



Early Childhood Quality Consultancy

About ECQC and Our Mission

ECQ is a group of early childhood teachers and consultants working in regional NSW, Victoria and Tasmania.

Collectively, our consultants have over sixty years' experience in early childhood education and care services: we have worked as educators in long day care, preschool, kindergartens, primary and high schools, Out of School Hours Care (OoSHC) and mobile services. In higher education as university and TAFE lecturers.

Our consultants have worked in various roles as early childhood educators and specialists with children and families who have complex additional support needs, including children with disabilities and from culturally diverse backgrounds. We have worked with the Inclusion and Professional Support Program as an Inclusion Support Facilitator, and as Early Intervention Consultants in early intervention services.

ECQ consultants have experience working with community based, council, for-profit, and not-for-profit services. They have worked in a variety of roles in these settings, including as educators, directors and managers. Our consultants have also had the unique experience serving as community volunteers on committees responsible for the management of preschool and OoSHC services. They have a deep understanding of the complex issues facing educators and providers of early childhood education and care services in regional areas.

ECQ's mission is to provide high standard of training and consultancy across the three states with particular empathy towards regional and rural services. ECQ consultants recently completed a successful contract with a privately operated for-profit ECEC provider. The contract was to manage twenty regional and rural services across three states. This was achieved successfully, improving quality outcomes for children and families, and increasing the occupancy by over 40% in four and a half years. The success of these centres ensured ongoing supply for families in regional towns of quality and affordable education and care for young children. The centres are all achieving pleasing results in the National Quality Standard.

ECQ Consultants have a strong connection and commitment to the provision of quality early childhood education and care throughout regional NSW, Victoria and Tasmania.

Our philosophy is guided strongly by the mantra of "what is best for the child?"

ECQ would like to submit the following information and ideas for the public inquiry into Childcare and Early Childhood Learning:

1) The contribution that access to affordable, high quality childcare can make to:

a) Increased participation in the workforce, particularly for women



As early childhood professionals, and as consumers of early years services in various formats throughout our working life, we are acutely aware of the difficulties working women and men face when choosing early education and care for their children in regional areas. There is often very limited choice in smaller country towns, with many families choosing the cheaper and more flexible option of unlicensed care in homes. Wages in regional areas are typically lower, and the high cost of ECEC can exclude many families from the option of returning to work and accessing formal care for their children. Universally affordable and high quality care would undoubtedly increase participation in the workforce by women with young families.

b) Optimising children's learning and development

Research demonstrates that quality ECEC contributes greatly to young children's learning and development. A quality early childhood learning program, developed by a qualified Early Childhood Teacher, promotes and nurtures the development of curious, enquiring minds and lays strong foundations for future learning. Access to ECEC with university qualified early Childhood Teachers from a very young age is especially important for children who are vulnerable or at risk – early literacy and numeracy skills are embedded during these early years, in spaces rich with opportunities for exploration, learning and development through play.

2) The current and future need for child care in Australia, including consideration of the following:

a) Hours parents work or study, or wish to work or study

b) The particular needs of rural, regional and remote parents, as well as shift workers

Regionally and rural based services face unique difficulties, operating with a client base who typically work in seasonal industries (agriculture – fruit picking, harvest, tourist towns). This has a significant impact on occupancy fluctuations making it very difficult for providers to manage services responsibly and viably. ECEC centres have great difficulty providing the flexible care families require, regular and stable employment for educators and employees, and the financial viability of the business.

c) Accessibility of affordable care

d) Types of care available including but not limited to: long day care, family day care, in home care including nannies and au pairs, mobile care, occasional care, and outside school hours care

e) The role and potential for employer provided childcare

f) Usual hours of operation of each type of care

g) The out of pocket cost of childcare to families

h) Rebates and subsidies available for each type of care**i) The capacity of the existing childcare system to ensure children are transitioning from childcare to school with a satisfactory level of school preparedness**

Regional and rural ECEC services have great difficulty recruiting and retaining university qualified Early Childhood Teachers. New graduates typically opt for positions in the school system where their wages and conditions are significantly better than in the ECEC sector. Teachers working in the ECEC sector typically experience a lower level of respect, understanding and appreciation of the complexities of their work with very young children. Schools can demonstrate a reluctance to engage with the sector (particularly long daycare, family daycare and occasional care), as they can have little understanding or respect for the work ECEC Educators do.

The key factor in a provision of satisfactory level of school preparedness is access to university-qualified teachers, and strong connections and collaboration between professionals working in the EC sector and those in the school system.

We believe the implementation of the 'Transition Statement' in Victoria has contributed to an increased awareness, understanding and appreciation of the work undertaken by ECEC educators, resulting in greater collaboration between schools and the ECEC sector, and more positive outcomes for children's transition to school.

j) Opportunities to improve connections and transitions across early childhood services (including between childcare and preschool/kindergarten services)**k) The needs of vulnerable or at risk children**

Families living in rural and regional areas are at particular risk of experiencing isolation and further challenges accessing the types of support required to care for children with complex support needs. Often the ECEC service identifies children who are vulnerable and/or at risk and it is vital that these children have access to high quality ECEC programs provided by qualified educators.

Children who are vulnerable and at risk often present with complex and challenging social issues and behaviours. They often require a high level of support from educators to interact and engage in the program. This places added pressure on educators who are often feeling undervalued, and overwhelmed in their roles – particularly due to the high turnover of staff in the sector, creating an experience and qualification drain. Difficulties retaining qualified ECT's and educators in the sector further expose these children to challenges, with many staff unable to meet their increasingly complex needs. The requirement for diagnosis of a disability to access funding for further support places families and educators under pressure to seek a formal 'diagnosis' for children who require additional support in the service. This is not good for young children.



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A child with a diagnosed additional need funding is able to access through the Inclusion Support program or similar services. Funding allows an additional educator to support the other educators in the room to include and educate the child in the service. Difficulties arise with the unlabelled child who often exhibits challenging behaviours. These children who are trying to make sense of their world are often not integrated well in the ECEC services. This is particularly difficult for the families who are in urgent need of support and respite.

An example: Lachlan from Wonthaggi is now five years old. He has attended five different ECEC services in the past two years including family day-care. His Mother, Lyn is a single mother working to support her three children. Lachlan has been seen by specialist and an Inclusion Support Facilitator (ISF), no funding has been allocated as he no diagnosis. The ISF has given ideas and strategies but still other parents are complaining, some withdrawing their children. Educators are struggling with a child they have little experience or training in how to manage. Finally the centre makes a decision to no longer allow Lachlan at the service. They can no longer afford the extra educator they have employed to support Lachlan's inclusion and they are losing enrolments due to the impact of his behaviour.

Lyn is forced to find another centre who will include Lachlan, so she can continue working.

Lachlan is to start school but because of the many changes in ECEC services there has been no continuity of services. The primary school is unaware they are about to enrol a child with many challenging behaviours. If funding to help Lachlan had been available even though he did not have a diagnosis, his early childhood education would have been much more consistent and enabled him a higher standard transition to school which is essential for his long term education and future life.

This scenario is not uncommon in regional and rural areas. ISFs are required to travel long distances to give support. The paper work is arduous, and funding is often stalled even when there is a diagnosis is available. The process could be made more streamlined to support the child, families and educators.

- I) Interactions with relevant Australian Government policies and programmes.**
- 3) Whether there are any specific models of care that should be considered for trial or implementation in Australia, with consideration given to international models, such as the home based care model in NZ and models that specifically target vulnerable or at risk children and their families**
- 4) Options for enhancing the choices available to Australian families as to how they receive childcare support, so that this can occur in the manner most suitable to their individual family circumstances. Mechanisms to be considered include subsidies,**



rebates and tax deductions, to improve the accessibility, flexibility and affordability of childcare for families facing diverse individual circumstance.

How should childcare funding be applied?

A model that may work is to follow the model of the private health insurers, with electronic claiming at the service. A family is issued a CCB card on registration with the Family Assistance Office (FAO). The family then presents the card to the service that has a swipe machine. The family's entitlement and all information are presented on the card. The centre then has the information to create an invoice for the fees. This system would save the laborious work in waiting for the CCB to come into the system for new families, back pay or over payment problems.

Should there be a CCB issue the family would have to follow up with FAO. Swipe machines are inexpensive and could be made available for family day care educators, ECEC services and OOSCH services. The card would have information about SCCB and other variations. Families could have details changed by contacting FAO in person, phone or email. This would be supported in both metropolitan and rural areas.

The current CCMS system would be greatly simplified.

It would be appropriate for Childcare assistance to have a name change to Early Education and Care Assistance. Childcare Benefit changed to Early Years Support.

Cost of childcare and early learning services in Australia.

High quality early childhood education comes at a cost. The government pledge to universal access to early childhood education for all children in the year prior to school has been a positive move and demonstrates the government's commitment to the importance of prior to school education.

The Tasmanian model where all four year olds, or prior to school age children, are now integrated into an early childhood program in the school system has proven successful, and certainly more affordable for families. In the first year this was introduced by the Tasmanian government, this put considerable financial strain on the early childhood services, as there was a loss of close to 20% of their occupancy. This has now stabilised with more places being available for younger children.

Should childcare assistance be subject to testing of family/parent income levels, or to other requirements such as a necessity to be participating in work, study or training?

Funding based on income levels is important and necessary to create a fair system that provides universal access for all children prior to school. In our society of fewer nuclear families it is important all families have support. As stated in the "UN convention on the Rights of the Child" article 4. "The government has a responsibility to make sure your rights are protected. They must help your family to protect your rights and create an environment



where you can grow and reach your potential." Article 28 "You have a right to good quality education. You should be encouraged to school to the highest level you can."

In order for families of young families to flourish and prepare for the future years encouragement towards employment and study are rightly supported.

Making childcare expenses tax deductible would make early education and care more affordable for families. As a bonus, non-registered educators who operate illegal childcare operations would no longer be able to flourish.

- 5) **The benefits and other impacts of regulatory changes in childcare over the past decade, including the implementation of the NQF in states and territories, with specific consideration given to compliance costs, taking into account the governments planned work with states and territories to streamline the NQF.**

The implementation of the National Quality Framework is a highly beneficial initiative and strongly support the ideals of improved staff:child ratio's, improved qualifications of educators, and continuous quality improvement embedded in the NQF.

NSW services have experienced great difficulty meeting the additional requirements under the NQF for ECT's. Additional ECT's drive up the cost of providing ECEC significantly, and place services under financial pressures that ultimately are passed onto families. We strongly support this requirement for additional ECT's, however processes for applying for waivers are clunky and impractical, and cost pressures need to be considered.

We are in a unique position to be able to compare experiences of Assessment and Rating under the National Quality Standards across states. While this is a national program, there are wide variations between the experiences of centres in different states. There is a huge emphasis in the community on the results of the process, and many inconsistencies between ratings and experiences of the process. The ratings of Working Towards, Meeting and Exceeding do not reflect overall provision of ECEC – especially when a service can be rated as meeting in 57/58 standards, and still only be rated as Working Towards based on 1 standard.

We worked with a centre who met the standards in all but one, the requirement for 4 ECT's (in NSW). They had 3 ECT's employed. Under the regulations, a similar sized centre in Victoria would only require 1 ECT, and therefore would be rated as Meeting the NQS. This does not reflect a national rating system.

National Quality Framework

Mobile and occasional care services should be able to demonstrate their high quality practices and be part of the NQF.



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NQF has been a positive move for the sector. There still seems to be some discrepancies between assessors but the process and the focus on the relationships with children is a much more child- centred approach.

Rural areas need to be treated the same as metropolitan areas with the NQF visit. Due to time constraints a centre in rural NSW had an assessor start at 6.30am and finish at 7.30pm. Staff were required to be on hand at all times during the visit, and were very concerned about the Assessors ability to carry out a fair and just assessment over such a long period. Staff were exhausted, and she must have been too!

There is some differences between the states which is does not follow the National Quality Standard.

We support the appointment of a National Educational Leader with ACECQA and hope that this will lead to a nationally consistent and fairer rating experience for all.

Increased staff ratios:

The increased staff ratios are a positive for the industry. The effect was witnessed closely in Victoria where the ratios for over threes went from 1:15 to 1:11. The difference in the services was seen, and definitely heard. Following the Early Childhood Australia's recommendation of 1:10 as it is in NSW, would be even better. The behavioural management in the rooms was greatly improved with educators having time to sit and engage with the children. Previously there was a lot of damage control as the educator worked hard to maintain control with little time for educating and intentional teaching.

For children under the age of two there has been an increase of time spent with educators. The 1:4 ratio has allowed educator engagement and peace to return to the nursery. With very young children it may be very smooth and calm but one crying baby can create a chain reaction. Suddenly there are many crying babies which need attention. The 1:4 ratio is vital to ensure the babies get the nurturing needed.

In Victoria the child:staff ratio for the two to three years is 1:4. In services, this was often too many, particularly in a room of sixteen children with four educators. It did allow time for good interactions and beautiful documentation but this in which the staff: child, 1:5 would suffice.

The flexibility of the National Framework which allows age group to be merged between rooms has been a marked improvement. There has been an increase in family grouping and flexible child grouping. This is particularly important in the regional and rural areas which are very sensitive to fluctuations of small population. A centre in Adelaide which achieved the ACECQA excellent rating used this flexible approach. It is a model that allows sensible usage of educators, allowing educators to be where they are needed most.



Evidence to support increased staff ratios is well recorded. The pace at which the new ratios have been introduced has been well considered and has allowed time for prior budgeting and fee rises to be stepped in small increments rather than one big jump. All services were well informed of the changes to the staff ratios and should be able to budget accordingly.

The allowance for small rural and regional services without an ECT to have access to an early childhood teacher “by means of information communication technology” (National Quality Framework (clause 145.2)) is an important clause that needs to be followed up in smaller centres. While an ECT in person is best this is an achievable compromise if there are no other options. Working in rural and remote areas can be very isolating.

Workforce shortages and qualifications.

The Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) have had incentives which have particularly supported educators and teachers to educate in regional and rural areas of Victoria. Incentives are too hard to staff regions with skills shortages. This allowed a centre at Phillip Island to access an Early Childhood Teacher and a diploma qualified team leader. Both were given financial incentives and bonded to the centre for two years. This was highly successful.

DEECD also has an incentive scheme to encourage educators in regional and rural areas to upgrade their qualifications from cert III to diploma or diploma to ECT. This has been used extensively by educators in the Victorian regional areas allowing centres to meet the new qualification standard. The scheme bonds the educators for two years.

Further information can be found at: <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/careers/Pages/scholarships.aspx>

Professional development is essential in order to have a high quality education workforce. Professional development should be wide and extensive. There is a tendency for some large organisations to train internally. This is detrimental to educators as it can be a closed view point and it does not allow networking with other services. The majority of Early Childhood educators are visual learners. It is important for all educators to expand their learning through visiting services and accessing high quality reflective professional development.

Other workforce and workplace issues.

The status of Early Childhood.

Recently in discussion with a student in her third year studying Early Childhood at Macquarie University she made the comment that she was going to do something else on completion of her degree as she “has way to much ambition to just be a teacher” This is an ideal candidate for an ECT. She scored well in her ATAR and there is now continued pressure for her to do something worthwhile with her life! After a long discussion and



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unpacking the role of a teacher she was able to see that teaching is a very worthwhile profession. The role of the early childhood teacher in the formative time of life is imperative to have long lasting effects on the child. Indeed it is arguably the most important role a person can do in society.

Unfortunately as early childhood graduates leave university they require a huge amount of dedication and resilience to accept an early childhood teaching role when their colleagues go off to Primary education and receive 25% more in annual wage, and vastly improved working conditions – weekly release from face to face teaching, shorter face to face hours and many more weeks holidays per year.

The pay discrepancy and status of all early childhood teachers needs to be addressed. Parity of pay for teachers with their counterparts, as it was in the 1980s, is a major issue for the industry striving for high quality.

The Early Childhood industry continues to educate the community of the importance of quality early years education. For the status of the Early Childhood Educator to rise there needs to be an ongoing education program in the community supported by government. The term childcare needs to be weaned from the public domain. Early childhood education and care is appropriate terminology.

My Child website

While improved, it still takes some time to navigate and find a centre. Finding NQS ratings is difficult, and must be explained more clearly to reassure families that a centre who has received a Working Towards rating can still be regarded as a quality setting – that each standard and element needs to be considered, not just the overall rating!