
Towards a national quality framework for early childhood education and care

Report of the Expert Advisory Panel on
Quality Early Childhood Education and Care

January 2009

Disclaimer

This document has been prepared to inform development of the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care. It is not a policy statement and should not be taken to represent agreed views of the Commonwealth, State or Territory Governments.

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Introduction

This is the report of the Expert Advisory Panel (EAP) on Quality Early Childhood Education and Child Care. The panel was established, to inform COAG's reform agenda for early childhood development. Membership of the panel comprises academics in the field of early childhood education, practitioners in early childhood education and care, and government representatives with experience in child care and early childhood education regulatory and accreditation arrangements. This group brings together significant operational experience in professional practice and in research and scholarly knowledge, hence the use of the adjective 'expert' to describe the panel's advice. The list of members and terms of reference for the panel are at Appendix A.

The panel was asked to advise on three key issues:

- a vision for an integrated and seamless system of licensing, regulation and accreditation within a national quality framework for early childhood learning and care services,
- options for quality standards for application in early childhood education and care settings, and
- approaches for a quality rating system for early childhood education and care services.

This report discusses the context for the development of a national quality framework for early childhood education and care, highlighting the need for change. It outlines a vision for the future informed by current research evidence and best practice in Australia and internationally, including the key drivers of quality in early childhood education and care.

The report addresses three key aspects of the framework:

- an integrated system of licensing, regulation and accreditation,
- strong national quality standards, and
- a quality rating system.

The report also touches on implementation issues associated with the development and introduction of a national quality framework.

SECTION 1

Context for a quality framework

The importance of quality early childhood education and care

The positive relationship between [ECEC] quality and virtually every facet of children's development that has been studied is one of the most consistent findings in developmental science (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000, p.313).

Early childhood education and care or ECEC is widely used by UNESCO and the OECD as the overarching term for the education and care of all children from birth up to eight years of age. In Australia, the term 'early childhood education and care' typically encompasses a range of care and education services for children from birth to five years such as Preschool¹ and Long Day Care. In the context of this report the term can also extend to Family Day Care, Occasional Care and Outside School Hours Care² including Before and After School Care and Vacation Care where programs are available to children much older than five years.

Early experience forms the foundation of an individual's life-long learning capacities and social behaviours. Investments in early childhood education and care (ECEC) programs to enhance all children's early experiences are justified by compelling and convergent evidence from developmental science, education, health and economics. These sources demonstrate that the effects of early experience reach into adult life experiences and adult productivity (Tayler, Clooney, Thorpe & Wilson, 2008). In quality ECEC educators provide rich, systematic learning opportunities for children, and promote experiences that progress and parallel the developing needs and entitlements that are relevant to the growing child's social and cultural context.

Numerous studies have shown the benefits of quality ECEC in improving short and long-term developmental, wellbeing and learning outcomes, as well as the immediate benefits experienced by children in high quality education and care. Longitudinal studies have shown the benefits of early education on long-term outcomes such as participation and achievement in education and social adjustment and wellbeing. Examples of this can be found in the evidence from the longitudinal Effective Pre-School and Primary Education project in the UK (Sammons, Sylva, Melhuish, Siraj-Blatchford, Taggart, Barreau, & Grabbe, 2007a and 2007b).

Further, there is evidence that the benefits of universal programs substantially exceed the costs (Koraly & Bigelow, 2005). Barnett (2008) justifies attention to universal ECEC provision on several grounds. Firstly targeting is an imperfect process and targeted families may opt out because of social stigma. In addition, there are significant costs in identifying target populations, differentiating programs and administering a targeted initiative after identifying potentially dispersed targeted populations within an overall system. Second, peers affect child development. Diverse groups bring rich learning opportunities and disadvantaged children appear to learn more when they attend programs that include advantaged children. Third, economic theory and experience (in the US) suggest that public support for high quality education is increased if the program is available to all children and families. Finally, all children benefit from high quality programs and there are substantial positive effects of maternal employment, even in the wealthiest countries. The continuing benefits are likely to remain significant even for the non-poor population.

The greatest benefit is received by the most vulnerable children (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, & Taggart, 2007; Waldfogel, 2004). Attendance at ECEC programs provides a valuable opportunity to reduce the risk of poor or diminished child outcomes, especially in the case of vulnerable children.

1 The term Preschool is used in this report to describe an educational program offered to children two years before they commence Year 1. Some jurisdictions describe this as Kindergarten. See Appendix B.

2 Although the term also encompasses In Home Care services, that type of care is not generally the subject of this report.

Vulnerable children are found in all SES groups but populations are not evenly distributed between groups. The largest numbers of children overall are found in the middle groupings. The lowest SES group has a greater percentage but a smaller number of vulnerable children. Conversely, children in the middle SES groups are less likely to be vulnerable, but because of the size of the group, this is where the most vulnerable children are found. Restricting programs to vulnerable children in low SES groups therefore misses the majority of children experiencing difficulties (McCain, Mustard & Shanker, 2007, p.46).

The value of ECEC also extends beyond the individual. There are significant economic and social benefits from investing in early childhood education. The level of investment sets the program-design features that drive quality. High quality programs demand high initial investment, returned through clear gains to the individual and society over time. The rates of return are much higher from early investments than those later in life (Tayler et al., 2008; Cunha, Heckman, Lochner & Masterov, 2006).

Babies and children

While it is often conventional and convenient to include babies under the generic term 'children' it is also important to ensure that the term children is actually inclusive of babies and that the needs of babies, toddlers and older children (often termed 'preschoolers' are given an equitable voice within a new National Quality Framework. Children in each age group have distinct developmental characteristics.

In Australia, labour force participation and the current maternity and paternity leave allowances mean that babies as young as six weeks are enrolled in formal or in-home programs (Press, 2006). Poor quality early childhood programs where there are high child to staff ratios, a lack of knowledgeable, unresponsive adults and large group sizes, create a stressful environment for babies which can have a negative effects on child well-being. This can have serious consequences on cognitive and language development and later academic achievement. (Sims in Hill, Pocock & Elliott, 2007; Pocock & Hill in Hill, Pocock & Elliott, 2007).

Acknowledging the unique characteristics of babies will ensure that early childhood programs, both private and community based, in-home or centre based, provide appropriately qualified staff, good child-staff ratios, and appropriate group sizes resulting in stress free environments (NICHD, 2002; Goodfellow in Hill, Pocock & Elliott, 2007). Babies and their families, particularly first time parents, need useful information, assurance about quality and support as they begin to engage in formal care and education programs. Early childhood staff, with a deep knowledge of child development and the ability to form caring, trusting relationships, are integral to a high quality infant program.

Such programs also have longer term benefits for children and the community. Often developmental delays are picked up in these early childhood programs and relevant intervention can be accessed promptly.

In some high quality early childhood programs in NSW (both private and community based), 3 or 4 year degree qualified early childhood teachers are routinely employed to work with babies and toddlers. This recognises the very real need for timely, knowledgeable and responsive care from teachers and caregivers identified in the research by Lally, Torres and Phelps (1994) and more recently in the research on stress and cortisol levels in infants by Sims, Guilfoyle and Parry (2005).

Some centres, both private and community based, are providing child-staff ratios of 1:4 or 1:3 for babies, instead of the 1993 National Standard of 1:5 in response to such research. While costs of better child-staff ratios are obviously higher, what is in the best interest of babies and toddlers is at the heart of such decisions.

It should also be noted that there are dimensions of quality for early childhood development that extend beyond ECEC settings and are thus beyond the scope of this panel. However, the panel note that related systemic changes, such as increased provisions for parental leave, are likely to impact positively on child-wellbeing, particularly for babies, and should be supported.

An evidence base

We know from research evidence that simply attending ECEC is not sufficient to ensure better developmental outcomes for children—it is the quality of the education and care that matters in delivering benefits. Three examples of widely cited studies bear this out.

National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Study of Early Child Care

Probably the most influential study on aspects of quality in early childhood care and education settings has been the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) Study of Early Child Care (Elliott, 2006, p. 28). This study followed 1 364 American children from birth, focusing on child care experiences and outcomes and on child care quality including sensitivity to children's needs, emotional attachment, stimulation of cognitive development, and children's interactions, exploratory behaviour and involvement. Findings indicate strong associations between higher quality child care programs and higher scores on measures of cognitive growth, social development and school readiness (Waldfogel, 2004; Brooks-Gunn, Han & Waldfogel, 2002; NICHD, 2000). Early language competence was related to the quality of language stimulation in a child's second year (NICHD, 2002a; 2002b) and behaviour problems at age three were linked with below-average quality care (Brooks-Gunn, 2003).

The Effective Pre-school and Primary Education project

The Effective Pre-school and Primary Education (EPPE) project is a significant source of research evidence on the influence of ECEC on children's cognitive, social and behavioural development. It is a longitudinal study of more than 3 000 children aged 3-11 years old in the UK. The sample includes children who attended a range of different preschool programs as well as 'home' children who had no or minimal preschool experience (Sylva et al., 2004).

There have been two stages in the EPPE project:

- the first stage followed children from aged three to the end of year 2 in primary school (age 7), and
- the second stage is following up the children to the end of primary school (age 11 years plus).

At the end of the first stage, EPPE found that attending preschool was related to better intellectual, social and behavioural development for children, and that children from disadvantaged backgrounds in particular benefited significantly from good quality preschool experiences (Sylva et al., 2004).

The results from the second stage of EPPE when children were aged 10 years found evidence of continuing positive effects from attending *higher quality* preschool settings on children's cognitive (mathematics and reading) outcomes and all round social-behavioural outcomes at the end of Year 5, once the influence of background factors had been taken into account. However, those children who attended low quality preschool no longer showed benefits in cognitive or social-behavioural outcomes by Year 5 (with the exception of pro-social behaviour)—their results were not significantly different from children who did not attend preschool. This is a shift from earlier findings at the start of primary school when all preschool experience was found to be beneficial (Sammons et al., 2007(a) and Sammons et al., 2007(b)).

The Competent Children study

The New Zealand Competent Children study has followed, since 1992, a sample of 500 children from early childhood through to 12–14 years. Although Farquhar and Croad (2005) caution against over-extension of the findings, in particular to culturally diverse groups, the study indicates a lasting contribution of early childhood education to the selected children's competency levels. Pedagogy, including the quality of teacher interactions with children, was found to have a particularly important effect on children's learning outcomes. Rich, elaborated pedagogies, characterised by targeted teacher interactions with children, teacher knowledge of appropriate guidance and scaffolding, and a focus on play, early literacy and cooperative environments appeared to contribute most to children's competencies at age 10 (Wylie, Thompson & Lythe, 2001). The effects of quality early childhood education settings were still influencing maths and literacy competence at 12 years of age for children in the study (Wylie, 2004).

The case for government investment

Public investment in ECEC is made to pursue public policy goals. The international evidence clearly demonstrates that ECEC provides public benefits and can yield high economic and social returns. The review of ECEC in OECD member countries identified three broad rationales for investment:

- improving children's life chances,
- improving the economy, and
- alleviating poverty and disadvantage (Tayler et al., 2008, p.ix).

Positive externalities (benefits accrued to the public or community) are a substantial component of the total benefits returned from investments in ECEC. These long term benefits are significant even though they may not be immediately apparent to children, parents and providers at the time of using an ECEC service. The OECD Starting Strong II report (2006) identified several domains of government that benefit from the widespread provision of early childhood education and care services. These include:

- Direct benefits to the national economy. These are both short-term, through the contribution of working parents, particularly women, and long-term through more effective human capital formation.
- Health benefits. Examples of these include better mental and physical health for children and families accompanied by a reduction in at-risk behaviours.
- Improved outcomes in social welfare and criminal justice. Examples include a decreased dependency by families on social welfare, higher earnings for families, improved gender equality and a reduction in family violence and criminality,
- Education benefits. ECEC can ensure better integration of young children into primary school, especially children at risk of not making optimum progress. ECEC provision is also linked to better grade progression and a reduced level of participation in special education.

By international standards, Australia's overall levels of investment in ECEC are low (OECD, 2006) and the baseline standard of Australian ECEC is relatively low as expressed across the ECEC regulatory systems. Hence it is from a low base that Australia is now charged with improving the quality of ECEC provision. There is a clear connection between overall levels of investment and the levels of quality that can be achieved in a contemporary ECEC system.

The report also notes risks associated with a lack of investment including:

- ECEC shortages (limiting access and choice),
- low quality of ECEC, particularly in services for children from low socio economic groups, children in rural and remote communities,
- unequal access and the segregation of children according to income (Prentice, 2005; Sadowski, 2006; Waters Boots, 2005 cited in OECD 2006),
- flow on effects for women's participation in full-time employment and the increased likelihood of women being pushed towards low-paid, part-time jobs (Lee, 2004; Immervoll & Barber, 2005 cited in OECD 2006),

Government action is needed so children do not receive poor quality care. Because wide social benefits, or externalities, are accrued through investments in ECEC there is support for increased resource allocation (McMahon, 2004). The benefits accrued include reduced crime, reduced remedial education and welfare costs, increased social cohesion and increased tax revenue (Wise, Da Silva, Webster & Sanson, 2005).

Early childhood care and education is not a repeatable process for a child. For children to achieve an optimum start in life it is important to ensure sufficient public investment and maximise the benefits of investment in the Australian ECEC market. The proposed national quality framework is vital for advancing the mix of goals underlying investment in an ECEC system. An effective framework should:

- overcome information barriers for parents who choose services (knowing what services are available, what are the core quality elements and differentiating between services on quality program and price),
- provide partnerships between the ECEC services and parents in the daily care and education of children so that long term positive outcomes are realised,
- provide an environment where access is maximised,
- ensure that all children, including those from disadvantaged backgrounds, achieve equity of access to high quality programs,
- encourage quality improvements even where choice is limited or non-existent: rural and remote regions as well as those where monopoly-like provision is apparent.

The Australian ECEC market

Australia takes a mixed market approach to the provision of early childhood services. Nearly three-quarters of centre-based Long Day Care in Australia is privately managed (Brennan et al, 2008). Responsibility for the operations and management of Family Day Care and Preschools vary significantly from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. The 'marketisation' of services has been typified in countries that have:

- decentralised public provision,
- community based, independent private and corporate operators, and
- paid subsidies to parents (whether through vouchers, tax incentives, reimbursements or other means).

This *demand side* approach to financing public investments in ECEC reflects the choice of governments in several liberal economies (OECD 2006). In perfect markets parental choice is a driver of quality, innovation and price. However in a market place with limited choice, combined with the imperative for stability in a child's ECEC makes it counterproductive, for parents to move their child between services in pursuit of greater quality or better price. To some extent the Australian market has also been driven by improved workforce participation and attachment by women and subsidy arrangements for child care services. Employer expectations, including inflexibilities in working hours, have also impacted on the market, particularly the operating hours of ECEC.

Starting Strong II (OECD 2006) notes the attraction of a market approach for governments trying to respond quickly to child care shortages and points to the related imperatives of avoiding inequity and adhering to high standards. Concerns expressed about market models by early childhood policy experts and planners (OECD, 2006, 116-117) include:

- the move away from the principle of providing universality in education,
- that demand-side funding is, in general, under-funded,
- subsidies paid directly to parents weaken the steering capacity of governments,
- subsidies may not be used efficiently on behalf of children,
- the risk of inequity increases as providers may be reluctant to invest in poor or sparsely populated neighbourhoods.

The newness of parent subsidy models and the relative inexperience of administrations in dealing with marketised child care services may account for apparently more uneven quality in marketised systems (Bennett, 2008). The diversity of the market in Australia is therefore a factor to take into account when considering the overall quality framework and the need for continuous improvement to drive up the quality baseline.

Quality is a shared responsibility of parents and governments. The goal must be to promote an Australian ECEC environment that ensures:

- all children have access to a consistently high level of quality ECEC,
- the benefits of public investment in ECEC are maximised,
- genuine choice for families is maximised, and
- continuous improvement and innovation against emerging evidence is encouraged and rewarded.

Regulation for quality Early Childhood Education and Care in Australia

The OECD (2006) *Starting Strong II* report notes that to maintain or improve standards at least two policy strategies are recommended:

- effective government steering of Early Childhood Education and Care systems, and
- participatory and voluntary approaches to quality provision.

It also notes that enforcement is more likely to succeed when authorities engage in consultative policy-making and management, and build up a general consensus about the need for and relevance of standards.

While the arguments are strong for the need for effective quality regulation for ECEC, the current arrangements for setting, assessing and monitoring quality in ECEC in Australia are fragmented and complex. This complexity stems from:

- shared responsibility for accrediting and licensing ECEC between the Commonwealth and State Governments, and
- different regulatory arrangements for different services within the ECEC sector.

Australia has a multilayered approach to quality assurance in child care, spanning minimum quality standards through to a national quality assurance system promoting continuous quality improvement (Tayler et al., 2006, p. 24). The Commonwealth Government is responsible for quality accreditation of child care through the National Childcare Accreditation Council (NCAC). This accreditation covers the 'quality' of the service, with the aim of ensuring children have stimulating, positive experiences and interactions that nurture all aspects of their development. Accreditation applies to Long Day Care, Family Day Care and Outside School Hours care sectors only, and only applies to services where the care provided attracts the Child Care Benefit. Accreditation schemes are different for each care type. There is no similar national quality assurance/ accreditation system for preschool / kindergarten.

State and Territory Governments maintain responsibility for setting and monitoring minimum quality standards, most often addressed through the licensing and regulation of prescribed child care services. Whilst regulations tend to address known structural determinants of quality child care, including staff qualifications, staff-child ratios and group size, physical environment, and health and safety requirements, there is limited consistency across jurisdictions in some of these areas (see Table 2). The lack of consistency is a cause for concern because evidence about the influence and impact of qualifications, group size and staff-child ratios indicate that the existing benchmarks in the various jurisdictions are unlikely to deliver the best possible outcomes for children.

Table 1—LICENSING OF ECEC IN EACH STATE AND TERRITORY (2007)

| Service model | NSW | Vic | Qld | WA | SA | Tas | ACT | NT |
|--------------------------------------|-----|-----|-----|----|-----|-----|-----|----|
| Centre-based long day care | L | L | L | L | L | L | L | L |
| Occasional care | L | L | L | L | G/L | L | L | L |
| Family day care schemes and agencies | L | X | L | X | G/L | L | L | X |
| Family day care carers | R | X | R | L | R | R | X | X |
| Outside school-hours care | R | X | L | L | R | L | L | X |
| Home-based care | L | X | X | X | L | L | X | X |
| Other care* | X | X | X | X | X | L | L | X |
| Preschool/kindergarten | L/G | L | L/G | G | G | G/R | L | G |

Key

- L = Services require a licence to operate
- R = Services require registration or approval to operate
- G = Services are provided by State/Territory Governments
- X = Services do not require licence, registration or approval to operate but may be required to meet regulatory standards

* Other Care = nannies, playschools and in-home care

Source: unpublished data provided by State and Territory governments.

State and Territory Governments are also responsible for regulating most preschools. While the situation varies between States, preschools are predominately subject to a different regulatory system from child care (Tayler et al., 2006, p. 24). For example NSW is working towards the regulation of school-based services; the Department of Education and Training currently provides preschools in 100 government schools. In Tasmania, kindergartens not in government schools are registered with the Schools Registration Board.

As a result of the current arrangements, there are overlaps, gaps and inconsistencies. For example, policies and practices can be checked by both licensing and accreditation officers; some child care types are not licensed in some jurisdictions and some are not accredited; and for the most part, preschools are subject to different regulations and standards than child care services.

Several jurisdictions are currently reviewing their regulatory regimes.

Standards for centre-based Long Day Care services

The variation in arrangements across Australia can be illustrated by looking more closely at quality standards for Long Day Care. In 1993 the Council of Social Welfare Ministers endorsed the National Standards for Centre Based Long Day Care, with the aim of establishing a consistent quality baseline for child care across Australia. States endorsed all the proposed standards, with the exception of Victoria which endorsed all but those relating to staff-child ratios and qualified staff-child ratios (Tayler et al., 2006, p. 31).

Adherence to the National Standards for Centre Based Long Day Care varies across jurisdictions:

- Tasmania, Northern Territory and the Australian Capital Territory have legislation in place which meets or exceeds the standards,
- Queensland, New South Wales and South Australia approximately meet the standards, with one exception each and Western Australia with variations in the approach to several items (but other higher standards in staff-child ratios and outdoor space), and
- Victoria’s legislation largely meets the standards through its performance-based approach, except for staff-child ratios (Tayler et al., 2006, p. 36).

The staff-child ratios are the most diverse (Tayler et al., 2006, p. 36), with Tasmania and Western Australia having higher standards (that is, lower ratios), the Northern Territory and the Australian Capital Territory having the same standards, and Queensland, New South Wales, South Australia and Victoria having lesser standards than those endorsed in the national standards. Table 2 shows the minimum staff-child ratios currently required across the jurisdictions.

Table 2—MINIMUM STAFF TO CHILD RATIOS IN CENTRE-BASED LONG DAY CARE, STATES AND TERRITORIES

| | 0-2 years | 2-3 years | 3-5 years |
|------------------------------|------------|------------|-------------|
| National standards | 1:5 | 1:5 | 1:11 |
| New South Wales | 1:5 | 1:8 | 1:10 |
| Victoria | 1:5 | 1:5 | 1:15 |
| Queensland | 1:4 | 1:6 | 1:12 |
| South Australia | 1:5 | 1:10 | 1:10 |
| Western Australia | 1:4 | 1:5 | 1:10 |
| Tasmania | 1:5 | 1:5 | 1:10 |
| Northern Territory | 1:5 | 1:5 | 1:11 |
| Australian Capital Territory | 1:5 | 1:5 | 1:11 |

Source: Tayler C., Wills M., Hayden J. & Wilson C. 2006, A review of the approach to setting national standards and assuring the quality of care in Australian childcare services, A project commissioned by the Children’s Services Sub-Committee of the Community Services Ministers’ Advisory Council.

Another area of complexity which is regulated differently across jurisdictions is the level of qualifications required by staff working with children in ECEC settings. This can be illustrated by looking at qualification requirements in NSW, QLD and WA.

In formal early childhood programs in NSW, for groups of more than 29 children there must be a teaching staff member present who holds a degree or diploma in early childhood. One Diploma qualified staff member must be present for groups of 29 or less where children under two are enrolled.

In WA, a certificate, diploma or degree qualified staff member must be present for groups of five children or more.

In Queensland, all carers in the approved ratio for groups of children which include children under two must have at least a Certificate III in an area of study applying to child care workers.

Further detail is contained in Appendix C.

Programming in Early Childhood Education and Care

A lack of national consistency in child care regulatory matters flows through into the curriculum or program used to guide children's development when they participate in ECEC. A wide range of curriculum frameworks and guidelines have been written for use in local contexts over the last decade or so. These are shown in Table 4. These documents vary in terms of the age ranges covered as well as in the conceptual underpinnings and framework that structures each document.

Table 3—PROGRAMMING DOCUMENTATION IN EACH JURISDICTION

| Jurisdiction | Document name | Intended use |
|-----------------|--|--|
| New South Wales | <i>The practice of relationships: essential provisions for children's services</i> | The framework was developed for use across all centres, but is in no way mandatory |
| Queensland | <i>Building Waterfalls</i> | A curriculum framework developed by Queensland C&K Association for use in its preschool and child care centres |
| South Australia | <i>Curriculum, standards and accountability framework</i> | Mandatory in government preschools and used in Catholic schools and some independent schools but not in child care centres |
| Tasmania | <i>Essential connections</i> | Linked to the Essential Learning framework for 0-16 year olds and to the national QIAS accreditation process |
| NT | <i>Strong Beginnings</i> | A curriculum framework for use in NT government preschools |
| ACT and WA | | Both jurisdictions have mandatory overarching education frameworks which include a component for preschools or kindergarten. |

The COAG reform agenda

In December 2007 the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) agreed to a partnership between the Commonwealth and State and Territory Governments to establish a rigorous National Quality Framework for ECEC, with two objectives:

- to enhance the learning and development outcomes for children in different care settings, and
- to build a high quality, integrated national quality system, including accreditation, for early learning and care that takes account of setting, diversity of service delivery and the age and stage of development of children.

The Productivity Agenda Working Group of COAG is responsible for delivering COAG's early childhood agenda, through the Early Childhood Development Sub-group. The Expert Advisory Panel on Quality Early Childhood Education and Child Care was set up to provide advice to the Sub-group.

SECTION 2

A National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care

The proposed national quality framework is intended to deliver:

- accountability for funding in early childhood education and care services,
- reassurance for consumers (families and children) about the quality of early childhood education and care services,
- certainty for businesses about national regulatory requirements in the provision of services, and
- an increase in the quality of service over time, including the professional development of the workforce and a culture of continuous improvement among early childhood and care services.

The intent is to provide children with the support, care and education throughout early childhood that will equip them for life and learning and to do so in a way that actively engages parents and meets the workforce participation needs of parents (PAWG, 2008).

A vision for the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care

The first task in developing a quality framework for ECEC is to set a clear vision for the desired state of the future. The EAP's vision for a National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care is set out below.

Children and families have the right to a high quality, integrated, seamless system of early childhood education and care. The national quality framework will drive system-wide quality to enable children's optimum development and learning.

This vision encompasses a view that children not only have rights and responsibilities, but that they are competent, powerful and valuable members of a community who co-construct knowledge and relationships with peers and the significant adults in their life. It is consistent with the United Nations' *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, which declares that children are entitled to special care and assistance, and that:

State parties shall respect and ensure the rights set forth in the present Convention to each child within their jurisdiction without discrimination of any kind, irrespective of the child's or his or her parent's or legal guardian's race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status (Article 2).

As previously noted, the term 'children' encompasses babies.

Outcomes

Any new framework should place the child at the centre of policy development and the delivery of services. As well as a greater focus on outcomes for children, it must promote improved outcomes for families, staff and communities.

The EAP expect that an adequately resourced framework will promote the outcomes proposed in Table 4.

Table 4—OUTCOMES for ECEC settings

| For children |
|--|
| Children are valued as citizens in their own right and able to participate in their community |
| Children are supported to learn and develop |
| Children are happy and engaged and their quality of life is enhanced |
| Children are safe and healthy. |
| For families |
| Families are confident and secure in the knowledge that their child is safe and happy |
| Families are supported to participate in programs for children |
| Families have access to information to guide their ECEC choices |
| Families have access to support to guide their parenting |
| Families have the capacity to participate in the labour force. |
| For staff |
| Staff have the knowledge and skills to ensure that individual children's education and care needs are met |
| Staff are supported and resourced to exercise professional judgements that promote positive outcomes for children. |
| For communities |
| Community needs are addressed by ECEC providers and systems. |
| For ECEC services |
| ECEC services are supported to respond to community needs |
| ECEC services are supported to respond to current thinking and research about children's developmental and learning needs. |

Noting that meeting these outcomes requires significant investment, the panel has considered the evidence base about how this might best be achieved. The remainder of this report presents the panel's advice, structured around three key elements of a National Quality Framework:

- *an integrated system of licensing, regulation and accreditation* to enable a more consistent and streamlined national approach to quality in ECEC,
- *strong national quality standards* to set clear expectations in ECEC settings, with a particular focus on standards related to the key drivers of quality, and
- monitoring, reporting and compliance arrangements, which are expressed in a *quality rating system* to drive continuous improvement through participatory approaches and provide parents with robust and relevant information about the quality of care and learning.

SECTION 3

An integrated system of licensing, regulation and accreditation

There are a wide variety of service types within the ECEC sector. Different service types operate in different settings, provide different types of services and programs to different age groups, and are currently regulated and accredited under different arrangements.

The EAP's vision encompasses a view that the governance, administration and regulation of ECEC will be integrated and seamless supported by a quality assurance system.

Children and families have the right to a high quality, integrated, seamless system of early childhood education and care. The national quality framework will drive system-wide quality to enable children's optimum development and learning

As discussed earlier, Australia has a complex system of licensing, regulation and accreditation arrangements for ECEC, which differs across jurisdictions and across child care and preschool settings, with both the Commonwealth and State governments involved. The current arrangements do not support consistent quality of ECEC for all Australian children and are confusing and complex for parents and providers of ECEC.

The Education-Care divide

The EAP vision for the future of ECEC places children's needs at the centre of the system. ECEC should be structured around what works best for children rather than children and their families having to manage around systems that had their genesis at a time when our understandings of how children learn and develop were much less sophisticated than they are today. An integrated system will also need to address the historic care–education divide that underpins the current arrangements.

In Australia, early childhood 'care' programs (such as child care) and 'education' programs (such as preschools) have separate histories and traditions which have resulted in substantially different goals, purposes and practices in child care and in preschools (Elliott, 2006, p. 1). Historically, preschools have been linked closely to education and have had a strong learning and development focus, with services provided by a qualified early childhood teacher. Traditionally, child care centres had more mixed objectives, with an important focus on meeting the child care needs of working parents, and with a much greater reliance on non-qualified staff. Administrative arrangements have tended to reinforce the separation of education and care through differential regulatory and quality assurance approaches.

There are many arguments for an end to the care-education divide and for an integrated system of licensing, regulation and accreditation across preschools and long day centres. Most importantly, the care-education dichotomy is an inappropriate conceptual model for early childhood development and learning. The early childhood literature is clear about the close connections between care and education and the inseparable nature of development and learning (Elliott, 2006, p. 1). Furthermore, the two-tiered system based on the care-education divide has important equity as well as access implications for children and families, with attendance at preschools differing according to socio-economic and employment status and geographic location (Elliott, 2006, p. 46).

Families should be able to expect a consistent level of quality, integrated education and care across all ECEC settings from birth until their children begin formal schooling. Integration of care and education better supports children's development, families need for care and changing community expectations. There is no justifiable, evidence-based reason to separate care and education into separate services, program funding or administrative arrangements. To do this is resource intensive, expensive and wasteful.

It is most important that integrated care and education provision extend across the birth to 5 age group. Press (2006, p.53) refers to Bennett's (2003) OECD Thematic Review work and the discussion about the problem of the lack of cohesion between education and care, suggesting that one of the consequences of the continued division between education and care has been a great imbalance between the number of services provided for over threes (in Australia over fours) compared to under threes. Programs for babies and toddlers require particularly responsive, nurturing and holistic approaches that provide for their overall development and learning as well as their health and wellbeing.

Australia is already seeing the boundaries between child 'care' and 'preschool' beginning to blur. Early care and education should be indivisible in fully integrated ECEC provision. Many early childhood centres across Australia, successfully provide both full time care **and** quality early childhood education. This is especially the case in jurisdictions, such as NSW, where it is common to have qualified early childhood teachers in child care centres. Extending this idea, both local and international examples show that it is possible to provide child health, family leisure opportunities and personal adult learning 'wrapped around' ECEC provision (Bertram et al., 2003). In Australia, some 'early learning centres' provide health services along with education and care. Where centres are also attached to schools they facilitate a seamless transition to school.

In England, models of integration include:

- unified approaches: amalgamated management, training, staffing and ECEC service structures,
- coordinated approaches with synchronised management, staffing, training and with ECEC services that work in harmony but remain individually distinct,
- coalitions where management, training and staffing structures of the services work in a federated partnership as an Association or Alliance and the various ECEC services operate as discrete programs,
- hybrid models where ECEC is strategically operating with a mixture of the above models to achieve a full range of services in a community, with no one model dominating (Bertram et al., 2002, p.12).

The provision of professional support to ECEC services moving into integrated education and care provision must also be complemented by capacity building at the administrative leadership level. This imperative is not just within services themselves, but also within the bureaucracies responsible for monitoring quality (for example through licensing and accreditation).

Administrative issues and constraints

Integration of regulatory and related quality assurance functions will also help to address the administrative burden associated with the current approaches. There is a level of concern within the early childhood sector about the administrative responsibilities and workloads in meeting the requirements of both licensing regulations and quality assurance accreditation as separate processes. The consequences include stress and job dissatisfaction, often causing staff to leave. The pay and conditions in early childhood settings are not sufficient compensation for the extra responsibility of dealing with paperwork that has overlaps and duplications in both systems.

Recent research confirms these perceptions about the impact of the regulatory environment as a source of dissatisfaction for early childhood professionals in the long day care sector (Fenech, Sumsion & Goodfellow, 2008; Fenech, Sumsion, Goodfellow & Robertson, 2006; Fenech, Sumsion & Goodfellow, 2006). Findings from these studies confirmed high levels of dissatisfaction with the processes of accountability and with the lack of support from systems that previously were deemed as supporting practice and promoting quality. Fenech et al (2008) reported that whilst practitioners still generally supported regulatory accountability, they also identified that overlaps between accreditation and licensing "can impede quality standards and practices".

The regulatory environment research makes it clear that early childhood professionals are in no doubt that regulation is necessary as is a quality assurance system but are concerned about its current structure and operation. In fact it was reported in the studies' focus group sessions and interviews that all of the practitioners supported the accreditation program when it was first introduced in 1994. However, with the 2002 changes to the process of monitoring and validating quality elements in long day programs, problems for practitioners began to manifest. Accreditation and regulation boundaries became blurred and completing the disproportionate amount of paperwork for both systems impacted on the practitioners' time, taking them away from their teaching and community engagement and affecting capacity for professional planning and decision making for children. Professional judgment, wisdom and knowledge in relation to delivering quality programs were sidelined to address the emphasis on compliance and risk management.

A comment from one practitioner in a focus group session pinpointed how practitioners view regulations and accreditation as a “double edged sword”, providing both benefits and drawbacks: “facilitate[ing] and enhance[ing] professional practice and concurrently restricting and damaging it” (Fenech et al., 2006, p. 52). Some responses from practitioners identified issues of time, professional autonomy and risk management as being three spillover effects of the non-integrated system that impeded their professional practice and that meeting requirements was actually detrimental to practice.

Ensuring quality for Indigenous children

There is longstanding evidence of the cultural nature of learning and development across a broad range of cultural communities (Rogoff, 2003), including Australian Indigenous communities (Fleer and Williams-Kennedy, 2002). The EAP acknowledges the COAG goal of significantly improving the lives of young Indigenous Australians and the importance of connecting with how quality is may be culturally defined (Fleer and Kennedy, 2000). A National Quality Framework for ECEC must recognise and be responsive to the diverse circumstances and requirements of Indigenous communities and families. This is essential to develop an effective and equitable framework to increase the participation of Indigenous children in quality ECEC. These considerations have implications both for the development of a quality framework which promotes equity for Indigenous children, and for the delivery of early childhood services.

The EAP is very aware of the diversity of Indigenous communities and family situations that exist throughout the nation, and of the diverse ECEC arrangements for Indigenous children. Indigenous children attend a range of early childhood settings, including Indigenous-specific services. But many Indigenous children do not access any form of early childhood service or access poor quality services.

The EAP acknowledges that the contexts in which Indigenous children and their families live require additional consideration in terms of the development and application of a quality framework for early childhood services. In particular, the EAP emphasises the need for:

- a staged approach to quality assurance with ongoing, local negotiations with Indigenous communities and families,
- additional resourcing,
- specific consideration of workforce issues for existing services and staff, as well as for future services, and
- early coordination with the Indigenous Reform Working Group of COAG.

Socially inclusive approach

Social inclusion is about finding practical and concrete ways to open up opportunities for Australians who are unable to fully participate in the economic and social life of this country.

Mustard (2007) observed that there is a role for ECEC in ensuring good early childhood development for all young children regardless of socioeconomic background (Mustard, 2007, p27). There is a clear demand for inclusive ECEC services in Australia. The EAP recognises the value of existing programs at both Commonwealth and State and Territory levels that support ECEC services so they can welcome and include all children including those with additional needs. This can include children from diverse cultural and language backgrounds, those with a disability, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

A new National Quality Framework must be built on principles of social inclusion and include practical and concrete ways to ensure that all children have access to the support, care and education throughout early childhood that equips them for life and learning. Equally ECEC should be delivered in a way that actively engages parents, and meets their workforce participation needs regardless of gender, culture, language or disability.

A way forward

In place of the current arrangements, the EAP recommends an approach integrating current regulatory and quality assurance functions, arguing for a quality framework that provides for a single set of national quality standards covering licensing, regulation and accreditation requirements.

The EAP recognises that this approach would require significant whole-of-system change, bringing current state-based licensing and national accreditation processes together under a single set of national quality standards, covering the whole scope of operations. It would involve significant changes to legislative and administrative arrangements and would need to be implemented over time. However, the advantages of an integrated approach would be improved overall quality and consistency across states and services. Parents would have some assurance that their child is receiving a quality of care that is comparable to the care being delivered across Australia. There would also be substantial administrative advantages to providers with a more streamlined, national regulatory and quality approach.

Such a system must include sound governance arrangements, broad coverage, clear accountability mechanisms, adequate levels of investment and realistic timeframes for implementation of the new system.

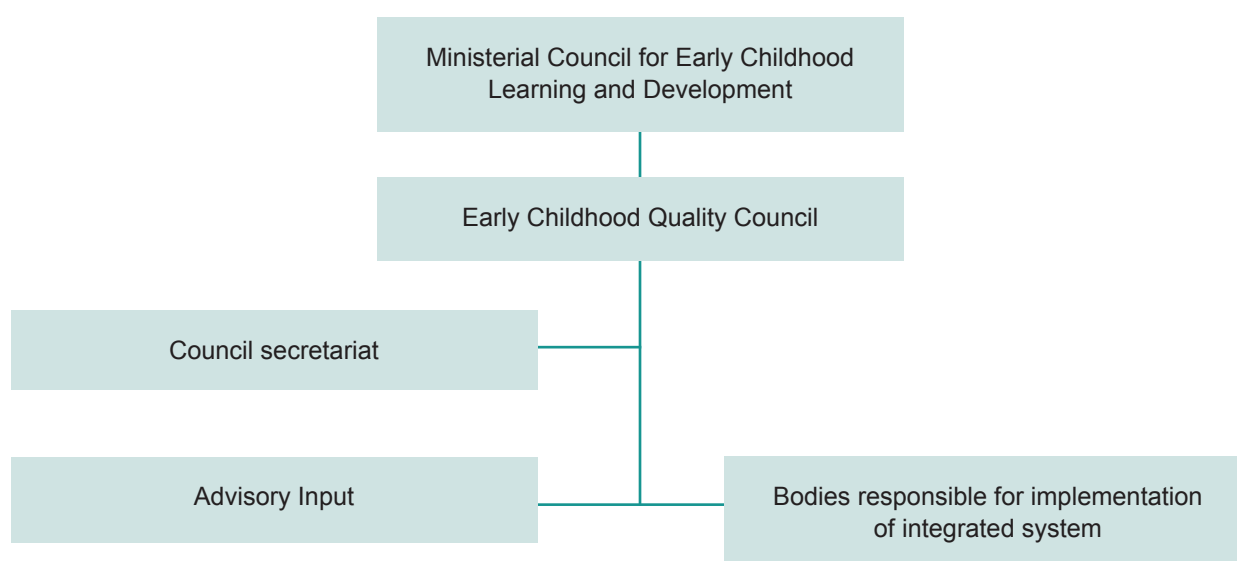
Governance arrangements

An integrated system will require a new approach to governance to ensure Commonwealth and State and Territory legislative responsibilities are taken into account. The objective is to marry a national approach to driving high quality ECEC across Australia with the flexibility to encourage local engagement and respond to local circumstances.

The EAP suggests the establishment of a new national, independent quality management council (the 'Early Childhood Quality Council' or similar), a regulatory authority or agency with state-based operational arms to administer, guide and oversee the introduction and operation of the National Quality Framework and a national office to support operation of the scheme. There may also be a need for advisory input on specific issues such as curriculum, qualifications or service types.

A national, independent 'Early Childhood Quality Council' would bring highly regarded community members, early childhood educators, researchers and teacher educators together with representatives of government, peak bodies and early childhood service providers. The Council could derive its authority from national, state and territory legislation, and perhaps a Ministerial Council. A National Children's Bill (or similar legislation) could set down nationally agreed requirements and standards, which could then be reflected in State and Territory legislation and implemented at the local level.

Figure 1—GOVERNANCE ARRANGEMENTS



Coverage

The EAP considers that an integrated quality framework—with quality standards and a quality rating and improvement system—should apply to all early childhood education services in all jurisdictions.

This will include all services identified earlier in this document at Table 2 – i.e. centre-based long day care, occasional care, family day care, outside school-hours care, home-based care, Preschool/kindergarten and could to extend to other care arrangements such as nannies, playschools and in-home care.

Investment and Accountability

Introduction of the proposed integrated quality framework will require extensive professional, educational and training support for individuals within early childhood services and for the ECEC sector as a whole.

Particular challenges may exist in integrating:

- child care services who receive public funding but currently sit outside the accreditation system, for example: budget funded services, occasional care and registered care,
- centre-based care provided in other settings such as Family Day Care and Outside School Hours care, and
- stand alone preschools or those based within a school environment which have traditionally been regulated separately from child care services.

There will need to be a comprehensive communication and education strategy—developed and implemented in consultation and partnership with the sector and supported by an appropriate training strategy.

A robust registration or regulation system is required that will ensure accountability for government investment (at both Commonwealth and State/Territory levels) and allow families to have confidence in the quality and outcomes of ECEC.

Transition times

Implementation of such significant reforms cannot happen without realistic transition timeframes being put in place. Other OECD countries that have implemented sector reforms on a similar scale have recognised that major change takes time. For example, the New Zealand reform process has been built around a 10 year implementation timeframe. States, Territories and the Commonwealth must work together to agree a timetable for transition to the new system that will ensure success. Given the workforce constraints already in play within the sector, setting overly ambitious timeframes could put more pressure on services at the expense of quality outcomes.

Lessons can be learned from regulatory reforms within individual jurisdictions. For example, in Victoria transition plans were implemented to maintain and improve compliance with standards. Examples included:

- Services built under previous regulatory arrangements had not moved to comply with new indoor space requirements. A process was developed for services to seek time-limited exemptions where a plan had been submitted on how the service would meet premises requirements. Over a two year period all services moved into compliance with space requirements.
- Occasional care services were required to employ Diploma qualified staff in every service. Using time limited exemptions and scholarships to assist with study costs occasional care services now meet qualified staffing requirements.

SECTION 4

National quality standards for early childhood education and care

What are quality standards?

Generally, quality standards have two aims:

- to describe a consensus model of what is most worthy, and most desirable to achieve, in the area the standards relate to, and
- to provide specifications that allow judgements to be made about levels of achievement.

Based on this, a useful definition of a standard is:

... a tool for rendering appropriately precise the making of judgements and decisions in a context of shared meanings and values. (Sykes & Plastrik, quoted in Kleinhenz & Ingvarson, 2007, p. 8)

In the area of ECEC, quality standards comprise both structural components and core educational statements about values, practices and outcomes that are evident in the delivery of early childhood programs—that is, they are statements about practice, leadership, curriculum, care, and pedagogy, and developmental and learning outcomes for children.

Developing standards

The development of standards should be guided by conceptions of care, learning and development for young children that are informed by contemporary research and agreed best practice. Standards must reflect evidence of what constitutes best practice to optimise children's development and learning in specific contexts. Standards must also be built around the expectations families and the community have of their early childhood services, as well as what teachers expect when children come to school.

The EAP considers standards in ECEC should be informed by:

- aspects of quality—factors the research and practice evidence tell us determine the quality of ECEC, so as to be clear about what is being measured, and
- quality enablers—areas of practice which enable developmentally and educationally significant outcomes for children, including the key drivers of quality.

These are discussed below.

Aspects of quality

It is essential in developing standards to be clear about what is being measured. This must reflect what factors the research and practice evidence tell us determine quality ECEC.

In a comprehensive review, the OECD identified seven aspects of quality which are summarised below (OECD 2006, pp. 129 – 130).

Table 5—ASPECTS OF QUALITY

| |
|--|
| Orientation quality |
| Government engagement through national legislation, regulation and policy initiatives |
| Structural quality |
| The overarching structures needed to ensure quality in early childhood programs |
| Educational concept and practice |
| The curriculum framework, underpinning knowledge of staff and the application of these in practice |
| Interaction or process quality |
| The day to day experience of children |
| Operational quality |
| The management and leadership (including policy and process) that guide the way in which a service operates |
| Child-outcome quality or performance standards |
| The environment and interactions that improve the present and future well-being of children |
| Standards pertaining to parent/community outreach and involvement |
| Outreach to parents groups, efforts to improve the home learning environment responsiveness to local cultural values and norms, and participation in integrated programming. |

Further detail is provided at Appendix D.

Quality enablers

Developmental and educational outcomes for children are supported by a number of enablers of good or best practice. National Quality Standards for ECEC should recognise ‘quality drivers’ which are inter-related and designed to enable developmentally and educationally significant outcomes for children.

Table 6—Enablers of positive outcomes for children in ECEC

| |
|---|
| Interactions and relationships |
| Enablers in this area include issues such as sense of belonging; shared and sustained conversations; expanding experiences and making conscious considered concepts and ideas beyond the present context; and relationships built on trust, respect, empathy, integrity and honesty. |
| Programming, planning and evaluation |
| Appropriate programming and planning; continuous evaluation and improvement mechanisms; documentation of planning for learning; and curriculum content, based on implementation of an Early Years Learning Framework applicable to all ECEC settings including preschool standards. |
| Connections (with family and community) |
| Engagement with families and community linkages. |
| Transitions |
| Understanding and sharing information about a child’s developmental and learning needs; planning transitions between services; transition to school; and individualised learning plans for children with special or additional learning needs. |
| Staffing |
| Staff stability; professional development and mentoring of staff; staff qualifications; appropriate group sizes and staff ratios ³ . |
| Health and safety |
| Providing active supervision and physically healthy, safe environments for children and staff; protective behaviours and management; and first aid. |
| Physical environment |
| Appropriate indoor and outdoor spaces that enable children to engage in quality experiences in both the built and natural environments. Physical environments should reflect requirements about minimal space, the Australian Standards and Building Code of Australia requirements, the community context (for example, in rural or urban areas, the Indigenous and cultural community, etc), and the capacity for children to influence their physical environment. In particular, the importance of natural materials in out-door areas as a means of promoting quality learning and development experiences should be considered. |
| Leadership and management |
| Accountability, governance, continuous quality improvement and business management. Capacity of a service to attract and retain suitably qualified and experienced staff. |

³ As the last three variables are seen as critical in driving quality ECEC, we have considered the research evidence in more detail in the following chapter, and where appropriate put forward recommendations for standards.

Quality standards should be developed and assessed in line with the vision for an integrated regulatory system. In addition new standards should draw on and incorporate key standards from current regulatory regimes and across current licensing and accreditation frameworks where these are consistent with contemporary evidence. Table 7 below summarises the quality enablers against the aspects of quality.

Table 7—aspects of Quality and Enablers for quality standards

| Aspects of quality | Enablers |
|--|---|
| Structural | Physical environment and space Staffing Health and safety |
| Educational concept and practice | Programming, planning and evaluation, guided by the national Early Years Learning Framework |
| Interaction or process | Interactions and relationships which develop from and lead to sustained shared thinking and conversations Connections with families and communities Leadership and management Programming, planning and evaluation which ensures pedagogical progression |
| Operational | Leadership and management, including parent participation Staffing Physical environment |
| Child-outcome quality or performance standards | Programming, planning and evaluation, guided by the national Early Years Learning Framework Transitions Connections with families and communities Health and safety |
| Standards pertaining to parent/ community outreach and involvement | Connections with families and communities Leadership and management |

Standards for early childhood education and care quality should state and describe a desirable level of performance. They measure performance against a specific criterion and describe:

- what programs should provide for children,
- how they should provide it,
- how practice (or outcomes) will be assessed, and
- what counts as meeting the standard.

An Early Years Learning Framework

In the last decade, a major policy change has taken place in the early childhood field, with the publication of new national, state or organisation-based curricula (OECD 2006. See also Table 3). ECEC curricula often take the form of pedagogical frameworks. These frameworks allow local interpretation, identify general quality goals, and indicate how they may be attained. They also encourage the formulation of a more detailed curriculum by each centre. Australian early childhood agencies have developed a range of early childhood curricula which are implemented to varying degrees by early childhood services. There is no nationally consistent mandate to implement such curricula.

The current early childhood education and care reforms call for the development of an *Early Years Learning Framework*.

The development of an *Early Years Learning Framework* is part of COAG's reform agenda for ECEC. The EAP recognises the importance of this work and considers that the *Early Years Learning Framework* should form a key component of the quality program standards, and in particular enable the development of early development and learning outcomes standards. As Table 7 shows, the proposed national Early Years Learning Framework should guide programming, planning and evaluation to ensure quality educational concept and practice in ECEC.

Typically, quality standards relating to educational practice both describe current practice and clarify program dimensions in the light of evidence from research and practice. Standards are the means of translating research into expectations for program quality, including curriculum quality and teacher quality. By virtue of the changing expectations of families and communities and the changing nature of knowledge about learning and development, standards related to programming are not set in concrete; they require regular revision to reflect new research and professional knowledge.

The EAP strongly supports the Commonwealth Government's commitment to universal access to preschool for all four year olds. In particular, we support a focus on improved learning experiences and outcomes for all children and a smooth transition to schooling. To support this focus, we recommend that the *Early Years Learning Framework* be designed to apply equally in preschools as well as other ECEC settings to reflect the integrated nature and importance of early learning for all children from birth to five and to support transitions to schools. The EAP would expect that any service receiving 'universal access' funding or Child Care Benefit funding should comply with a mandatory requirement to provide rich educational programs for all children. Embedding the *Early Years Learning Framework* as an integral part of the national quality standards may be one way to ensure this.

SECTION 5

Key drivers of quality

The research evidence is clear: the quality of social interactions between a child and his or her carers—or the relational environment—is the key driver of quality ECEC and achievement of optimal developmental and learning outcomes. Access to warm, rich and consistent relationships with caring adults in protective and safe environments is a crucial element of early care (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Two recent large studies of preschool education—the EPPE study in the UK (Sylva et al., 2004) and the Australian Preparing for School study (Thorpe et al., 2004)—found that the level of focused interactions predicted learning outcomes, with increased language and early literacy levels and reduced behavioural difficulties associated with indices of relational environment. Similarly, in group educational settings, lower levels of direct interaction between adults and children have been associated with poorer developmental outcomes (Tayler et al., 2008, p. 6).

While the available evidence suggests that the most important aspect of quality is the nature of the interaction between the teacher and the child, this is difficult to define and regulate. However, well qualified staff, low staff-child ratios, and small group sizes provide the context in which quality is likely to occur (Currie, 2000; McQuail, et al., 2003). These three key quality variables—staff qualifications, staff-child ratios and group size—have been dubbed the ‘iron triangle’ of quality because they are interrelated. Rather than operating independently, these quality dimensions combine to create effective early childhood services. The combination of these dimensions enables services to offer responsive and sensitive care.

As these three variables are seen as critical in driving quality ECEC, we have considered the research evidence in more detail below, and where appropriate identified levels for inclusion in national standards.

Staff qualifications

A recent review of standards for the Children’s Services Sub-Committee of the Community Services Ministers’ Advisory Council concluded:

Qualifications and training of staff are key indicators of the quality outcomes for children in ECEC programs, assessed using measures across the developmental spectrum (emotional, social, cognitive, language, and physical). There is a wealth of empirical evidence supporting the association between quality care and qualified staff. (Tayler et al., 2006, p. 59)

The EPPE study also provides useful evidence about the impact of staff qualifications on ECEC outcomes. This work pinpoints the importance of early childhood teaching qualifications in the creation of quality environments and the positive impact of early childhood centre managers’ qualifications on a centre’s quality profile (Elliott, 2006).

The EPPE study found that having qualified teachers working with children in preschool settings for a substantial proportion of time, and most importantly as the pedagogical leader, had the greatest impact on quality, and was linked with better cognitive and social-behavioural outcomes for children. Conversely, higher proportions of staff with low-level qualifications were associated with poorer child outcomes on scales of peer sociability, cooperation, and conformity, and were associated with higher levels of antisocial or worried behaviours (Sammons et al., 2002; Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2003; Sylva et al., 2004).

A recent review of seven major US studies of early care and education concluded, however, that policies focused solely on increasing teachers’ education will not suffice for improving classroom quality or maximizing children’s academic gains (Early et al., 2007). The studies were used to predict classroom quality and children’s academic outcomes from the educational attainment level and discipline-major of teachers of 4-year-olds. Most of the analyses yielded null findings and, although there were some statistically significant associations, no clear pattern emerged.

This is not to say that the study concluded that 'teachers' education is unimportant', but rather that it is likely that the relationships among teachers' education, classroom quality, and child outcomes in preschool programs are complex, and hence:

...a policy of requiring a certain degree or major will not substitute for the hard work of selecting high-quality teachers and supporting them in a way that will maximize their capacity (Early et al., 2007, p. 575).

Raising the effectiveness of early childhood education and care will most likely require a broad range of initiatives including increasing the supply of qualified early childhood educators, and providing targeted professional development activities that support, amongst other things, teachers' pedagogies including interactions with children. In the Australian context quality standards should include specifications about entry-level qualification requirements for early childhood staff coupled with a requirement for continuing professional development.

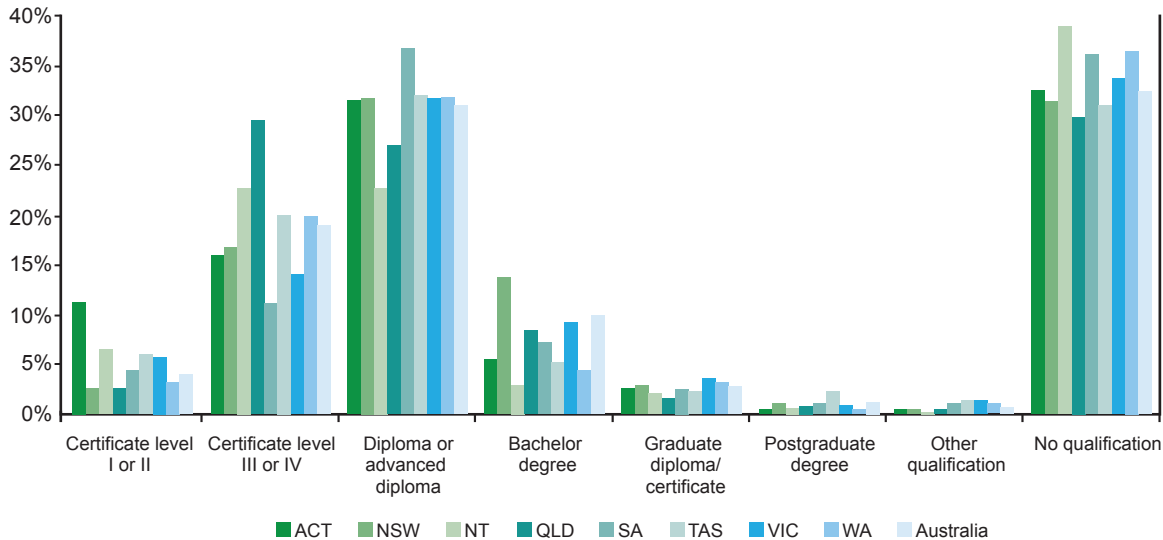
Researchers from the EPPE project drew a similar conclusion, cautioning that it is not the teacher qualification per se that affects outcomes but the ability of the staff member to create a better pedagogic environment that makes the difference (Sammons et al., 2003). As summarised in Elliott (2006), at the heart of appropriate pedagogies is the ability of practitioners to structure environments that promote optimum engagement for children. Key elements of this pedagogy are the richness and appropriateness of staff interactions with children and their scaffolding strategies, especially guiding, modelling and questioning. Other key factors linked to children's developmental outcomes are staff knowledge of children's development and learning needs, and their knowledge and understanding of curriculum. Research also showed that those teachers with Early Years qualifications were able to show better outcomes than those with other qualifications (reported in Elliott, 2006) and further, that the presence of better qualified staff has positive influence on the behaviour of other staff (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002).

The New Zealand government has recognised the importance of qualifications as one of the determinants of quality ECEC and has introduced legislation that will ensure 'at least one qualified early childhood educator in each centre to improve overall quality' (Elliott, 2006, p 40). However, building the qualification level of the workforce takes time and mandating qualification levels is not without risk, including the likelihood of driving up costs through higher wages bills causing financial hardship for families and for early childhood services (Elliott, 2006). Workforce capacity building requires long lead times together with supporting transitional strategies. Elliott (2006) cites Mitchell and Cubey's (2003) research into the value of professional development to enhance pedagogy, and outcomes for children. With this in mind, the current National Workforce Strategy to increase the number of staff with higher level qualifications should include consideration of identifying and funding in-service professional development models to suit the diversity of staffing needs in the ECEC sector (Elliott, 2006). Other workforce capacity building issues must also be taken into account. Continuity of care is recognised as one of the features of ECEC services with high quality outcomes. As reported in the first of the two OECD Starting Strong reports:

There is a critical need to develop strategies to recruit and retain a qualified and diverse, mixed-gender workforce and to ensure that a career in ECEC is satisfying, respected and financially viable (OECD, 2001, p11).

As shown in Figure 2, building the capacity of Australia’s ECEC existing workforce is also part of the current challenge. Figure 2 summarises information about staff qualifications collected in the National Children’s Services Workforce Study⁴. It indicates that only 45 per cent of staff hold a Diploma or above qualification and that more than 30 per cent of staff hold no qualification.

Figure 2—Qualifications of staff by jurisdiction



Staff-child ratios and group size

Research associates both low staff-child ratios and group size with positive and sensitive staff-child interactions, which in turn are associated with positive child outcomes (Mooney et al., 2003, p. 18).

For example, a large multi-state study predicting process quality in care from structural elements established significant correlations in infant, toddler and preschool programs between staff-child ratio, group size, and the process quality outcomes (Phillipson et al., 1997). Process outcomes were measured by environment (overall daily quality of care), interaction (sensitivity, harshness and detachment), and involvement (proximity and level of responsive interaction). Further, while there is clear evidence that low ratios of children to staff are beneficial for older children, younger children need even lower staff-child ratios.

Another study (Fiene, 2002) found that ratios and group sizes could be used as an indicator for health, safety and developmental outcomes in children. This is because these two indicators significantly affect many other health and safety issues, such as the transmission of disease, which is greater when there are more children and adults present. On the mental health and school readiness side, more secure attachments and smooth transitions to school are influenced by lower staff-child ratios and smaller group sizes.

These research findings make sense because developmental outcomes for children are typically improved through positive and more frequent interactions between adults and children, greater engagement in children’s play, lower levels of child distress, and more positive nurturing behaviour from staff—the outcomes of lower staff-child ratios and smaller group sizes. The impact is greater on very young children and children from low income families (Feine, 2002).

4 National Children’s Services Workforce Study, Community and Disability Minister’s Council (2006)

However, generally studies do not recommend specific group sizes or optimum staff-child ratios across ages on a sound empirical basis, with conclusions limited to generalisations. To better inform the development of standards, it is useful to consider practice in other similar OECD countries. For example:

- In the UK, in centre-based ECEC there is a staff-child ratio of 1:3 for 0-2 year olds; 1:4 for 2-3 year olds; and 1:8 for 3-5 year olds. Preschools have a staff-child ratio of 1:10 and a teacher-child ratio of 1:13.
- In New Zealand, in education and care settings the staff-child ratio is 1:5 for 0-2 year olds and 1:10 for children aged two or more (Tayler et al., 2006, pp. 67 and 70).

Quality drivers for Australian early childhood education and care

A recent review of the evidence on drivers of quality in ECEC gave support to including the three key quality variables of staff qualifications, staff-child ratios and group size in quality standards, concluding:

Evidence on the impact and effectiveness of early childhood education and care shows there is a compelling knowledge base which demonstrates that enriched learning environments are fostered by better qualified practitioners, and that better quality environments and pedagogies facilitate better learning outcomes...Quality outcomes for children are most likely when competent, qualified staff interact with small groups of children in enriched environments (Elliott, 2006, p. 31).

However, there is less evidence identifying a threshold level for these variables that should be reflected in the standards. Further, it is important to highlight a point about all the variables—they are all proxy indicators as they are all associated with positive and sensitive staff-child interactions, which in turn are associated with positive child outcomes.

Regulatory reform literature emphasises the importance of moving away from prescriptive regulation which specifies inputs or actions to be taken—in this case, for example, specifying a level of staff qualification or staff-child ratio—and putting more emphasis on performance or outcomes focused regulation which focus on regulating the ends to be achieved rather than the means (Allen Consulting Group, 2007, pp. 53-4).

While the EAP acknowledges these points, it is also important to be mindful of the context within which these standards are being developed—for inclusion in an integrated system of licensing, regulation and accreditation. While an outcomes-based approach, with a focus on ends rather than means, may be appropriate for some elements of the system, the EAP does not consider that such an approach alone could bear the weight of ensuring effective licensing, regulation and accreditation of ECEC services. The ECEC industry has a number of characteristics that indicate it is appropriate to rely—to a relatively significant degree—on prescriptive regulation (Allen Consulting Group, 2007, p. 54):

- currently, there are no outcome measures of ECEC. Reliance on an outcomes-based regulatory approach is less appropriate where there are difficulties with cost-effectively identifying, monitoring and assessing outcomes (Coglianese & Lazer, 2002, pp. 15-17),
- ECEC has the characteristics of an experience good meaning that we base our understanding of the service on the experience of using the service. It is difficult to assess quality in advance of a child attending a centre. Understandably, parents look for markers of quality care such as qualifications and staff-child ratios,
- in other markets, people receiving a service can assess its quality, complain if the quality is unacceptable and choose not to return to a poor quality service provider. This is generally not the case in the ECEC market. Children may not be able to identify and convey information about a poor quality experience and there is often no capacity to change early childhood education and care provider,
- prescribing minimum standards aims to afford a degree of protection to young and vulnerable children, and promotes national consistency which parents can rely on.

Because of the differences in the organisational purpose, structure and ownership of those providing ECEC in Australia, prescribing minimum standards for quality is a way of ensuring baseline quality care and education for children whichever centre they attend, promoting continuous improvement, and directing the conduct of a diverse group of providers.

It should be obvious that 'minimum' in this context refers to the minimum acceptable level and not to a lowest common denominator.

Taking the evidence and arguments into account, the EAP recommends the following minimum standards for staff qualifications and staff-child ratios to drive quality.

Staff qualifications

Every ECEC service must have at a minimum one university-degree qualified and registered early childhood teacher. These degree qualified early childhood educators would be supported by diploma and certificate (in children's services or equivalent) trained staff, with a minimum qualification level of Certificate III. While unqualified staff can make valuable and unique contributions to children's development and complement key educational staff, unqualified staff should be supernumerary to the required base level child: staff ratios.

Staff-child ratios

ECEC services should have the following staff-child ratios:

Under two years: 1:3

Two to three years: 1:5

Three to five years: 1:10

While the discussion above highlights the importance of small group sizes for enabling good staff-child interactions, the EAP has not made any recommendations stipulating maximum group sizes as there is less evidence about the exact relationship between group size and quality ECEC. Standards should focus on outcomes for children and could allow ECEC services flexibility in group size within existing physical infrastructure, cultural expectations and programming strategies as long as children's needs are being met. However, we would be opposed to any increase in group size where it is identified in existing legislation or regulation, but note this may require review in relation to changes in staff-child ratios. For example Queensland currently has a maximum group size of 8 for 0-2 year olds with a staff-child ratio of 1:4.

SECTION 6

Quality rating system

Monitoring, reporting and compliance arrangements to ensure appropriate accountability comprise the third key element of a quality framework. For the National Quality Framework for ECEC these may be expressed in a quality rating system, which aims to drive continuous improvement and provide parents with robust and relevant information about the quality of care and learning. Together with national standards, a quality rating system should enable individual centres and the early childhood sector as a whole to evaluate practice, improve quality and implement models of accountability that stand up to public and professional scrutiny.

The Commonwealth has proposed the introduction of a five-category or 'A—E' rating system for ECEC services. Expectations of the rating system include:

- That ECEC providers should be able to showcase their high quality care status to parents,
- That the new system should provide parents with information for each area of an ECEC service's operation and their child's engagement and development,
- That the new system will rate quality levels of ECEC services,
- That the quality record of all accredited ECEC providers will be made public, and
- That the quality assurance process should be able to drive continuous quality improvement.

The EAP has been asked to provide advice on approaches for developing such a system.

The EAP proposes that all early childhood services be rated in terms of their program quality—this would include child care centres, preschools, occasional care and other centre-based services or settings for children between birth and five years, including 'budget-based' early childhood services (that is, those that provide care but are not approved for Child Care Benefit).

Objectives

The objectives of the proposed Quality Rating and Improvement System for ECEC are:

- *Information for families and communities*—the rating system should provide families, communities and professionals with robust and relevant information about the quality of care and education in early childhood settings.
- *Indicator of service quality*—the ratings system should summarise a service's achievements in a meaningful way across the scope of the quality standards and integrated regulatory framework for ECEC, including the *Early Years Learning Framework*.
- *Continuous improvement in the ECEC sector*—the rating system should drive continuous improvement and innovation in the service sector.

The rationale for these objectives is presented below.

Information for families

Although parents have become more knowing consumers of childcare they still tend to overestimate the quality of care received by their children (Elliott, 2006). International research backs this up with the evidence suggesting that:

*parents are more generous in their assessments of ECEC service quality than are professionals.
To put this another way, few parents have the tools to identify high quality (Brennan et al., 2008).*

It is worth considering that a rating system may provide a mechanism for governments to both report on the quality of early childhood services and to educate parents about the quality indicators and drivers of ECEC. This is likely to both inform their choices about which service they use and increase their own engagement with their children's learning and development.

At a minimum, parents need to have confidence that children in ECEC are in a safe, nurturing environment and protected from harm. Information about quality environments is often encompassed in policy documents, however, documentation should be supplemented by observations of practice to substantiate quality and give

parents reassurance about their decision to use ECEC services. A licence to operate has historically been a proxy indicator for this. Further, parents wish to know that an ECEC service will promote their children's development. High quality interactions are the factor most likely to lead to such an outcome, of which the proxy measures include qualifications of staff, staff-to-child ratios, group size and child-centred programming. There are a range of other triggers that determine choice of service type or even the choice between services (where available). Such information is likely to be both quantitative and qualitative and can be related to outcomes for the child, for the parent and/or for the community.

The EAP notes that public consultations about the reform agenda are currently underway and expects that the outcomes of consultations will include views about what parents want in the way of information about ECEC to inform their choices.

Indicator of service quality

Having a reliable indicator of service quality will be of benefit for operators of ECEC services, for users of services and for governments who will ultimately be held accountable for their investments in the short and long term. However, accountability is not just about ensuring that funds are not misused but more importantly about achieving results. Controls must be effective in addressing an identified problem and efficient in terms of maximising the benefits to the community, taking account of the costs. Sanctions alone are limited in their effect. Therefore, for governments in particular, having a reliable indicator of service quality will allow them to direct resources and support where they are most needed to reduce risks and ensure the objectives individuals, communities and government want from ECEC provision.

The current child care accreditation system in place in Australia includes a quality rating which has allowed the National Childcare Accreditation Council (NCAC) to map trend data and identify areas of weakness or risk across the service types. In response to these trends the NCAC has developed resources to support services improve their practice including Factsheets, policy templates and a newsletter distributed to all services which includes strategies supporting quality practices.

As has previously been discussed, Commonwealth and State and Territory governments both have an interest in the operations and outcomes of ECEC and monitor this through a combination of regulation and accreditation. Both are mechanisms put in place to ensure the best outcomes from the implementation of government policies, but are not applied uniformly to all ECEC settings. The new integrated quality framework proposed for the child care and preschool sector could incorporate an indicator of service quality that helps to both manage risk and direct resources and support to areas of greatest need. After all:

Australians expect regulators to focus on the things that matter—the quality of services and regulatory effectiveness—rather than unnecessary procedural requirements (Briggs, 2008).

Continuous improvement

The number of children using ECEC services in Australia has increased as has the average amount of time an individual child spends in care (Taylor, 2005). We also know more now about the importance of the first years of a child's life for their early and ongoing development and parents are becoming increasingly focused on their children's social and cognitive outcomes (Elliott, 2006). These three factors have been instrumental in driving a shift in focus to the quality of ECEC services as opposed to just the quantity of places available (Taylor, 2005).

Without a doubt there is a need for a systemised approach within the proposed National Quality Framework to support continuous improvement for all services, not just to achieve agreed standards, but to exceed them. Continuous improvement at a service level will drive up the benchmark of the entire industry over time which is of benefit to children, families and communities in both the long and short-term.

However, we cannot assume that quality rating alone is a sufficient incentive to drive up quality. Recent trend data from the NCAC indicates that in Long Day Care the percentage of centres listed as accredited has dropped over the last three years. Although a range of resources have been developed to try and address areas of risk identified through trend data, this is yet to flow through into measurably improved practice.

To realise the objective of continuous improvement, the rating system may need to integrate strategies other than just reporting measurement outcomes. Braithwaite et al. (2007) identified a number of drivers of quantitative compliance in aged care including: inspection visits, inspector praise, reintegrative shaming, fostering of managerial self-efficacy, and trust.

Rating through a responsive regulatory approach

In considering these last two objectives for the rating system, the EAP is mindful of the regulatory approach to be taken. There is an opportunity to secure compliance with the quality standards and drive continuous improvement through integration of a rating system with the regulatory approach.

The EAP considers that an approach based on ‘responsive regulation’ would also be appropriate. The basic idea of responsive regulation is that governments should be responsive to the conduct of those they seek to regulate in deciding whether a more or less interventionist response is needed, recognising that there will be a range of differing motivations, conducts and capacities within an industry (Braithwaite, 2002, p. 29). Australia’s ECEC industry is comprised of many entities with differing organisational purpose, capacity, location and ownership, and hence—to some extent—differing motivations and conduct.

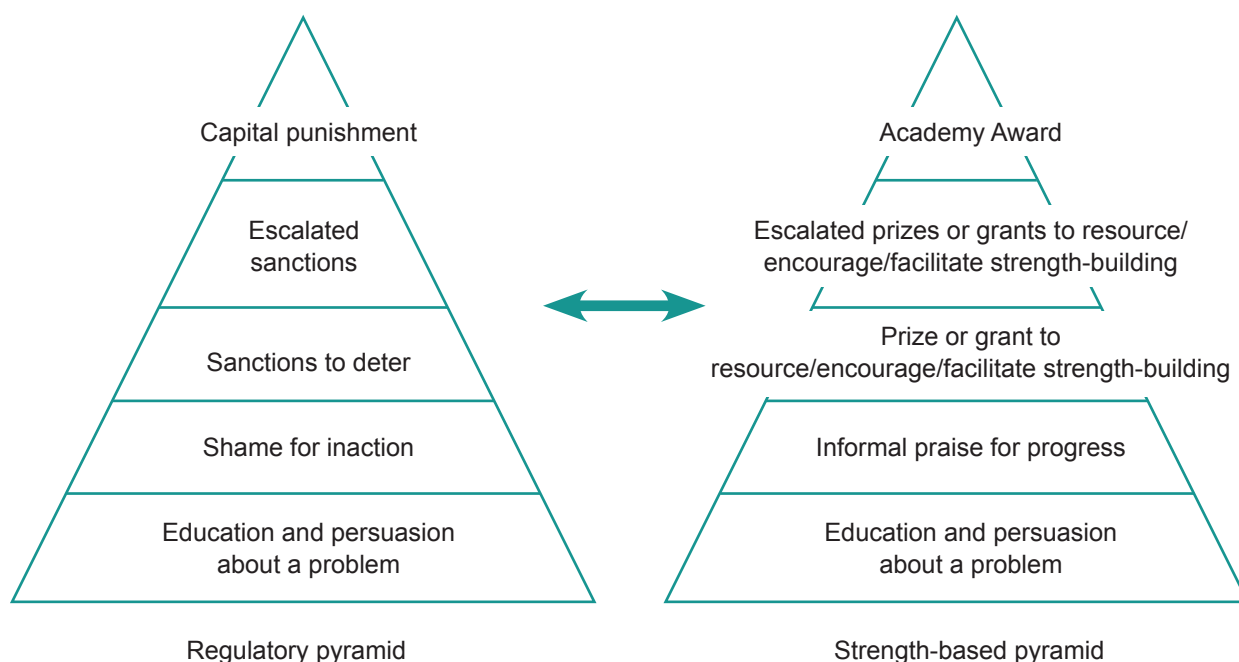
In this context, good regulatory practice will necessitate a range of responses. Under responsive regulation, regulators vary their stances as they deal with different people and circumstances. For some, a more rigorous enforcement approach against formal rules will be called for, while for others a more results oriented approach will be appropriate, stressing responsiveness and preferring tools involving self-regulation and persuasion (Ayres & Braithwaite, 1992).

A well-designed quality rating system would provide a range of responses to the performance of ECEC providers against national quality standards. For example, the base level of the ratings system could be a ‘pass’ or ‘fail’ against the conditions for operating an ECEC service, coupled with a higher level rating which could allow for recognition of degrees of quality against the standards or other indicators to encourage maintenance of high quality early learning provision and continuous improvement.

The EAP has considered the integrated compliance and strengths-based approach put forward by Braithwaite et al. (2007) as one possible model. Figure 2 shows the Braithwaite model.

The underpinning philosophy of the Braithwaite model is to promote better performance by rewarding and building on recognised strengths. The intention is to avoid preoccupation with “guaranteeing a minimum standard, [instead seeking to] maximise quality by pulling standards up through a ceiling” (Braithwaite et al., 2007).

Figure 3—REGULATORY AND STRENGTH-BASED PYRAMIDS



Source: Braithwaite, J., Makkai, T. and Braithwaite, V. (2007). *Regulating Aged Care : Ritualism and the New Pyramid*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing Limited.

A range of incentives could be designed to support the focus of the rating system on continuous improvement. These incentives would need to be carefully considered to ensure that, while encouraging and rewarding improvement, they do not serve to entrench inequity. For example, differential (higher) payments (such as CCB) to higher rated services would tend to reinforce different quality levels, while differential (lower) payments to lower rated services could undermine continuous improvement and disadvantage families.

Examples of incentives that may be useful include:

- Mentoring support: as acknowledged centres of excellence, services could be encouraged to mentor other services to improve. Such a rating might allow centres of excellence to access financial assistance to facilitate this mentoring role, such as to reduce the financial cost of releasing staff to undertake such activities,
- Research funding: services participating in research might also be able to access financial assistance to facilitate this. This might not be limited to higher rated services, but be based on the research proposal, as participation of lower rated services in research may assist them in lifting quality.

Other areas for possible incentive programs include staff development and networking.

The EAP is mindful that the vast majority of ECEC services in Australia are currently compliant with regulatory and accreditation standards, but wishes to stress the value of embedding a continuous improvement approach to drive up whole of sector quality over time to bring Australian ECEC provision in line with international best practice.

Issues to consider in the design of the system

The EAP believes that further research is required to determine whether a single five-category based rating system could coherently address all three quality assurance objectives. The development of a rating system needs to include a thorough assessment of the advantages and potential risks. Issues exist for both families and service providers which need to be addressed appropriately as the system is being developed.

The EAP also considers that a participatory approach to quality within Australia will only succeed if the sector participates in consultations to develop a consensus about the need and relevance of quality standards and the rating system.

For *families*, the rating system needs to be designed to provide meaningful information about the types of services available and a valid, defensible indication of the quality of services. As indicated a quality rating schedule provides an opportunity to indicate quality and what constitutes such quality in ECEC settings, and to educate parents about the importance of high quality early childhood education and care. However, there is a risk that this type of rating system will have unintended and potentially negative impacts for families. These consequences include potentially undermining family's confidence in their services—especially when choice of service is limited—and changing behaviours, such as exiting the workforce rather than using a service that is considered only 'adequate'.

There are challenges too, in identifying and reporting on the sort of information families want. For example it may be difficult to compare and 'score' additional and specialist programs (such as early intervention programs) and other features that add value to a service, over and above compliance with quality standards. The issue of information packaging, and whether all parent-focused information must be presented in one rating should be carefully considered.

For *services*, there are some clear advantages from a quality rating system, including:

- recognition of services that have been delivering consistently across the whole of the service,
- recognition of exceptional services, and
- demonstration of quality to current and potential customers.

However, it would appear there is a potential risk, particularly in a rating system with several grades of excellence 'above the line', that higher ranked services will increase their fees leading to decreased accessibility to high quality services for children whose family cannot afford the fees.

For *administrators*, there are issues to consider as well.

Care must be taken to integrate licensing and compliance with standards to ensure that services ranked excellent are not also at risk of sanctions for breach of operating protocols, and

Skills, qualifications and qualities of assessors/evaluators will need to be considered, particularly in relation to supporting continuous improvement and especially through a strength-based approach.

Finally, the issue of labelling is one of concern to the EAP. While supportive of a quality rating system, the EAP has significant concerns about formally labelling the rating levels 'A to E'. An A to E rating scale carries with it cultural understandings of what different grades mean. These meanings (such as 'C' being 'average' and 'E' being a 'failure') do not equate comfortably with the content of the rating levels illustrated above.

In an integrated national quality system, where a high level of quality is a base level requirement, labelling that level 'C' is likely to undermine consumer and sector confidence unnecessarily. Calibrating the rating system to place this high quality base level at a higher rating (for example, moving the 'Accreditation' rating to a 'B' level) undermines the capacity of the system to encourage continuous improvement and recognise higher levels of performance.

There are also concerns that culturally based misunderstandings of what ratings mean may have unintended behavioural impacts. For example, a family which only has access to a 'C' rated service may decide, based on a misapprehension of the quality of the service, that the difficult decision for the mother to re-enter the workforce is no longer worthwhile. There may also be similar impacts on workforce decisions of potential staff. It should be noted that a 'star' labelling system is likely to encounter similar issues.

The EAP recommends that the rating levels be labelled appropriately, probably using a descriptive text format. The issues around labelling under a quality rating system and the expectation of five-categories of rating would be a useful area for feedback during stakeholder consultations.

Next steps

As is clear from this discussion, designing a ratings system is a complex matter. Deciding on legislative and operational protocols and then planning to implement the operational aspects of the rating scheme across very different settings—such as child care, community preschools and school-based preschools—requires considerably more work and consultation with stakeholders. It is the EAP's belief that development of the rating system is best handled as part of the introduction of a new integrated regulatory approach. Development of a rating system cannot precede the development and implementation of new quality standards, as the rating system will report on the degree to which centres (preschools or child care) meet the standards.

SECTION 7

Concluding remarks

The vision and advice in this document are strategic. Individual recommendations, strategies and options require further development and consultation. While some aspects of the advice are achievable in the short to medium term, other aspects face significant constraints and require concurrent financial planning and additional investments in the short, medium and long term. The EAP acknowledges that raising the quality standards that underpin a national system has significant cost and workforce implications for governments, service providers and families. We recognise that some practicalities may limit the capacity of services to achieve improved recommended quality levels in the short-term.

The evidence is strong for improvement of quality standards and the emphasis in financial modelling should be about staged and appropriate implementation of higher standards, rather than not implementing improved standards. Countries such as UK and New Zealand have outlined 5-10 year strategies to deliver quality improvement and better outcomes for children. A mid to long term strategy is required for Australia to address workforce issues particularly in the context of the proposed National Quality Framework.

A critical step in progressing the reforms, including gaining the buy-in of stakeholders is valid and reliable financial modelling leading to the design of a coherent investment strategy. This would take into account implementation priorities and practices over time. Working from an evidence base that takes into account costs, behavioural and regulatory impacts will enable the development of a realistic implementation strategy with achievable timeframes, thus ensuring that stakeholders opt in to the reforms rather than out.

The EAP recommendations generally refer to centre-based ECEC including stand-alone and government preschools . Because of the extreme national diversity and complexity of Family Day Care and Outside School Hours care further discussion and consultation needs to take place to ensure the effective participation of these setting types in one integrated system. However, the panel wishes to restate the importance of developing an integrated system that is organised around quality outcomes for children rather than a particular service type or setting.

The EAP stresses that it is important to embed the work being done on the Early Years Learning Framework in the quality standards. An Early Years Learning Framework is at the core of standards pertaining to children's development and learning.

In developing the National Quality Framework for ECEC the EAP noted the lack of coherent Australian evidence, including major empirical studies, on many factors that impact on quality. Developing the evidence base—especially around factors that may influence quality and affect the outcomes for children—should be a major priority and a feature of the National Quality Framework.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Expert Advisory Panel

Summary of Terms of Reference

The Expert Advisory Panel is to, through the Quality Working Party to the Early Childhood Development Sub-Group:

- advise on a vision for an integrated and seamless system of licensing and accreditation within a national standards framework for early childhood learning and care services,
- advise on and develop options for draft quality standards for application in ECEC settings, and
- advise on approaches for an A to E ratings system.

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Appendix B: Preschool or kindergarten

| State or Territory | Current nomenclature for program offered 2 years before Year 1 | Age of children attending |
|------------------------------|--|---|
| New South Wales | Preschool | Generally, children must be 4 by 31 July in the year of commencement (community based services may take younger children) |
| Queensland | Kindergarten/ Pre-Prep | Children must be 4 by June 30 in the year of commencement (3½ to 4½ year olds) |
| Victoria | Kindergarten | Children must be 4 by 30 April in the year of commencement |
| Western Australia | Kindergarten | Children must be 4 by 30 June in the year of commencement |
| South Australia | Preschool/Kindergarten | Access from four terms before entry into schooling or up to eight terms for Indigenous children and children under the guardianship of the Minister |
| Tasmania | Kindergarten | Children must be 4 by 1 January in the year of commencement |
| Northern Territory | Preschool | Continuous entry after 4th birthday |
| Australian Capital Territory | Preschool | Children must be 4 by 30 April in the year of commencement |

Appendix C: Qualification requirements

New South Wales

The requirement for early childhood qualified staff in all formal early childhood programs in New South Wales is set down in the NSW Department of Community Services Children's Services Regulation 2004. The number of children that are enrolled dictates the number of qualified staff required.

Children enrolled:

| | |
|------------|---|
| 0-29 | No qualification is required, however if there are any children enrolled under 2 years of age a staff member with at least a minimum qualification of a Diploma (Children's Services) is required to be present at all times that the children are present. |
| 30 or more | 1 teaching staff member |
| 40 or more | 2 teaching staff members |
| 60 or more | 3 teaching staff members |
| 80 or more | 4 teaching staff members |

A teaching staff member of a children's service means a member of staff of the service who:

- has a degree or diploma in early childhood education from a university following a course with a duration (on a full-time basis) of not less than 3 years, or
- has some other approved qualification, or
- has other approved training and other approved experience.

The number of children enrolled in a NSW centre determines the number of qualified staff required. The cut off number of 29 is an anomaly that was determined on an economic threshold for small business and not necessarily in the best interests of children.

Western Australia

The Western Australian Child Care Services (Child Care) Regulations 2006 specify that if there are 5 or more enrolled children in attendance at a care session, the licensee must ensure that the children are supervised by at least 2 contact staff members, one of whom must:

- have reached 18 years of age; and
- be a class A, B or C contact staff member.

At the broadest level the definitions of Class A, B and C contact staff include:

| | |
|---------|--|
| class A | a degree or diploma in early childhood care or early childhood education from a recognised Australian university or other tertiary institution |
| class B | (a) a 2 year certificate in child care studies; or (b) a diploma or associate diploma in child care; or |
| class C | (a) a registered mothercraft nurse; or (b) the holder of a mothercraft nursing qualification; or |

Queensland

In Queensland, Child Care Regulation 2003 makes the following provisions.

Staffing requirements other than during a rest period

1. This section applies to each of the groups at the child care centre other than during a rest period.
2. There must be a qualified group leader working with, and in charge of, the group.
3. The number of qualified carers working with the group must be at least the number required to comply with the ratio for the group stated in schedule 1.
4. In this section—**qualified carer**—
 - a. means the qualified group leader in charge of the group and any other qualified assistant working with the group; and
 - b. includes 1 adult working with a group who is not a qualified assistant if—
 - i. a qualified group leader and a qualified assistant are also working with the group; and
 - ii. the service's licensed capacity is not more than 30.

Staffing requirements during a rest period

1. This section applies to the service during a rest period.
2. The number of qualified carers working with each of the groups at the child care centre must be at least—
 - a. for a group including a child aged less than two years—the number required to comply with the ratio for the group stated in schedule 1; or
 - b. for another group—the number that is 1 less than the number required to comply with the ratio for the group stated in schedule 1 (but at least 1).
3. In addition to the qualified carers working with the groups under subsection (2), there must be at least the following number of adult staff members present at the centre and able to attend with any of the groups immediately if required—
 - a. if the service's licensed capacity is not more than 30—one adult staff member;
 - b. if the service's licensed capacity is at least 31 but not more than 75—two adult staff members;
 - c. if the service's licensed capacity is at least 76—three adult staff members.
4. A director must be present at the centre.

At the broadest level the qualification requirements are:

| | |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| Qualifications for assistant | A person has a qualification prescribed for an assistant if the person has: <ol style="list-style-type: none">a. a certificate III or IV in an area of study applying to child care workers under the AQF; orb. a one year qualification in early childhood studies or child care studies |
|-------------------------------------|--|

| | |
|--|--|
| Qualifications for group leader | A person has a qualification prescribed for a group leader if the person has: <ol style="list-style-type: none">a. a diploma in an area of study applying to child care workers under the AQF; orb. a two year qualification in early childhood studies or child care studies |
|--|--|

| | |
|------------------------------------|---|
| Qualifications for director | A person has a qualification prescribed for a director if the person has: <ol style="list-style-type: none">a. an advanced diploma in an area of study applying to child care workers under the AQF; orb. a qualification that is at least a three year qualification in early childhood studies or child care studies; orc. a postgraduate qualification that is at least a one year qualification in early childhood studies or child care studies. |
|------------------------------------|---|

Appendix D: OECD Aspects of Quality

Orientation quality: the type and level of attention that a government brings to early childhood policy, for example, through national legislation, regulation and policy initiatives.

Structural quality: the overarching structures needed to ensure quality in early childhood programs. Structural quality defines the physical environment (for example, buildings and space), the quality and training levels of the staff, staff-child ratios, work conditions and curriculum standards. The OECD notes that structural quality is a government responsibility and these 'structural requirements' can be enforced via legislation or regulations. With its focus on the necessary inputs to delivery ECEC, this quality aspect underpins the capacity to deliver on each of the other quality aspects. Measures of structural quality should cover the range of acceptable requirements for any facility involved in caring for children. Structural measures would include many of the requirements currently included in the various licensing regimes, such as facility standards (fences, safety glass, toilets, etc), appropriateness of personnel (working with children checks and qualification requirements), and minimum operating standards (staff-child ratios, group size, etc). Some of these requirements may vary between care types (for example, Long Day Care, Family Day Care, Outside School Hours care, etc) and by age group (for example, ratios and group size based on age of children).

Educational concept and practice: this reflects what happens on a day to day basis in ECEC settings. Centres are generally guided by a curriculum framework, which sets out the key goals of the early childhood system. This quality aspect also identifies that staff with relevant training and competencies are needed to effectively implement the curriculum. The OECD notes that a common conviction is emerging across countries that lead-staff need to be trained to a high level to achieve the broad goals of early childhood programming.

Interaction or process quality: this looks at the day to day experience of children. The OECD describes interaction or process quality as:

The warmth and quality of the pedagogical relationship between educators and children, the quality of interaction between children themselves, and the quality of relationships within the educator team figure among the process goals. ... The pedagogical relationship between children and educators seems to be most effective when the relationship includes care, upbringing and concern for the general well-being of each child, as well as expert support for the children's learning (OECD 2006, p. 12).

Operational quality: this is about the management and leadership of ECEC providers, in particular, the responsiveness of management to local need, quality improvement and team building. It includes regular planning at centre and classroom level; opportunities for staff to engage in continuous professional and career development; time allowed for child observation, assessments and documentation; support to staff performance in the form of accompaniment and mentoring. Operational quality may also include flexible and appropriate (for children) opening hours and the integration of core programming with other necessary services. The quality of operational standards depends largely on the professional competence of local administration and leaders of centres. Measuring the ways in which a program operates, which are key determinants of quality, typically involves a review of processes. These processes are typically documented through the policies of the service, and relate to a broad range of issues, from health] safety and wellbeing to programming for child development and learning, and program evaluation. Assessment of process issues is linked to appropriateness of policies (for example, that they are developed in consultation with families and based on evidence and best practice) and observation of their practical application (that is, that they are actually in day to day use). It will be important here to ensure that processes are outcomes focused, thus allowing flexibility for different operational environments (for example, sun smart policies for different climates, and excursion policies for services with limited direct access to natural environments). Processes also reflect differing philosophical approaches and priorities of services and the families which use them (such as reflecting cultural and linguistic contexts, specialist program priorities and specific educational approaches such as Montessori or Steiner).

Child-outcome quality or performance standards: Above all, the purpose of ECEC services is to improve the present and future well-being of children. Positive child outcomes are a major goal for ECEC programs. Measures in this area should aim to capture the effectiveness of an early childhood program in optimising developmental and educational outcomes for children. However, these outcomes are not the exclusive responsibility of early childhood education services, and it would be inappropriate to hold services directly accountable for all specific developmental or educational outcomes. In terms of quality standards, the key component of quality is an environment which supports children developmentally and educationally. For example, research indicates that high quality interactions and relationships are integral to achieving educationally significant outcomes for children. Key outcome indicators for a quality early childhood education service could thus include evidence of the quality of interactions (for example, focus, intentionality etc), and dynamic programming, planning and evaluation focused on developmental and learning outcomes for individual children.

Standards pertaining to parent/community outreach and involvement: this includes outreach to parents groups—particularly through involvement in centre management—sensitivity to local cultural values and norms, efforts to improve the home learning environment, and participation in integrated programming with the employment, social, health and adult education authorities. This aspect is particularly important for targeted and local ECEC programs.

Appendix E: References

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Appendix F: Glossary of terms for a national quality framework

Access: A family is considered to have ‘access’ to early childhood education when a place is available in a quality early childhood education program where neither distance nor cost presents a barrier to attendance.

Agency: individuals exercise agency when they feel empowered to make choices and decisions⁵.

Child care: Broad interpretation includes Long Day Care (LDC), Family Day Care (FDC), Outside School Hours Care (OSHC) and Occasional Care.

Curriculum: This refers to a planned course of action leading to certain outcomes for children, and includes what is desirable, how and why it should be learnt and how best it can be evaluated.

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC): Early childhood education and care or ECEC is widely used by UNESCO and the OECD as the overarching term for the education and care of all children from birth up to eight years of age. In Australia, the term ‘early childhood education and care’ typically encompasses a range of care and education services for children from birth to five years.

Early learning: Refers to the ‘education’ children receive (from stimulation, experience and play-based activities) from birth to 5 years. The early years are critically important learning years as children are born learning and are naturally wired up to learn. Children’s desire to learn is based on their need to make sense of the world and understand their own experiences. Children learn through their important relationships; they learn when they feel good and are engaged and motivated in what they are learning; and they learn when they are making sense of their world.

Integrated services: At the narrowest interpretation, means a combination of preschool and child care, but has the potential to refer to a much broader co-location (or direct relationship between) services for children and the parents of young children. The 2020 proposal for child and parent centres, which could include child care, preschool and child health services, is an example of a more broadly defined integrated service.

Pedagogy: The function or work of teaching; the art or science of teaching, education instructional methods.

Personal, emotional and social development: These describe children’s social and emotional development.

Play: In early childhood education and care play encourages exploration, risk taking, socialisation and engagement in learning. Play (both unstructured and structured) provides children with hands-on tasks enabling children to practise problem-solving, trying things in different ways and encourages children to attempt tasks with creativity. Through play children explore and reflect on interests and issues relevant to and meaningful in their lives. The role of adults is central in supporting and extending children’s learning through play.

Preschool: Structured, play-based education delivered by a qualified early childhood teacher and primarily undertaken in the 12 months prior to formal schooling (alternative terms for preschool are used in some jurisdictions, such as kindergarten, pre-prep and reception).

5 The State of Queensland (Queensland Studies Authority), 2006, Early Years Curriculum Guidelines, Spring Hill, Qld