management.

Mr. Adam Selinger – Project Officer, Early Start Discovery Space

Adam has been designing and staging educational programs for over 20 years, from science centre exhibits to stage shows and workshops at children’s festivals and community events. Adam has produced educational programs across the UK, New Zealand, Indonesia, China, the UAE and South Africa. He is looking forward to working with the community to realise the vision of a venue that inspires a child’s lifelong love of learning and creative thinking.

Ms. Tanya Nikolic – Executive Assistant

Tanya has worked with Professor Chandler since he was appointed as Dean of Education and was involved with the successful application for Government funding for the Early Start Project. Prior to UOW, Tanya spent a number of years overseas working in the Middle East and for the United Nations in administrative roles. She has a wide range of experience in commercial and public enterprise organisations including engaging with people from diverse backgrounds.

Michelle Gregory – Learning Technologist

She is a qualified Early Childhood teacher with teaching experience in various early education settings, as well caring for her own nine month old son at home. Michelle joined the higher education sector in 2008 and has lecturing/tutoring experience in areas of early years child development, philosophy, management, leadership and ICT. Her particular interest in ICT and early education forms the basis for her current PhD research, investigating ICT perspectives of in-service and pre-service early childhood educators.

Dr Lisa Carrington-Long – Educational Designer

Lisa holds a Bachelor of Teaching (Primary); Bachelor of Education (Honours); Graduate Certificate of Research Commercialisation; and Doctor of Philosophy. In her role, Lisa is redesigning courses aligned with the Early Start project for blended delivery at UOW South Coast campuses. She is also looking at options for technology-based delivery in ways that will enhance learning experiences for students. Lisa is a qualified primary school teacher and has tertiary lecturing/tutoring experience in the areas of educational technology, adult learning/teaching, and educational research methods. Lisa's current interests include blended delivery methods using technology to enhance learning.