

## Community Services and Health Industry Skills Council Environmental Scan 2012 ACCS Submission

### 1. How is demand for services in your industry changing?

The Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) sector is going through a great period of change due to the National Quality Agenda (NQA) and trends in service demand.

As the national peak body for community-owned not for profit children's services, Australian Community Children's Services (ACCS) has conducted research into the pertinent challenges and issues facing our sector. In December 2010 and January 2011 ACCS surveyed not for profit children's services across Australia. This research will be drawn on through this submission. Comprehensive results are available at

**Attachment 1.** Full details of quotes cited in this submission are available on request.

Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) Census data summary indicates that there are increasing numbers of children attending 'child care' (DEEWR, 2008: 12). Between 2006 and 2010, the number of children attending child care (during the reference week of the census) increased by 24 per cent, in other words there were an additional 188 000 children accessing the services (DEEWR, 2010: 80).

Recognition of ECEC as an integral part of a child's education, development and life chances, as shown through the two national curriculum frameworks *Belonging, Being and Becoming* and *My time, Our Place*, has begun to change the public's perception of the skill and knowledge required to deliver quality ECEC. ACCS believes the further professionalisation and formalisation of the value of the ECEC sector through the reforms will influence demand on quality ECEC services.

#### a. What is driving the change?

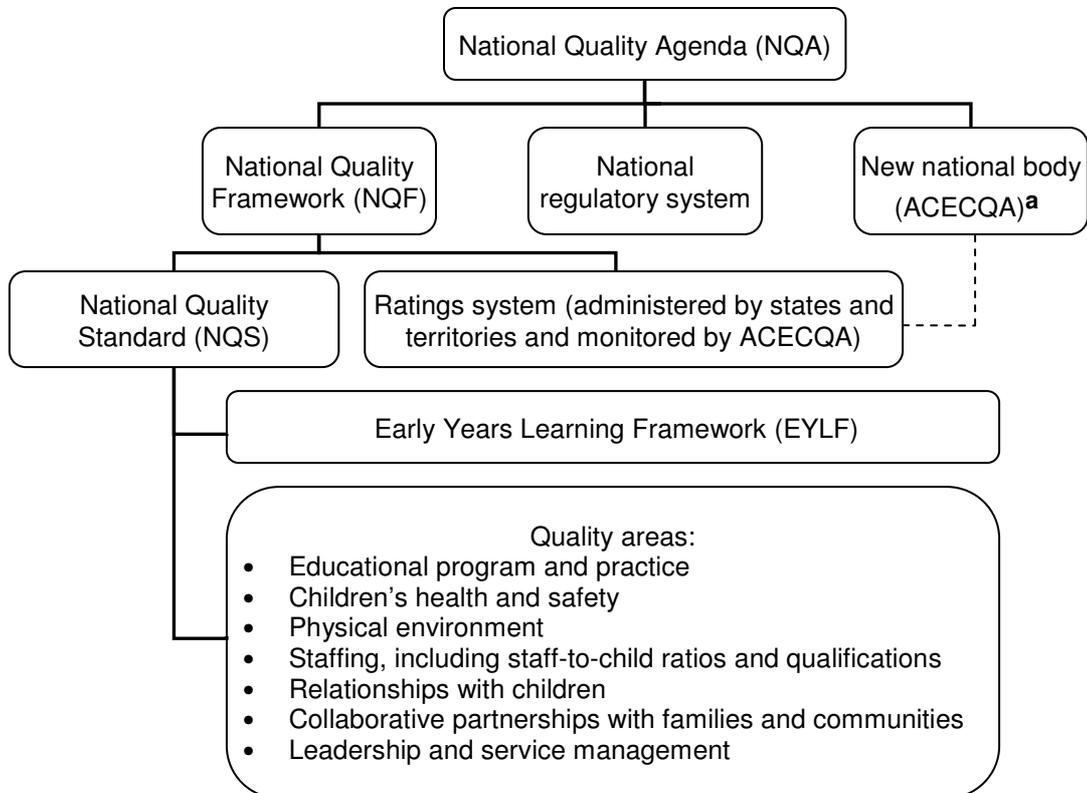
The major driver to this change is the range of reforms currently being implemented (please see Figure 1 below for summary), including a national early years learning framework, a framework for school age care, a National Quality Standard (NQS) and a national regulatory system. Agreed to by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG), the NQS and its associated elements will change the workforce and the sector introducing new and higher levels of qualifications required, better levels of staff to child ratios and new regulatory systems.

The recent Productivity Commission Report on the Early Childhood Development (ECD) Workforce predicts the reforms will require another 15 000 workers, with a higher level of qualification, to the ECEC sector (Productivity Commission, 2011: xxix).

The long day care, family day care and preschool workforce has a timeframe of 1 January 2014 for all educators included in the staff:child ratios to have or be working towards a relevant qualification. At least half of these staff are required to have or

working towards a relevant diploma or higher qualification while the other half need a certificate III qualification.

Figure 1 **National Quality Agenda for Early Childhood Education and Care**



**Source:** Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority, [www.acecqa.gov.au](http://www.acecqa.gov.au)

In addition to this there has been an increase in affordability due to increased government support for families accessing ECEC services. In 2009 the Child Care Rebate (CCR) was increased from 30 per cent to 50 per cent capped at \$7500 per child per year.

Beyond what is driving change ACCS wishes to emphasise a key issue that has been challenging the ECEC sector for decades, that being low status of the workforce. The low standing of the early childhood education and care workforce impacts on the sector's ability to recruit and retain staff, in particular with degree and other qualifications. At times this is cited as a reason to abandon or delay moves toward high quality in the sector, however ACCS advocates strongly against this. While the NQS should raise the public perception of the important economic and social contribution of the ECEC sector ACCS believes the professional workforce will continue to play a significant role in enhancing the quality of care that children receive.

The overwhelming majority of respondents to the ACCS Survey (93%) consider community recognition of professional status to be an issue for the ECEC workforce (Attachment 1, table 7).

While much change is currently in place, further movement is needed on many levels – in building the self perception of educators in ECEC services, building public awareness of the critical importance of learning in the first three years of life, improving the industrial conditions in the sector, strengthening government support for early childhood education and care through funding and a continued commitment to building the quality of the system.

### **b. Have you responded to these changes?**

Community-owned children's services have been preparing for the NQA for several years. In addition to the research conducted by ACCS nationally, Community Child Care, the Victorian ACCS branch surveyed over 100 members in mid 2011, concentrating on preparation for the introduction of the NQS to take place on the 1 January 2012. The results of this research indicated that many in the community sector were already and had been for quite a time working towards the standards to be included in the NQS. Most services surveyed stated they were already operating at or exceeding the new minimum staff:child ratios to come in from 2012 to 2016. This research shows a reflexive and adaptive part of the sector that is delivering high quality education and care to children while responding to many policy, societal and economic environmental changes.

### **c. What roles are emerging?**

Recently the ECEC sector has seen an increase in integrated services that also offer child health and family support services. This emerging holistic approach to ECEC requires for a particular dynamic and responsive workforce. As discussed by one respondent to ACCS research:

*'As a newly integrated service we are also looking for staff with experience in working as part of a team... this is often difficult to find, and is certainly lacking in much of the training offered to students' (ACCS survey question 6, number 3)*

This is an issue ACCS believes will be of increasing importance with the Australian policy focus shifting to the integration of services to ensure a holistic approach to early childhood education and care.

## **2. What workforce development trends exist?**

ACCS believes that the ECEC sector requires a skilled workforce. The standards in the COAG reforms are vital to achieving outcomes for children. The new national curriculum and a national framework for ratings and assessment will all positively impact on the health, learning and development outcomes for children. These changes and the desire of families for quality services are already setting an increased demand for qualified ECEC workers.

A contentious issue within the sector is Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). ACCS has observed there is large number of long serving educators who have never completed accredited training who now require minimum Cert III or other appropriate qualification in respect to their positions in ECEC. While we support the professionalisation and higher qualification of the ECEC sector we see RPL from external reputable, accredited training organisations as one way to support those without formal qualifications to obtain the new minimum Certificate III requirement. The most critical element in the success of an

RPL strategy for the minimum qualification is ensuring the consistent, high standard of assessment by a training organisation.

There are a large number of skilled and committed educators leaving the sector due to wage structures that do not adequately reflect the importance of the work or meet family and living costs. In addition educators face challenges in studying and upgrading their qualifications given their family commitments and low wage.

**a. What are the current and emerging occupational shortages?**

In 2010 more than half of ECEC positions stay vacant after being advertised for more four weeks and the trend is on the increase (DEEWR, 2010).

The ACCS survey indicates that the higher the qualification required the more difficult it is to recruit staff in that category. Where a service employs a diploma and/or degree qualified educators, the majority of the time it is 'always difficult' to recruit in these categories (Attachment 1, table 1 and table 1a).

The survey of ACCS members revealed that low wages are a significant factor in difficulties filling positions. 60% of respondents indicated this is often or always significant. Wage differentials were only sometimes significant. (Attachment 1, Table 2). One respondent commented that;

*'the workload and expectations far outweigh the pay' (ACCS survey question 6, number 4)*

The lack of suitable skills and qualifications of applicants is another area which most respondents agree is 'always' or 'often' a significant barrier to recruitment.

The ACCS survey asked whether services experience difficulty retaining staff for more than 12 months ranging from unqualified Early Childhood Assistants to Directors. The results show that of the services which employ Certificate III Child Care Assistants a clear majority of services (68%) have 'no difficulty' in retaining this category of staff (Attachment 1, Table 3a)

Half of the respondents have no difficulty in retaining Diploma Qualified Educators, with nearly half of the responses indicating that Diploma Qualified Educators are 'sometimes' or 'always difficult' to retain.

Fifty-eight percent of respondents that employ Degree Qualified Teachers find this category of staff 'sometimes' or 'always' difficult to retain. ACCS believes this is due to the lack of consistency in employment conditions between teachers in the ECEC sector and those in the mainstream education system.

Further wage discrepancies exist within services in the ECEC sector which promote a lack of consistency in the value of the work. ACCS believes the wages and salaries of different workers are not always appropriate – CCC (ACCS Victoria) is aware of a service in which a degree qualified teacher, with an additional degree, works in a room with 3 and four year olds and is paid \$23.70 per hour, whereas her colleague – also a teacher – works in a Kindergarten room and is paid \$32 per hour although both work at the same service. This is a serious discrepancy in wages.

## **b. What inhibits workforce development in community services and health?**

The issues facing the early childhood education and care sector are covered well within the Workplace Research Centre research roundtable briefing paper (Workplace Research Centre, 2010). This describes 'skill atrophy' in the child care sector - 'Low wages, work intensification and negative perceptions of the quality of work offered are issues of significant concern to the sustainability to the sector. These problems have flow on effects in the form of high turnover, resulting in the casualisation of the workforce, skills shortages and a consequent lack of focus and investment on skill development. This has become a self perpetuating cycle (Workplace Research Centre 2010: 4).

The Workplace Research Centre observes that 'although there is a high incidence of turnover in the sector, it should be noted that the child care sector workforce is also characterised by a small group of long term workers who remain committed to their employment in spite of the low pay and poor working conditions. This has been referred to by Simms (2006) as the 'exploitation of vocational passion' (cited in Bretherton, 2010) from (Workplace Research Centre 2010; p4).

On the question of what inhibits workforce development, we can look to the demography and professional development of the sector. With 97 per cent female participation the sector represents a time poor population often juggling a low paying occupation with additional family and care responsibilities. While there are many in the sector who strive to support workforce professional development many staff are inhibited by the implications of getting time off their work to study where the workplace may already experience staff shortages.

Furthermore the lack of financial compensation for professional development can be detrimental to services and individual development, for example unpaid practical work in an ECEC site. While ACCS strongly supports placed based learning we see a major barrier to accessibility of professional development in the financial viability of a low paid workforce forgoing salary at times to study or for placements.

This points to another barrier – there are very limited career pathways that actively encourage a highly qualified person to stay working face to face with children in an ECEC service. No modern award recognises qualifications higher than an undergraduate degree.

### **3. How is workforce planning being undertaken in your sector, if at all?**

Through COAG a National ECEC Workforce Strategy is under development. Individual state and territory governments are also implementing workforce strategies. In the meantime the sector is implementing its own strategies.

The ACCS Survey asked what strategies were used to retain staff (Attachment 1, Table 4). Funded Professional Development, Above Award Pay and Additional Planning Time were all nominated by the respondents as a strategy 'always' used to retain staff. On the other end of the scale, Additional Leave was responded to as a strategy 'Never' used to retain staff. In the qualitative responses some respondents indicated they use family friendly policies and 'flexibility' as a strategy to retain staff, and a few services said they offer rostered days off to retain staff.

Qualitative responses from the ACCS survey indicate that many respondents are able to offer sufficient reward to workers (ACCS Survey 2010, question 12).

Examples of how sufficient reward is offered to workers who obtain additional skills and qualifications included wage increases, days off, and professional development opportunities including study leave.

The key reason services do not offer sufficient reward is a lack of funds.

Services value and recognise the expertise of educators (ACCS Survey question 13), in practical ways such as through increased pay and planning time, through open communication on skills acquired and through providing celebratory functions when possible and appropriate.

*'Verbal appreciation and celebration of innovative and excellent ideas. We have a paid discussion group which encourages sharing ideas, and recognises individual effort. Parent feedback (they know good quality when they see it) always passed on. Committee appreciation – social events, bonuses etc. Mutual support, management publicises professionalism of educators, and uses appropriate education based terms in publications' (Response 23, question 13, ACCS Survey)*

This strategy shows respect for educators, and demonstrates a culture within the service which values the professional role of educators.

Conversely on the question of what holds services back from recognising and valuing expertise further, the key responses were the challenges of the hours in the Outside School Hours Care (OSHC) sector and money.

On the question of how could career progression within the ECEC sector be enhanced, responses pointed to better pay and conditions – including the proposal;

*'All staff in the ECEC sector paid under ONE award' (Response 48, question 15, ACCS Survey 2010)*

Other responses included support for study through affordable courses and covering staff undertaking professional development, and integrated services offering an opportunity for career progression.

#### **4. What has been achieved to date in addressing workforce development challenges?**

The Australian Government has invested in many programs to support the ECEC workforce development in particular in response to the current reforms. This includes the Professional Support Coordinators in all state and territories and the national workforce development fund offering discounted VET courses. Many state governments have offered further support.

The Victorian Government has successfully invested in initiatives such as financial support to attract more people to the early childhood education and care workforce and support skill upgrades, investing to increase networking and professional learning and investing in leadership capacity through customised leadership programs through the Bastow Institute. More information is available from the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) 'Improving Victoria's Early Childhood

Workforce' document which is available online

<http://www.education.vic.gov.au/researchinnovation/resources/workforce.htm>

However, given the continuous issues within the workforce ACCS strongly encourages further, stronger and more targeted supported for the workforce to deliver high quality education and care for Australian children.

The ACCS survey asked whether services were aware of any government initiatives to increase the supply of early childhood education and care workers and although 74% of responses indicate that they are aware of government initiatives (Attachment 1, Table 9), 54% of respondents were 'unsure' if the initiatives have been effective (Attachment 1, Table 10).

26% of respondents said the Government initiatives were effective (Attachment 1, Table 10) with the most effective being those based on financial support to undertake courses and fee exemptions for training.

Staff working in rural and remote children's services face additional challenges accessing training and development programs. These additional challenges include not having a peer or mentor in a geographically close location, often needing to undertake study externally or with no or limited face to face interactions, lack of easy access to study and library resources, and computer download speed and capacity in some rural and remote regions.

Successful models exist such as Contact Inc NSW has recently completed trialling a rural and remote mentor program assisting staff working in these services to continue to study relevant children's services qualifications. At the end of 2010 no mentored students had dropped out of the program which is an indication of success.

Further information on professional development programs may be available from the Professional Support Coordinator Alliance.

### **c. What else is need to address these challenges?**

The supply of qualified ECEC workers can expand sufficiently if all levels of government invest in workforce initiatives such as those funded by the Victorian Government in recent years. ACCS refers you to the website Victorian Government link above.

Within the ACCS survey, suggestions for new initiatives that would help increase the supply of early childhood education and care workers included fee exemptions as well as Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). Two responses indicated that reforms shouldn't be only about supply;

*'it's about quality as well' (Response 2, Question 22 ACCS Survey)*

With another respondent suggesting;

*'Limit the amount of training providers – so that a quality qualification is being handed out' (Response 43, Question 22 ACCS Survey)*

The ACCS survey responses were mixed on this question, although many responses indicate that staff within a service have either started to upgrade qualifications or will stay and upgrade;

*'the right type of educators will upgrade their qualification – those that are passionate about their work. The others may not, but perhaps this is not such a bad thing in the long run.. It may make it more difficult to recruit qualified educators though' (Response 34, Question 23 ACCS Survey)*

However ACCS believes it is not wise to build the future of the ECEC system on the back of altruism from passionate staff members. Wages and conditions were identified by survey respondents as a reason why people would leave, including the lack of reward in wages for upgrading qualifications.

On the question of effective staff retention strategies, the Workplace Research Centre in Sydney released a briefing paper in 2010 looking at innovative responses by employers to address the 'low skill – low wage nexus' (Workplace Research Centre 2010: 5).

There were 6 strategies used by best practice employers to develop skilled labour and these were;

- 1 – Lift the economic and social value of work
- 2- Use of stable employment structures as part of a wider strategy to reduce staff turnover
- 3 – Clarify customer need, and use this to rally staff development
- 4 - Create opportunities for professionals to mobilise in order to lay the foundation for reconstruction of core skills in the sector
- 5 – Expand options for funding, but with a view to lifting quality in service and quality of employment
- 6 – Harness the enthusiasm of workers to engage in training.

(Workplace Research Centre 2010: 6-7)

#### **d. What are the barriers and the opportunities in addressing these challenges?**

The ECEC sector is complex in its inputs and outputs with many nuances. Ensuring high quality ECEC for Australian children is intrinsically linked with a highly qualified and sustainable workforce.

ACCS firmly believes that the ECEC sector operates best when it is not working for a profit. Our membership represents community owned not for profit services that extend beyond just offering a customer a service, engaging families as partners and building resilient communities.

A great opportunity in government support for the ECEC sector in this period of time can be found in supporting specifically not for profit and community owned services, in particular in the community and social capital that they produce. The involvement and appreciation of the community to the ECEC sector in this setting can have a very strong effect on families and the general public's perception of the high importance and value of the ECEC workforce.

ACCS cites an excerpt from the CCC (ACCS Victoria) research report *A Very Empowering Feeling*:

In 2007 CCC gathered data from families across Victoria about their experience of community owned and managed children's services; it reveals the families in this study value partnerships and a real connection that encourages different types of involvement and which is focused on shared decision making about the education and care of their children despite challenges and constraints on family involvement. For these families community owned services are places where connectedness with families and the local community and responsiveness to local and individual family needs are paramount (Community Child Care, 2007: 3).

##### **5. How effectively are the training packages for community services and health supporting workforce development needs?**

Effectiveness of the skills package is a consistent concern within the ECEC sector.

The Productivity Commission report highlighted these issues stating that "many participants expressed concerns about poor-quality training providing students with insufficient support, unreasonably short courses, and inadequate access to practicum experience" (Productivity Commission, 2011: XXXIV). This is consistent with the concerns ACCS hears from the sector.

The majority of respondents to the ACCS survey indicate that the Diploma for Educators and Degree for Teachers are 'highly appropriate' for entry into various early childhood education and care occupations (Attachment 1, table 5). However a significant number see these qualifications as only 'somewhat appropriate' and more than 10% believe the early childhood degree for teachers is 'not appropriate'.

The Certificate III for Assistants attracted the most critical responses with most seeing it as 'not' or only 'somewhat appropriate'. One respondent commenting;

*'It is my belief that the Cert III should no longer be available and that all staff be minimum Dip training. However I also believe the Dip should be upgraded to a 3 year course!' (Response 8, question 9 ACCS Survey)*

The majority of respondents to the ACCS survey believed that Newly Qualified Certificate III assistants, Newly Qualified Diploma Qualified Educator and Newly Qualified Degree Qualified Teachers 'sometimes have necessary skills' to be effective in the workplace (Attachment 1, Table 6).

A number of themes arose from the comments including the importance of on the job experience and variations in the training institutions from which the qualification obtained.

One response refers to the construction of the courses and the importance of ensuring courses are practical as well as theoretical;

*'it depends on how they completed their qualification. Courses that offer more hands on contact hours with children and more placement opportunities produce higher quality staff' (Response 18, question 10 ACCS Survey)*

This comment highlights the fundamental difference between vocational training resulting in Certificate III or Diploma provided through Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) and professional qualifications – undergraduate and higher degrees - obtained through universities. ACCS believes theoretical components of courses are important to underpin the practical skills.

As previously detailed, ACCS has concerns about the range of quality in the recognition of prior learning (RPL) processes and courses provided by training providers. Additionally we believe a care for babies proponent should be included in all diplomas.

ACCS supports recommendation 10.1 of the Productivity Commission Report:

*The Community Services and Health Industry Skills Council should, as a priority, update the Community Services Training Package to ensure that children's services qualifications:*

- *reflect recent changes to the regulatory environment for early childhood education and care (including the National Quality Standard, the Early Years Learning Framework and the Framework for School Age Care)*
- *contain rigorous, auditable assessment requirements for each unit of competency*
- *require practical skills to be demonstrated in a workplace environment.*

**e. What key changes are requested to assist the industries in meeting their skills needs.**

Wage rates that reflect the professional roles and responsibilities of an ECEC professional are paramount to addressing the many challenges facing the workforce.

A delicate equilibrium is needed in supporting professional development and up-skilling in the workforce and not lowering the value of the workforce by lowering prerequisites for entering into ECEC qualifications and employment. ACCS has seen a negative effect on quality and the public's value for the ECEC through the flexibility of the current skills package. Low self value for the skills earned through a online course with little requirements for entry is perpetuating further the low status of the sector at large.

An understanding of the many nuances of the sector is needed in designing policy interventions to support workforce up-skilling and development.

For example another survey response articulated a problem that underpins many of the issues facing contemporary society – a past built on 'male breadwinning' (Brennan 2009: 11). When answering the question of how career progression could be enhanced; *'Being fully integrated into the school education system, with career paths, respect and recognition going both ways. This is unlikely to happen as long as early childhood is constrained by being a secondary industry, dependent on other women's wages for survival (ie we are limited in our ability to charge a fee that would allow wages that truly recognise the skill level of our staff) Response 21, Question 15 ACCS Survey*

This refers to the idea of ‘women’s work’ and the low value placed thereon. As Brennan notes ‘Mothers are far less likely to be employed than fathers, much less likely to work full time and more likely to be engaged in casual work’ (Brennan 2009: 5).

**6. A new workplace development agenda proposes policy, strategies and funding that are broader than education and training only. How can workforce development and education/training policy best support community services and health industry growth reform objectives.**

We see a comprehensive approach to the challenges facing the sector. The first part of this approach is being addressed with the higher standard expected in quality of the ECEC services through the NQA. Subsequent elements include:

- Increasing wages and conditions
- Better aligning wages and conditions with “competitive” sectors including primary teaching
- Lifting prestige within the sector and in the wider public including through lifting requirements for entry into qualifications to limit ECEC career being a “default career”
- Include baby care in skills package as a requirement for ECEC qualifications

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