

Our interest

Since its inception in 1993, the National Childcare Accreditation Council (NCAC) has worked in partnership with families, services, government and other key stakeholders to facilitate and support continuous improvement to the quality of child care provided for children in Australia.

NCAC is funded by the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) to administer Child Care Quality Assurance (CCQA) systems for long day care centres, family day care schemes and outside school hours care services.

For 18 years NCAC has demonstrated a commitment to the provision of quality child care experiences for all children enrolled in child care services in Australia. As at 1 January 2011, there are 9,866 children's services registered with NCAC.

NCAC employs almost 200 staff, including experts in early and middle childhood education (Validators, Moderators and Child Care Advisers), committed administrative staff and professionals from a range of disciplines including finance, human resources, information technology, communications and management. NCAC has continued to be recognised annually as an Employer of Choice for Women and a Quality Endorsed Company since 2007.

Following the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) endorsement of the National Quality Framework in 2009, a new national body will manage and administer the governance of the National Quality Standard, and as such, NCAC will cease to operate from the end of December 2011.

Early Childhood Development Workforce Study: NCAC response to Productivity Commission enquiry

Providers of early childhood education and care (ECEC) suffer from chronic shortages of qualified staff.¹ Recent Commonwealth Government initiatives, such as removing TAFE fees, creating additional places for diploma courses, and increasing university places will help encourage entry to the profession. However, while entrants to ECEC may be attracted by the desire to work with children, they often become disillusioned with wages, conditions, career structures and professional status. This leads to a high turnover in the workforce, which in 2006 varied between 26 per cent and 60 per cent in different states.²

Following the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) endorsement of the National Quality Framework (NQF) in 2009, which will require higher levels of qualified staff in ECEC, the challenge is now retaining experienced educators and improving their qualifications.

Improvements in pay and conditions, in the pathways for obtaining qualifications, and in the professional status of educators are all required to achieve these goals, and will help attract new entrants to the profession. This submission covers each of these areas, and also notes some particular issues for family day care and outside school hours care, and for ECEC services for Indigenous children.

Implementing the National Quality Framework

The introduction of the NQF provides challenges for both service operators and for individual educators.

For some states and territories, the new educator-to-child ratio requirements outlined in the NQF will be challenging to meet. For example, while the current educator-to-child ratio for children aged 3 to 5 years in NSW is 1:10, it is currently 1:15 in Victoria. By 2016, ECEC services in Victoria will need to provide 1 educator for every 11 children, which could potentially result in mass shortages of child care places.

Educators will also need to familiarise themselves with the National Quality Standard (NQS), which brings together the requirements of the licensing and quality assurance systems in place for at least a decade. Additionally, anecdotal feedback from services to NCAC has been that while the implementation of the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) has been successful in terms of sector awareness, it has generated confusion about what is required, particularly in relation to programming.

To move smoothly to the new system, services and educators will need to be supported with regular communication and suitable resources which detail the requirements of the NQS in plain language. It is also recommended that practical examples be provided to services to enhance understanding of how specific standards can be met and exceeded.

¹ Watson, L. (2006). *Pathways to a profession: Education and training in early childhood education and care, Australia*. Barton, ACT: Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training, p. xv.

² The Childcare Union (n.d.) *Big Steps in Childcare: Education and care for the 21st century*. Haymarket, NSW: Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Union, p. 15.

Pay and Conditions

Families increasingly expect qualified staff to be caring for their children, recognising they are playing an educative role. Most parents of children in long day care overestimate the qualifications of educators, believing that university degrees are common, and 20 per cent believe that all child care workers have a relevant degree or diploma.³ However, pay and conditions reflect the historical tendency in the community to see workers in long day care, family day care and outside school hours care as babysitters rather than educators. This attitude underlies poor pay rates and conditions, which do not support the retention of educators with high levels of qualifications.

Wages

As the *Issues Paper* for this enquiry notes (p16), untrained workers in the ECEC workforce earn less than those caring for the aged or disabled. They are in what Bretherton calls the 'low-skill, low-pay trap' yet they are reluctant to train as they see little return in income or status.⁴

For qualified educators, who have considerable skills and responsibilities, wages are also poor. For example, the minimum wage for an educator with a Certificate III is around \$18 per hour, while a diploma or degree-trained director of a service could expect less than \$25 per hour on commencement.⁵

For degree-trained educators working in ECEC, wages compare poorly with other teaching sectors. Teachers in long day care services, and in some states and contexts preschool teachers, are paid up to 20 per cent less than those with the same qualifications working in primary schools.⁶

Early childhood educators who study to become teachers often see this as a pathway out of ECEC into the school system.⁷ To more consistently retain degree-trained teachers in long day care and preschools, inequities in pay and conditions need to be eliminated. Consultation is required between state and Commonwealth governments and other stakeholders as to how this is to be achieved.

³ The Childcare Union (n.d.) *Big Steps in Childcare: Education and care for the 21st century*. Haymarket, NSW: Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Union. p.13.

⁴ Bretherton, T. (2010). *Developing the child care workforce: Understanding 'fight' or 'flight' amongst workers*. Station Arcade, South Australia: National Centre for Vocational Education Research. p. 20.

⁵ Fair Work Australia. (2010). MA000120 – *Children's Services Awards 2010*. Retrieved December 21, 2010, from http://www.fwa.gov.au/documents/modern_awards/award/ma000120/default.htm

⁶ NSW/ACT Independent Education Union. (n.d.) 'Teachers are teachers' campaign. Retrieved December 8, 2010 from http://teachersareteachers.org.au/media/IEU_newsletter.pdf

⁷ Watson, L. (2006). *Pathways to a profession: Education and training in early childhood education and care, Australia*. Barton, ACT: Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training. p xv.

Conditions

Conditions for teachers in long day care services and in some preschools also compare unfavourably with their school-based counterparts, with:

- longer working hours and shorter holidays
- lack of preparation and programming time
- the need for completing administrative tasks after hours
- equipment or supplies sometimes paid using employees' own money.⁸

Because child care services are often small businesses without supportive infrastructure:

- staff at all levels may be asked to do cleaning or maintenance
- there are limited opportunities to cover short absences, making it difficult to release educators for programming time, study or personal leave
- replacing educators who are sick or otherwise absent often involves using expensive casual or agency staff to maintain educator-to-child ratios.

When absent staff are not replaced, this causes additional stress for the remaining educators.

Educators now need to adjust to administrative and attitudinal change associated with the introduction of the NQS, the EYLF and *My Time, Our Place: Framework for School Age Care in Australia*. This is on top of everyday stresses, which are often exacerbated by staff shortages.

Strategies about pay and conditions

Children, educators and service management benefit when existing educators are supported to improve their skills, and if those educators are then retained within the sector the cost of subsidising training for new educators is reduced. Reducing staff turnover also reduces stress on other educators remaining in a service, and induction costs to the service for new employees. Investments in improved pay and conditions also attract new entrants to the sector.

Ways to attract, upskill and retain educators through changed pay and conditions include:

- pay parity with the school sector
- strengthening the link between pay increments and completion of a qualification
- allowing work hours for programming and preparation
- subsidising services to backfill positions with suitably qualified staff while educators are released for study time.

⁸ Bretherton, T. (2010). *Developing the child care workforce: Understanding 'fight' or 'flight' amongst workers*. Station Arcade, South Australia: National Centre for Vocational Education Research. p 26-27.

Qualifications and career pathways

While the required qualifications for positions in early childhood services have varied a great deal between states and territories, the NQF and the Universal Access program will provide greater consistency across the country. The minimum requirement of Certificate III for educators in family day care and long day care settings by 2014 means a significant increase in the need for trained educators. While between 2006 and 2009 Certificate III or Certificate IV qualifications for child care educators increased from 18 per cent to 27 per cent, at the end of this period 37 per cent of educators remained unqualified.⁹ The increased demand for degree-trained early childhood teachers also needs to be met.

The need for qualified educators must be met at least partially by retaining and training existing unqualified staff. In this context, both government and ECEC services must support educators to upgrade their qualifications, and services may in turn need support to achieve this.

Upskilling educators

By 2014, all educators in family day care and long day care will be required to hold, or be actively working towards, a minimum Certificate III qualification. While government incentives are likely to attract new entrants into the sector and encourage some educators to upskill, a large number may be reluctant to undertake further education. If these mandatory requirements inadvertently cause educators to leave the sector, staffing shortages will become more severe. The commitment for educators currently working within an ECEC service to obtain a new qualification takes considerable time. For example, the number of hours required to complete a Certificate III in Children's Services with TAFE NSW is 487 hours¹⁰, while a Diploma qualification in Children's Services (Early Childhood Education and Care) requires 1,136 hours.¹¹ Yet educators in most services are currently required to study in their own time without formal leave.

For the staffing requirement of the NQF to be met, current educators must be effectively supported both by their service and through government initiatives.

Support for services

A most effective support for educators to upskill is likely to be through paid study leave. Yet if services are to provide this for educators in their employ, they need to find both additional funds and qualified replacement educators to backfill positions.

Services should be able to apply for government subsidies to pay for relief staff while their existing educators are released for study to upgrade their qualifications. This targeted financial assistance to services would help them to maintain the required educator-to-child ratios, in turn allowing them to support their own staff as they undergo further training.

⁹ Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations. (2010, April). Retrieved January 5, 2011, from <http://www.deewr.gov.au/EarlyChildhood/Resources/Documents/StateChildCareAus.pdf> p.10.

¹⁰ TAFE NSW. (2010). *Children's Services*. Retrieved January 5, 2011, from <https://www.tafensw.edu.au/howex/servlet/Course?Command=GetCourse&CourseNo=18206>

¹¹ TAFE NSW. (2010). Retrieved January 5, 2011, from <https://www.tafensw.edu.au/howex/servlet/Course?Command=GetCourse&CourseNo=18208>

A strategy to increase the pool of qualified relief educators is for the government to collaborate with Vocational Education and Training (VET) and higher education institutions to include a paid work placement program within Advanced Diploma and Bachelor level qualifications. Students could be required to complete a minimum number of hours working within a child care service, providing a pool of part-time educators with at least two/three years education in early childhood. Services would be able to employ these student educators using the relief staff subsidy scheme.

Support for educators

Current educators will need to be supported and encouraged to upskill their qualifications, particularly those unqualified but experienced educators. In December 2010, *The Australian* newspaper suggested that the Hon. Kate Ellis MP, Minister for Child Care, would relax the qualification requirements for long-standing staff¹²; however this has not been verified by Minister Ellis' office.

For many long-standing staff without qualifications, a well-designed Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) program would allow them considerable, or even total, credit towards a qualification, most likely at Certificate III level. The NQF has recognised the value of qualifications in providing quality ECEC: to automatically waive its requirements for long-serving staff could undermine that commitment.

However, existing educators may be discouraged from upskilling by long work hours and family responsibilities.¹³ Hence flexibility in course delivery is required. Online courses may provide educators with the ability to work from home or at an administration office within the centre. Multi-campus locations in existing educational facilities may help in reaching suburban and regional communities, while educators from non English-speaking backgrounds may need additional translation services. Community colleges, which often run classes after hours or on weekends, may be appropriate for delivering short training courses in suburban areas.

Additionally, the Commonwealth Government will need to work with and fund TAFEs and universities to implement additional training pathways for educators at all qualification levels. For example:

- Qualified educators may not necessarily want to acquire a higher level qualification, but may need to update their skills. In this case, short courses or study programs could be tailored to their needs.
- Diploma qualified educators who wish to upskill to a bachelor degree may potentially receive a maximum of one year credit in a four year bachelor's degree¹⁴ and may require further support moving from the heavily task-oriented VET sector to the academic literacy focus of higher education.

¹² Bitá, N. (2010, December 17). Experience now counts in childcare sector. *The Australian*. Retrieved January 5, 2011, from <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/experience-now-counts-in-childcare-sector/story-fn59nlix-1225972394386>

¹³ Watson, L. (2006). *Pathways to a profession: Education and training in early childhood education and care, Australia*. Barton, ACT: Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training. p. 24

¹⁴ *ibid.* p. 26.

Note that as educators are upskilled to degree level, there is the risk that they will be lost to the primary school sector unless parity in wages and conditions is achieved (see Pay and Conditions).

Additionally, Government-funded scholarships can provide incentives in areas of particular need, for example, for those working in remote areas, and for Indigenous educators to enrol in degree courses. Scholarships are one of several measures, including support for mentoring, used by the New Zealand government to increase the levels of qualified staff in ECEC.¹⁵

Consistency in qualifications

A nationally coordinated program of RPL that has occurred outside formal education and training is necessary in implementing the qualification requirements. This would allow Certificate III training providers to easily identify the amount of course credit to be allocated to unqualified educators in a consistent way. In addition to minimum course requirements, skills recognised could include cultural competence in Indigenous or culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities.

In the rush to supply educators to meet the new standards of the NQF, a rigorous RPL program must be combined with oversight of training offered in the VET sector. It has been found that the quality of training by some Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) is poor, with the more unscrupulous operators 'selling' qualifications.¹⁶ The short-term goal of increasing the numbers of qualified staff through a less-than-rigorous system will have long-term negative consequences for the sector, for families and especially for children.

Professional status

Quality training, improved wages and working conditions and parity in pay and conditions between the various teaching sectors will help attract and retain strong candidates to ECEC. Feedback to NCAC suggests that those working in the field feel positively about being described as 'educators' rather than 'child care workers' or 'carers'. The establishment of a professional institute would also improve the status of ECEC.

In NSW, an Institute of Teachers exists to support quality teaching in all NSW schools, to oversee a system of accreditation and recognition of a teacher's professional capacity, and to support continuing professional development. NCAC suggests the establishment of a similar national organisation to support educators in the ECEC sector, which could set out professional standards for educators to clarify expectations of practice within the ECEC profession. It could additionally offer guidance to those seeking to improve their practice through self-reflection and professional development.

If a professional institute covered educators with both technical and higher education qualifications, it could:

¹⁵ Bretherton, T. (2010). *Developing the child care workforce: Understanding 'fight' or 'flight' amongst workers*. Station Arcade, South Australia: National Centre for Vocational Education Research. p. 19.

¹⁶ Humphries, G., and Marshall, G. (2009, November 23). *Chapter 5: National childcare provision: the accreditation, licensing and regulation of childcare*. Retrieved January 5, 2011, from http://www.qph.gov.au/senate/committee/eei_cite/child_care/report/c05.htm

- assist educational institutions with the articulation of courses from diploma level to degree level
- provide information and support to educators about career pathways
- advise on skills, pay and conditions as industrial awards move towards greater national consistency.

A professional institute could also accredit RTOs for Certificate III and Diploma level qualifications. Having providers accredited with a professional institute would enhance reputability and consistency of training.

In line with the NQF agreements on educator-to-child ratios and qualifications, a national award structure to cover all levels of staff in early childhood services would be appropriate.

Special considerations

Family Day Care

A report currently being prepared by the Community Services and Health Industry Skills Council on the family day care workforce is expected to detail the percentages of qualified and unqualified educators in family day care, and should inform decisions about improving the supply of qualified educators.

In this sector, educators may be reluctant to gain qualifications because of language, cost and time constraints. Strategies to address these include:

- language – encouraging partnerships between VET and higher education institutions and local migrant support groups to encourage educators from CALD backgrounds to meet qualification requirements
- cost – ensuring that educators, in spite of being self-employed, are eligible for free or subsidised TAFE study towards their Certificate III or other relevant qualifications
- training – requiring a member of each family day care scheme's coordination unit to be qualified with a Certificate IV in Training and Education, allowing them to deliver appropriate training, and to assess the skills of educators on the job.

Outside School Hours Care

The outside school hours care sector is a predominantly part-time workforce, with only 4 per cent of workers employed for 35 hours or more per week, by contrast with 42 per cent of full-time workers in long day care.¹⁷

Conditions, and possibly pay, suit a number of workers (for example, students), but this work is often viewed as a short-term opportunity. In 2006, around 1 in 3 outside school hours care staff had worked for less than one year with their current employer.¹⁸ The split sessions of before and after school hours care and the irregularity of vacation care programs encourage casual employment, and therefore educators may not stay long enough to complete relevant qualifications.

To retain qualified and experienced educators, a career structure based on full-time work is probably necessary. Due to the divided shifts required for before and after school hours care, integration with work in either long day care or in a school setting is a possible model of delivery.

¹⁷ McNamara, J. and Cassells, R. (2010). *Who cares for school age kids: staffing trends in Outside School Hours Care*. Canberra, ACT: University of Canberra, p. 17.

¹⁸ *ibid.* p. 12

ECD workforce for Indigenous children

The 2006 Census showed that while 4 per cent of the birth-to-4-year-old population were of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) origin, only 2 per cent of children in long day care were of ATSI background.¹⁹ This is in spite of evidence that Indigenous children are likely to benefit from quality formal child care, as it can provide opportunities for early intervention to address developmental problems, lead to increased levels of school completion and enhanced literacy and social skills, and support the needs of families.²⁰

Integrated models of early childhood service delivery result in better outcomes for Indigenous children and families, especially hard-to-reach families, by taking into account culture, family, education and health.²¹

To provide effective services to Indigenous children, workforce programs need to:

- encourage cultural competence among all ECEC educators, especially those in areas where there are Indigenous children
- encourage entry and upskilling of Indigenous educators.

Cultural competence in mainstream services

A lack of cultural competence in mainstream services is a barrier to attracting and retaining Indigenous staff, and this in turn affects the likelihood of Indigenous children and families using such services.²²

Developing 'culturally safe' workforces, where identity, culture and values of Indigenous people are honoured, requires improvement in training of ECEC educators and the embedding of culturally sensitive practices. Such practices should be developed through critical reflection and consultation with Indigenous communities.²³

There is a need to improve nationally endorsed training packages to ensure that they do not marginalise Indigenous knowledge and practices, for example, by offering Indigenous studies only as an elective.

To increase the employment of Indigenous educators in mainstream services, a strategy adopted by SDN Children's Services is to advertise vacant positions in Indigenous media and community centres.²⁴ To retain Indigenous educators, flexibility is also required. For

¹⁹ cited in T. Hutchins, T. Frances, K. and Siggers, S. (2009). Improving the representation of indigenous workers in the mainstream childcare workplace. *Australian Journal of Early Childhood* 34(1), p. 3.

²⁰ Australian Government Productivity Commission. (2009). Chapter 4: COAG Targets and Headline Indicators. *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators 2009*, p. 4.25

²¹ Atkinson, G. (2010). Co-location and Integration of Koorie Early Childhood Services. Paper given at 2010 SNAICC National Conference, Mbantua, Alice Springs, NT 27-29 July 2010. Retrieved 15 December, 2010, from http://www.snaicc.asn.au/_uploads/fckpg/TUES_14_ATKINSON_Geraldine.pdf

²² T. Hutchins, T. Frances, K. and Siggers, S. (2009). Improving the representation of indigenous workers in the mainstream childcare workplace. *Australian Journal of Early Childhood* 34(1), p. 2.

²³ Gangari Bamford Maguire & Associates 2009. Including Aboriginal Australia in your service. *Putting Children First* 30, p. 10.

²⁴ Mundy, L. and Peters, J. (2010). How welcome would Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families feel at your service? *Putting Children First* 34, p.12.

the non-Indigenous workforce, low wages and the profile and status of the profession are factors working against retention.²⁵ When these educators leave for future study or to begin families, they are not likely to return. By contrast, Indigenous workers may leave for a time to fulfil family or cultural responsibilities, but be prepared to return to the sector once the issues that took them away are resolved. Services which are able to be flexible will retain such employees.²⁶

Entry and upskilling of Indigenous educators

For Indigenous trainees, the delivery of training needs to take into account both learning styles and contexts.²⁷ For example, it needs to be flexible in when and where training is held and competencies are assessed. Additionally, candidates' knowledge of Indigenous culture should be recognised as a skill of value to children, and credit given to candidates who demonstrate this competence.

Some of the difficulties in attracting entrants to ECEC training and upskilling existing educators are those of regional and remote communities where it may be difficult to leave the community to attend college or university. These are being addressed by a number of educational institutions with student-centred course design, but this needs to be well-resourced to be effective (for example, with after-hours delivery at the workplace and time allocated to study at work). For the university sector at least, participation and success rates in remotely-delivered programs for Indigenous university-level students are reported to be poor.²⁸

The following support strategies identified as effective for Indigenous early childhood degree students could also be applied to other levels of education:

- funding support for travel, accommodation, and backfilling of positions
- access to technology and resources at on-campus sessions
- identified programs for an Indigenous cohort, including periods of block release, interspersed with periods at home, working in communities
- Indigenous academic support unit, contributing to teaching and mentoring students, providing cultural safety as well as study skills instruction and support
- culturally appropriate 'both-ways' curricula, affirming and sharing cultural knowledge.²⁹

²⁵ T. Hutchins, T. Frances, K. and Siggers, S. (2009). Improving the representation of indigenous workers in the mainstream childcare workplace. *Australian Journal of Early Childhood* 34(1), p. 8

²⁶ *ibid.* pp. 7–8.

²⁷ *ibid.* p. 8.

²⁸ Watson, L. and Axford, B. (2008) *Characteristics and Delivery of Early Childhood Degrees in Australia: Part A: Final report*. Canberra, ACT: University of Canberra. p.10.

²⁹ summarised from Fleet, A., Kitson, R., Cassidy, B. and Hughes, R. (2007). University-qualified Indigenous early childhood teachers: Voices of resilience. *Australian Journal of Early Childhood* 32(3), pp. 3–4.

Conclusion

NCAC supports the move towards a more qualified ECD workforce and improved educator-to-child ratios for ECEC services.

NCAC recommends that:

- Services and educators are supported with regular communication and practical resources about the requirements of the National Quality Framework
- Degree-trained ECEC educators receive pay parity with their school based counterparts
- Awards allow that increments in pay are strongly linked to completion of qualifications
- Awards allow ECEC staff paid hours for programming and preparation
- Government work with VET and higher education institutions to include a paid work placement program for Advanced Diploma and Bachelor level students to backfill positions within ECEC services
- Services are subsidised to backfill positions with suitably qualified staff while employed educators are released for study time
- Flexibility in course delivery and study options for ECEC is provided
- A national organisation to support ECEC educators in professional development and career pathways is established
- Partnerships between VET and higher education institutions and local migrant support groups are enhanced to encourage the non English-speaking ECEC workforce to upskill
- Coordinator unit staff in family day care settings be required to hold a Certificate IV in Training and Assessment to effectively support and train family day care carers
- Full time opportunities are enhanced for outside school hours care educators
- Indigenous cultural competence is encouraged in mainstream services
- Indigenous educators are actively encouraged to upskill or enter the ECEC workforce.