

NATIONAL EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABILITY ALLIANCE

Submission to the review of the Productivity Commission Report August 2014

The NATIONAL EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABILITY ALLIANCE welcomes the opportunity to participate in the review of the Productivity Commission Report, August 2014.

The Alliance is a broad-based national network incorporating national and state-based professional organisations with a commitment to advocacy for the implementation of education for sustainability principles and practices across the early childhood sector. This submission is fully supported by all five alliance member organisations as listed below:

Australian Association for Environmental Education Early Childhood Special Interest Group (AAEE EC SIG).
www.aaee.org.au

Early Childhood Australia Victorian Branch Education for Sustainability Special Interest group
<http://www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/>

Environmental Education in Early Childhood (EEEC Victoria).
www.eeec.org.au

New South Wales Early Childhood Environmental Education Network (NSW ECEEN).
www.eceen.org.au

Queensland Early Childhood Sustainability Network (QECSN).
www.qecsn.org.au

These professional organisations have been integral to advancing awareness, understanding and action for early childhood education for sustainability over two decades, both within the early childhood sector and more broadly across education and community sectors. Professional development, conferences, publication, networking and resource provision have been core to the role of the alliance member organisations.

The ongoing work of the alliance organisations is now undertaken with a sense of urgency in light of the 'critical decade' concerns about climate change and sustainability (Commonwealth of Australia Department of Climate Change and Energy Efficiency, 2011). Notions of intergenerational equity as promoted by the Brundtland Report (WCED, 1987) and the rights of children to be active decision-makers about their futures as stated in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 1989) strongly support this work. Also, young children are developing life-long habits to engage with sustainability and have the potential to influence their parent's decision-making about sustainable practices in their home and community contexts. It must be acknowledged that children are most likely to suffer the long-term consequences of inaction by the current generation (Strazdinis & Skeat, 2011; Waterson, 2006) to militate against environmental concerns.

We argue that sustainability is not too subjective to incorporate in early childhood programs (Productivity Commission, 2014, p. 273), when considering the potential impacts on the future health and well-being of young children attending early childhood services today. In fact, it has been stated elsewhere (Elliott & Davis, 2009; Elliott, 2014) that there are clear pedagogical and philosophical alignments between education for sustainability and early childhood education making adoption and implementation an opportunity to reflect and reorientate programs. The concept of sustainability also maps effectively to *Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* and is particularly pertinent to Outcome 2: Children are connected with and contribute to their world (DEEWR, 2009). When coupled together, QA3.3 (ACECQA, 2013a) and Outcome 2 (DEEWR, 2009), offer a strong foundation for building a sustainable future beginning in the early childhood sector. Furthermore, this approach in early childhood aligns with the *Living Sustainably: National Action Plan* (DEWHA, 2009) and the *Sustainability Curriculum Framework* (AGDEWHA, 2010) pertinent to the school sector and the inclusion of sustainability as a cross curriculum thread in the new Australian Curriculum (ACARA, 2014).

On this basis we firmly advocate that in any review of the NQS to simplify or remove standards and elements, as indicated under Recommendation 7.1, (Productivity Commission, 2014, p. 274), that Quality Area 3 and in particular, that Standard 3.3 pertaining to sustainability be maintained; indeed it should be strengthened to include child agency and participation, beyond solely caring for the environment and managing resources. This standard for the first time nationally and internationally, sets a regulatory benchmark for the

implementation of sustainability principles and practices in the early childhood sector. The benchmark provides impetus for systemic change across the sector and over recent years there have been a number of state and local government funded initiatives to support early childhood services incorporating sustainability including *Little Green Steps* (Gosford & Wyong Councils, 2007); *Little Green Steps WA* (Lotterywest & City of Cockburn, 2014); *Green Kinders Kit* (Hobson's Bay Council, 2009); *EcoSmart* (NSW ECEEN, 2012) and in South Australia, the *Australian Sustainable Schools Initiative* (AuSSI) which is inclusive of early childhood services. Beyond Australia, early childhood education for sustainability is gaining significant international traction (Davis & Elliott, 2014; Siraj-Blatchford, Smith, & Pramling Samuelsson, 2010; UNESCO, 2008), yet the mid-term report of the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development 2005-2014 acknowledges there is still much to be done in the early childhood sector (UNESCO, 2009). There is no question that the inclusion of QA 3.3 in the NQS as a means of promoting systemic change demonstrates international leadership in early childhood education for sustainability.

Also, there are an increasing number of publications that assessors and educators alike can draw on to inform the NQS accreditation process in relation to QA3.3 (Davis, 2010; Davis & Elliott, 2014; Elliott, 2014; Kinsella, 2007; 2008; Lee, 2012; NSW ECEEN, 2012; Young & Elliott, 2014). The quarterly accreditation reports from August 2013 (ACECQA, 2013b) to August 2014 (ACECQA, 2014) provide evidence that over time increasing percentages of accredited services are meeting or exceeding QA3, indicating increasing understanding and implementation of sustainability principles and practices. It is significant to note that generally in those states where national alliance member organisations exist, they are ahead of other states and territories with respect to QA3. For example in Victoria where EEEC Vic. Inc. has supported the sector since 1992, from the initial quarterly accreditation report in August 2013 (ACECQA, 2013b) to the current report (ACECQA, 2014), consistently 88-89% of services have met or exceeded the QA3 accreditation requirement.

We acknowledge sustainability is a new concept for many practitioners across the Australian early childhood sector, however to ignore its critical importance in the early childhood years at this juncture in human civilization places children's futures at risk. Irrespective of individual world views, a precautionary principle must be applied and sustainability maintained within the NQS such that intergenerational equity might be realised.

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