

TICCSS IN CONTEXT

The National Quality Framework
and the voice of the
Community Children's Services Sector



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Foreword

Prue Warrilow, ACCS National Convenor

Australian Community Children's Services is pleased to publish this analysis of how our longitudinal study of the implementation of the National Quality Framework contributed to vital public policy debate.

The Trends In Community Children's Services Survey research documents and celebrates how well the not-for-profit sector has done in lifting quality standards and bringing the commercial sector along. Australian Community Children's Services always advocates for children to be placed at the centre of all policy considerations for early childhood education and care so we celebrate the positive impact that the quality reforms are having for children.

Children are entitled to good quality early learning environments in their own right and not only as a way to facilitate parent participation in the workforce.

Despite the negative rhetoric expressed through the media and other sources our research consistently showcased a whole group of services stepping up and delivering. Attempts to characterise the National Quality Framework as red tape and an administrative burden failed to derail this significant reform and the National Quality Framework survived multiple reviews without any reduction in the broad indicators of good quality - improved ratios of staff to children, improved qualifications of staff and strengthened engagement with children through the Quality Areas.

ACCS is proud of the influence of the Trends In Community Children's Services Survey research on public policy broadly and in particular on successfully advocating for official reporting on sector achievements by management type to distinguish quality ratings of private not-for-profit community managed services and private for-profit services.

The National Quality Framework survived a change of government most likely due to the universal agreement through the Council of Australian Governments with every state and territory signing up to the same system. It avoided the flaws that characterise the implementation of the policy of Universal Access to Early Childhood Education where bilateral agreements grafted federal funding onto the widely varying state and territory preschool systems resulting in some arrangements that are less than ideal.

So the National Quality Framework has been a success – but there is more to be done including research on further improvements to minimum quality standards in early childhood education and care such as improved ratios to determine what delivers the best outcomes for children.

Amanda Rishworth, Shadow Minister for Early Childhood Education

The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education is seen by the Australian Labor Party as a very proud achievement and legacy from our last period in government.

It may be underestimated in the wider community, and while we perform badly on affordability and access compared with other OECD countries, we are right up there on quality.

Implementing these reforms despite the rhetoric about cost and red tape is a great achievement.

I am most proud of the evidence-based basis of the framework, especially the relationships between children and educators. We are not just ensuring that children stay safe – it is a much richer range of measurements and all evidence-based.

I was not confident that the National Quality Framework would survive the change of government in 2013. Some Liberal Democrat and Coalition Members of Parliament were vocal against it. There was a Senate Inquiry and attacks from right-wing think tanks – but the Framework largely survived.

Whilst stakeholders have been important in defending the Framework, there has also been strong buy-in by state and territory governments. They took on responsibility for some aspects of the Framework and several states are responsible for direct delivery of services.

I see the next challenge is to continue to ensure it is fit for purpose and to complete the introduction of the requirement for a second early childhood teacher in larger services. This is still a challenge for many services and there is a growing number of exemptions.

We also need to find ways to reward services that achieve compliance with National Quality Standards to encourage services to rise above ratings of *Working Towards* the Standards. It is a market failure when I hear parents talk about moving house for their newborn to get into the school of their choice but then choosing an early learning service because it looks good from the outside. We need to find ways to translate the quality ratings into terms that are clear for parents.

There are no easy solutions to the question of improving remuneration for early childhood educators. We need to determine if the industrial route is the most appropriate way. The National Quality Framework has professionalised the workforce – the Children's Services Award needs to be updated to reflect that reality.

Hon Kate Ellis, Minister for Early Childhood Education, Childcare and Youth 2007 – 2010, 2013

When the concept of a national quality agenda for early childhood was first raised in the Australian Labor Party there were concerns it was too ambitious as well as arguments about affordability.

In the years since it has clearly been shown to be the right thing to do; it has been incredibly successful. So it is easy to forget now that it could have gone into the 'too hard' basket.

The national quality reforms have significantly shifted thinking about the importance of the early years. It has shown that the role of early childhood education and care services is not babysitting, it is improving children's outcomes. Turning neuroscience into policy in early childhood education and care settings is a significant achievement but it is only the first step. We must continue to build on this by raising understanding in the general public about the importance of the early years in whatever setting. This will see policy flowing into other areas such as parental leave.

My vision is informed by my own experience with my children in early childhood education and care. On the first visit to a centre with my older child, the educator explained the new Framework and it was obvious it was very new. Now with my youngest child, it is entrenched and shows in really good communication with parents. The learning stories are very clear in showing what my child is learning and how. This is an incredibly powerful outcome.

Seeing how trained educators respond to children I learn parenting techniques every time I enter an early childhood education and care service. This is an invaluable benefit of higher qualifications for educators.

Professor Deb Brennan, author of *The Politics of Australian Child Care: from philanthropy to feminism and beyond*

It is rare to have longitudinal insights into the impact of a policy or regulatory change and I congratulate Australian Community Children's Services on conducting this series of reports.

The reports highlight the strengths of the community sector in leading and adapting to the changes brought about by the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care.

The National Quality Framework was incredibly important and much needed particularly in light of the move to a heavily marketised service system.

Families, educators and policymakers can now see the link between what goes into a vibrant early childhood service system and what comes out – improved outcomes for children.

The Trends In Community Children's Services Survey research demonstrates the strength of the community based sector, both in adapting to change and in providing leadership to push back against false claims about the impact of the reforms.

The COVID pandemic has had interesting implications for the sector – on one hand, it has brought home to the community and to policymakers how critical early childhood education and care is to families and the economy. On the other hand, it exposed weaknesses in the marketised model. It took two major government interventions to keep the sector going that

were not seen in school education because that system is based on a national vision of public provision.

Recently the Canadian Government has announced that it will direct future investment into community based early childhood services. We know that community based services come out of a deep concern for families and children while recognising the importance of supporting parent participation in the workforce.

What the National Quality Framework brought to the sector is extremely valuable and hopefully will eventually contribute to professional recognition of the workforce and professional wages. And research is accumulating that supports a further lifting of minimum standards.

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Executive summary

The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care (NQF) introduced for the first national system for regulation and quality assessment for children's services in Australia. It brought consistent minimum quality standards across service types and state and territory jurisdictions in a phased rollout in the eight years to 2020.

Throughout this critical period, the peak body for community children's services Australian Community Children's Services (ACCS) conducted the Trends In Community Children's Services Survey (TICCSS) longitudinal study of the achievements of the community sector in engaging with this new system, the challenges it faced and emerging issues for the children and families it served.

The findings provided the evidence base for the community sector voice to government during the phased rollout. The persistent positive findings through the six waves of TICCSS research demonstrated the capacity of the not-for-profit (NfP) sector to implement all stages of increased minimum standards, often exceeding them.

The *TICCSS in Context* report locates the findings of these surveys in the context of other related research and social policy papers published during this period. It examines how this research contributed to crucial policy discussions especially in defense of the reforms in the context of doubts about affordability, the administrative burden and the availability of an appropriately skilled workforce.

The publicly available literature of this period showed strong support for the NQF across state and territory governments in Australia as well as the diverse mixed economy of the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) sector despite these concerns.

The NQF survived a change of government only two years into the eight-year implementation period, despite efforts to find flaws through a focus on efficiency and characterisation of the quality assurance processes as red tape, ignoring the body of evidence from academic research of how quality ECEC contributes to children's learning and development for the long term benefit of society and the economy.

None of the research found in this literature review demonstrated fundamental flaws in the NQF. There was an attempt however to cast quality as being incompatible with affordability that was ultimately based on misrepresentation of data. Other research published during this period focussed on updating the evidence for the benefits of quality ECEC for children and the broader society and on ways to strengthen implementation of the NQF such as better targeting of professional development and strengthening of understandings of the role of the Educational Leader, which was new to many ECEC services.

TICCSS made an ongoing contribution to this public debate during the implementation of the NQF. The review of this and other publicly available literature before, during and after the staged rollout contained in this paper revealed five broad themes in the public discourse:

- **Evidence** – in support of investment in ECEC
- **Quality in ECEC** – the constituent parts, implementation of NQF, impacts of increased quality and changes made to the NQF along the way
- **Goals of quality improvement** – including supporting outcomes for children, future productivity and national economic growth – mostly presented as a linked cause and effect but occasionally as being in tension
- **Workforce** – a fundamental requirement of achieving the improved quality in the NQF through improved ratios of staff to children, mandatory minimum qualifications for people working with children in ECEC and professional development to enable the potential of the learning frameworks to be achieved
- **Governance of the NQF** – including questions of public investment, regulation, enforcement and the shift in focus after the election of the Coalition Government.

The focus of the publicly available literature shifted between these themes as the rollout progressed. Not surprisingly the literature in the lead up to the introduction of the NQF was dominated by discussion of the evidence in support of such a reform and the elements that compromise quality. After the implementation rollout began, public discussion grew around what outcomes were sought and the workforce challenges of delivering these outcomes. Public discussion in the middle years of implementation was dominated by issues of governance of the quality reforms and with a strong continuing focus on outcomes and what compromises quality. In the final years of the rollout, governance and outcomes were again high in the public discussions with a return to focus on the workforce.

The reports of the six waves of TICCSS research published during the eight-year phased implementation were the only longitudinal research and the only documents that throughout the rollout consistently addressed issues of quality, the outcomes of the NQF, workforce, governance of the NQF and child and family vulnerabilities.

The TICCSS research provided valuable evidence to support the policy views expressed by the community sector peak body ACCS in all of these debates.

Evidence in support of investment in early childhood education and care

The evidence of the impact of early experiences on child development that emerged around the turn of the century included insights from neuroscience on early brain development, the importance of relationships in early development, the capacity to influence positive outcomes with high-quality interventions including highly qualified people working in ECEC and the financial return on the investment required. This evidence was widely accepted in Australia amongst policymakers and the early childhood sector.

The first significant assessment of the financial return on investment in quality ECEC was published early in the implementation of the NQF. Midway through the implementation period, a study of more recent international research showed further strong evidence that the quality of children's relationships with teachers and educators in the first three years of life predicts better engagement at school, with these benefits most marked in children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The publicly available literature showed no serious arguments against this evidence which went largely unchallenged in public debate until the final stages of implementation of the NQF. The Coalition Government shifted the focus of public debate about the reform process to 'red tape' and a Senate Select Committee recommended that the government compile evidence that staff ratios and qualifications contribute to quality, apparently in ignorance of the work mentioned above.

What constitutes high-quality early childhood education and care

Of more sustained debate was the question of minimum standards to ensure high-quality experiences for children in ECEC.

The international research that was foundational in the development of the NQF recommended co-ordination of fragmented early childhood programs and integration of early childhood development and parenting support programs. These concepts informed the NQF which drew long day care and preschool/kindergarten into a common quality assurance system.

The NQF for ECEC in Australia set out a clear model for the service system it wished to establish by 2020. The literature which was published following the commencement of this reform process was overwhelmingly positive about the intent and the overall reforms. Every time a government consultation process called for submissions all respondents expressed support for the NQF.

While welcoming increased minimum ratios of staff to children the community children's services peak body Australian Community Children's Services (ACCS) called for further improvements, specifically for the newly mandated 1:4 ratio for staff to children under two to shift to 1:3, a level at which many community services were already operating.

Research evidence demonstrated that improved ratios in ECEC produced enhanced later school performance. Research also supported higher qualifications for staff. Effective teachers and pedagogical staff made a tangible improvement in child wellbeing, development and learning. Qualified teachers were shown to develop warm interactive relationships with children which contribute to improved child outcomes. Research also suggested that low-quality ECEC may damage children's outcomes.

Learning frameworks form an intrinsic part of the NQF. The New Zealand early learning framework survived a change of government as did the Australian *Early Years Learning Framework*. Research showed that it was strongly taken up in ECEC services. There is less documentation in the public arena of uptake of the school age care framework.

The *Early Years Learning Framework* introduced the concept of intentional teaching to large parts of the ECEC sector for which it was a new idea. Research suggested that instructional support from staff supports improved child outcomes. Pedagogical leadership was also introduced as part of the NQF. Research demonstrated the need for targeted support to develop understandings in the sector of the role of leadership to build quality.

The most significant contribution from TICCSS to public debate about the essential elements of quality ECEC was to report at every stage in the implementation of the NQS the capability of community ECEC services to meet and exceed the new minimum ratios and qualifications and actively supporting their Educational Leaders with investment in paid time allocated specifically to this role outside of regular time allocated to education and care of children. They demonstrated throughout that increased minimum standards were achievable and that ECEC services were capable of achieving quality ratings of *Meeting* and *Exceeding* NQS. These self-reported ratings were confirmed by the updates published by the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) which showed high proportions of community NfP services rated as *Meeting*, *Exceeding* and *Excellent*.

By the final TICCSS in 2020 nearly half of the respondent community children's services were exceeding minimum ratios of educators to children for all age groups as well as increasing the proportion of staff with diploma and four-year early childhood teaching qualifications.

Outcomes of investment in quality

During this period the literature on the ultimate purpose of investment in improving quality in ECEC rested heavily on concepts of human capital, casting the skills and knowledge gained by individual children as valuable assets to the nation. But it also addressed the impact on children and on their families.

The international academic evidence that seeded the development of the NQF included a powerful economic analyses of the return on investment in high-quality ECEC. The NQF foundation documents argued that quality ECEC delivers improved educational outcomes for children, which in turn boosted their future productivity to support the national economy.

Early childhood advocates adopted economic arguments to boost the credibility of their submissions to government. Australian researchers conducted detailed cost-benefit analyses of government investment. Some academic analysis questioned the impact of this discourse arguing that focussing on economic benefits ignores the complexity of quality in ECEC.

This ultimate focus on assurance to governments that investment in quality ECEC was good economic management did however rest on clear commitments to improved outcomes for children. The explicit goals of the NQF included social inclusion, reducing inequality and closing the gap for First Nations children.

Research identified and tested which aspects of quality ECEC improved developmental outcomes for children's learning, behaviour and school performance.

The literature produced during the staged implementation of the NQF included recognition of the potential role of ECEC services in early identification and intervention for children with developmental vulnerabilities. It also examined evidence of the unequal impact for children experiencing vulnerability. Research exposed low participation in ECEC by children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds thus starting school behind their peers.

Some literature focussed on children's rights with quality services cast as a right as well as assurance that services operate with a child-safe culture especially to protect against sexual abuse.

TICCSS tracked the participation of children experiencing vulnerability throughout the implementation period, revealing increasing numbers of vulnerable children attending community services and an increase in the range of vulnerabilities that these children were experiencing. It documented the contribution of the NQF throughout the period to increasing the focus of community children's services on programming as well as on working with the wider community and supporting families experiencing vulnerability.

The impact on families was less well documented during this period despite the explicit goal of the NQF to improve understanding by families of quality ratings in ECEC.

An unintended consequence examined in the literature was the impact of the quality reforms on the cost of delivery and consequently on affordability for families. The commercial sector argued that this was inevitable and posed a threat to profitability and viability of its services. Price competition created a barrier to investment in the quality reforms for these services. Research was produced to support these contentions which was based on a misleading analysis of trends in fees charged.

TICCSS on the other hand demonstrated that fee increases in the community sector during the reform period were modest and there was little evidence of families reducing their use of the services as a result.

Workforce

The potential for problems in meeting the supply of sufficient numbers of qualified teachers and educators in the implementation of the NQF was recognised from the start with the Council of Australian Governments flagging the need for a national ECEC workforce strategy as early as three years before implementation commenced.

TICCSS and other consultations with educators and early childhood teachers published during the implementation period showed a high level of support for increased qualification requirements with the sector determined to find ways to achieve them through strategies such as upskilling of the existing workforce.

A census midway through the implementation period showed that the vast majority of people working with children in ECEC held early childhood qualifications.

TICCSS showed strong stability in staffing in the community children's services sector, high numbers working towards a mandated qualification and satisfaction with their current job despite high levels of dissatisfaction with pay and conditions.

TICCSS found that the qualifications profile of the community sector improved throughout the staged introduction of the NQF with only 3% of educators in community services unqualified by 2020.

However, staff shortages persisted especially in rural and remote areas as did difficulties in access to training for First Nations educators.

ACECQA tracked the sector's progress in applying the NQF including the reliance on waivers of the minimum staffing requirements. It found a consistently small proportion of services relied on these waivers until 2020 when the COVID pandemic and the requirement for a second qualified early childhood teacher in larger services coincided to produce an increase in waivers, but still, the vast majority of the sector was able to meet the staffing requirements of the NQS.

Demand for teachers and educators was estimated to increase significantly in the period to 2024.

A forecast of the skills required in the sector identified the need for professional development including knowledge of First Nations culture, pedagogical leadership and addressing institutional responses to child sexual abuse and family violence. The need for professional development on the latter issue was borne out by TICCSS reporting an increase in the incidence of child abuse and family violence among families using community ECEC.

In all of the literature only the commercial child care sector advocated weakening of qualification requirements; however this was limited to the edges – short term relief staff and new appointees.

Concerns about pay and conditions arose throughout the period of implementation of the NQF especially in creating barriers to recruitment and retention. Some called for government support for professional wages and in 2019 the Australian Labor Party made an election pledge to fund a significant pay rise in its unsuccessful bid to win government.

A number of industrial claims were lodged during this period for improvements to award wages in the early childhood sector and in 2021 early childhood teachers received an award increase as well as an allowance for educational leaders on the basis of the changes in work value.

Another key issue identified in the literature on the ECEC workforce was the variable quality of pre-service training as well as poor quality in-service professional development and cost barriers to participants. TICCSS found that the community sector was more proactive in supporting staff attendance at professional development by funding fees and granting paid study leave.

Consultation for the development of a national workforce strategy building on the learnings from the eight-year rollout of the NQF was published in 2021.

Governance of the National Quality Framework

Initially, responsibility for the governance of the NQF rested with the Council of Australian Governments. It developed a consensus on the need for investment in early childhood across all jurisdictions representing both sides of politics in Australia. This consensus helped the NQF to survive the change of federal government in the early years of the phased implementation,

unlike the New Zealand experience at the turn of the century which saw major reform in ECEC introduced by a Labour Government stalled and partially overturned by an incoming conservative government.

The literature at the time showed that the major shift brought by the Australian Coalition Government was a focus on reducing the cost of compliance with national regulations and recasting the practice of the NQF as potentially burdensome administrative red tape.

The NQF commenced with a commitment to monitor the efficiency and effectiveness of the reforms. A Board made up of state and territory Education Ministers governs the new national body ACECQA which was charged among other things with regularly monitoring the administrative burden. The first national review of the NQF also focussed on these questions.

ACECQA found over three annual surveys of the sector a reduction over time in the perception of the burdens created by the NQF. The exception was a persistent perception of a burden created by assessment and rating visits and the documentation required to demonstrate quality. It addressed the latter with clarification of the expectations of services. The one issue that remained of concern was inconsistency between jurisdictions in how their regulatory authorities conducted assessment and rating processes. This concern was raised by many in the sector.

TICCSS showed that community children's services experienced the NQF as streamlining administration rather than increasing the burden. An increase in 2020 in the proportion of services reporting an increased workload in administration could be attributed to the introduction of Child Care Subsidy before the administration of the 2019 survey.

Throughout the implementation period, government conducted various surveys, consultations and external reviews to monitor challenges in implementation and delivery of quality ECEC and to assess the capacity of the sector to meet future demand. The NQF was affirmed by the findings of these reviews. Only small changes were made such as some simplification of the NQS.

There was significant debate in the literature regarding government investment in ECEC to support quality improvement. The early literature drew on international comparisons to show Australia's underspend in comparison with other countries in the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development.

There were calls from the sector and from the Productivity Commission for the federal government's fee subsidy for families to be simplified by combining a fragmented system of multiple subsidies into a single subsidy. The Government responded with the creation of Child Care Subsidy and Additional Child Care Subsidy for families experiencing vulnerabilities.

Conclusions

TICCSS research made a significant contribution to the public debates about the rollout of the National Quality Framework.

It was influential in demonstrating that the new quality standards were achievable without causing services to become unaffordable for families. It also demonstrated that it was possible to build the workforce by starting with upskilling existing educators.

It flagged the emerging challenges of growing vulnerabilities experienced by children and their families and when the COVID pandemic hit in the final year of the rollout of NQF TICCSS was an ideal vehicle to gather firsthand experiences of the impacts of public health lockdowns on children, their families and on the children's services themselves.

As the NQF is bedded down the TICCSS research is now completed.

The reports on the six waves of the survey research and this contextual report will stand as a testament to the resilience of the community ECEC sector, showing leadership in times of positive change and speaking out about the impacts of calamitous events like fires and pandemics as well as the everyday vulnerabilities experienced by children and families.

Introduction

The early childhood education and care sector in Australia before the National Quality Framework

Before the Council of Australian Governments reached agreement on the National Quality Agenda (NQA) in 2009 Australia's ECEC system was fragmented and quality was highly variable.

Before the NQA there were significant variations in policy, regulation and quality assurance across jurisdictions and between different service types. The federal government funded fee subsidies for child care for children of working parents from birth through primary school. Minimum regulatory safety standards were set and administered by state and territory governments. Most only regulated long day care and family day care and there were wide variations in the mandatory standards. Many people working in early and middle childhood education and care had no formal qualifications.

In the late 1980s, the community sector peak body National Association of Community Based Children's Services worked with other national peak bodies to explore the potential for a quality accreditation system to sit above regulated safety standards to ensure services operated in the best interests of the child.¹ The resulting national quality assurance process was established in 1995 administered by the National Childcare Accreditation Council and applied to long day care only. There was widespread dissatisfaction with the long day care Quality Improvement and Accreditation System.² It was eventually rolled out to family day care and outside school hours care but ceased in 2011 when replaced under the NQF.

Each state and territory government formed its policy on funding for preschool/kindergarten programs in the year before school entry and quality assurance procedures were limited.

The community early childhood sector proclaimed access to high-quality children's services as a right of all Australian children and called for 'a strong system of quality assurance... based on improving services and best practice, not minimum standards'.³

National policy was based on the belief that what happens for children before formal schooling or in the leisure hours after school is of less importance than ensuring parents were free to participate in the workforce. Historically successive Australian Governments of both sides of politics were stubbornly resistant to the advice from the community child care sector

¹ D Brennan *The Politics of Child Care in Australia – from philanthropy to feminism and beyond* Cambridge University Press 1998 p 200

² See for example '[Reviewers Give Their Reasons for Discontinuing with NCAC](#)' in *Rattler* 57 Autumn 2001 accessed 26.7.21

³ National Association of Community Based Children's Services *NACBCS A National Policy for Australia 2007 & Beyond – Quality child care now for children, families and communities!*

advocates on the benefits of lifting quality standards in ECEC for children, for families and for society.

Significant changes occurred around the turn of the 21st century as international research by eminent academics, including a Nobel Laureate could no longer be ignored.

The National Quality Framework didn't emerge out of nowhere

It is useful to go back more than a decade before the NQF to recognise how the scene was set by key international influences.

In the 15 years leading up to the Australian Government publishing a plan to invest in early childhood development, there was a profound broadening in understanding of what ECEC services do and the role of quality standards in maximising the individual, family and national benefits of these services.

This opening up owes much to the influence of four international experts who provided scientific evidence and powerful rationales for seeing 'child care' as early education. They published evidence-based arguments from diverse policy perspectives for investing in ECEC and the risks of failing to do so. Some of these experts toured Australia around the turn of the century addressing state, territory and national government policy advisors as well as the ECEC sector.

The first was Dr Fraser Mustard, an eminent Canadian medical doctor and renowned researcher in early childhood development who published the seminal study *The Early Years Study – Reversing the Real Brain Drain* in 1999. His study drew on 'neuroscience, developmental psychology, human development, sociology, paediatrics and the determinants of health, learning and economic growth' as evidence of 'the need for a more integrated framework for early child development and parenting support.'⁴

His study examined the extensive brain development that occurs *in utero* and the first year of life, how nutrition, care and nurturing directly affect this brain development and how negative experiences in the early years of life have long term consequences. One of the most impactful images shared by him and others to bring attention to this analysis was scans of the underdeveloped brains of neglected children.⁵

Shortly after Dr Mustard's study was published, an American paediatrician Jack Shonkoff published, with Deborah Phillips, *From Neurons to Neighbourhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development* emphasising 'the importance of early life experiences... the central role of early relationships... [the] essential ... skills that develop during the earliest years of life

⁴ JF Mustard, M McCain [*Reversing the Real Brain Drain - Early Years Study*](#) Final Report April 1999 Canadian Institute for Advanced Research Ontario p 1 accessed 26.7.21

⁵ BD Perry and D Pollard [*Altered brain development following global neglect in early childhood*](#) Society For Neuroscience: Proceedings from Annual Meeting New Orleans 1997 accessed 26.7.21

and ... the capacity to increase the odds of favourable developmental outcomes through planned intervention'.⁶

The report called for coordination to reduce the fragmentation of early childhood programs.

Around this time a US economist James Heckman won the Nobel Prize for Economics for his work in the development of a scientific basis for evaluation of economic policy which he then applied to demonstrate the economic return on investment in high-quality ECEC programs.⁷ His work calculating the financial return on every dollar invested in ECEC was particularly effective and continues through his leadership of the Centre for the Developing Child at Harvard University.⁸

UK Professor of Child Development and Education Iram Siraj-Blatchford visited Australia around this time, raising awareness of the Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) study of children in the United Kingdom from birth to the early years of school.⁹ Its 2004 report provided evidence that high-quality pre-schooling (which in UK includes programs from birth to school entry) provides better intellectual, social and behavioural development for children. Importantly the report also provided evidence that higher qualifications of staff contributed to higher quality of programs which led to children making greater progress.

It concluded that indicators of quality in ECEC are warm interactive relationships with children, having trained teachers, both in delivery and management and effective pedagogy, including an instructive learning environment and sustained shared thinking to extend children's learning.

Further, the study found that children who participated in high-quality ECEC were more independent and showed less antisocial and worried behaviour on entering primary school and achieved higher scores in standardised tests of reading and mathematics at age six years.

These four evidence-based international advocates combined with the consistent advocacy of the community ECEC sector and open minds in the policy arena in Australia created the environment for a profound shift in early childhood policy under an incoming Australian Labor Party Government. Their key messages are reflected in the NQF – increased investment in early childhood, coordination and integration of children's services, quality staff including Early Childhood Teachers and robust learning frameworks.

And so three of the key themes permeating public debate in Australia were established – science providing evidence of the importance of early experiences, especially early

⁶ National Research Council and Institute of Medicine *From Neurons to Neighbourhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development* Committee on Integrating the Science of Early Childhood Development J Shonkoff and D Phillips (eds) Board on Children, Youth, and Families, Commission on Behavioural and Social Sciences and Education: National Academy Press 2000 pp 20-21 accessed 7.10.21

⁷ See for example J Heckman 'Invest in the very young' In: R Tremblay, RG Barr, RDeV Peters (eds) *Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development* [online] Montreal, Quebec: Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development and Heckman J. 'Skills Formation and the Economics of Investing in Disadvantaged Children' in *Science* vol 312 June 2006 accessed 23.7.21

⁸ J Shonkoff, JM Radner and N Foote 'Expanding the Evidence Base to Drive More Productive Early Childhood Investment' *The Lancet*, 389(10064), 2016 pp 14-16 accessed 7.10.21

⁹ K Sylva, E Melhuish, P Sammons P, I Siraj-Blatchford and B Taggart B *The Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) Project Final Report* London: The Institute of Education 2004

relationships and provision of education and care by qualified staff, for the ultimate goal of relieving pressure on the public purse.

But action did not come for several years, while across the Tasman early childhood policy was developing apace in New Zealand (Aotearoa). And its experience introduced a fourth theme – the governance of reform.

What was happening in early childhood policy overseas

The widely acknowledged leaders in ECEC quality at the turn of the 21st century were the Scandinavian countries. There was a strong social contract that surrounded families with young children with a network of support including paid parental leave for the first 12 months and guaranteed access to quality child care during the pre-school years as well as outside of school hours care delivered by specialist recreation pedagogues.¹⁰ Advocates in Australia could only look on in admiration.

Closer to home efforts were underway to move several steps towards high-quality ECEC. In the early years of the 21st century the New Zealand ECEC sector was undergoing a transformation.¹¹ In 1996 it adopted its first early childhood curriculum framework *Te Whariki* which was adopted with support from both sides of politics. At the same time, the education union was advocating for mandatory teaching qualifications for people delivering ECEC which proved to be a step too far for the incumbent conservative government.

In 1999 the incoming Labour Government published a strategic plan for ECEC which recognised that to realise the aspirations of *Te Whariki* it was essential to have qualified teachers involved in its delivery. A few years later a major investment in ECEC was announced under the policy *Pathways to the Future* and included funding for 20 hours per week of free ECEC for all children at ages three and four.

Australia's ECEC sector waited 13 years after *Te Whariki* for an early childhood curriculum framework and its policy of Universal Access to Early Childhood Education for all children in the year before school arrived four years after the New Zealand policy. It was not free and was subsidised for only 15 hours per week. Both of these developments only became possible with the election of the progress Australian Labor Party Government in Australia in 2007.

Shortly after the election of the Australian Labor Party in Australia, a conservative government was elected in New Zealand and the gains made for their ECEC sector were wound back, with reductions in the commitment to free ECEC for three and four-year-olds and only 80% of staff required to be qualified. However, the early childhood curriculum framework *Te Whariki* survived the change of government.

¹⁰ P Abrahamson 'The Scandinavian social service state in comparison' in J Sipilä (ed) *Social Care Services: The Key to the Scandinavian Welfare Model* Ashgate Publishing Ltd, Aldershot UK 1997

¹¹ G McDonald and H May 'Organisations Concerned with Early Childhood Care and Education' revised 2018, originally published in *Women together: a history of women's organisations in New Zealand / Ngā rōpū wāhine o te motu* 1993, published online in 2018 accessed 27.7.21

Consensus on early childhood quality reform in Australia

When the Australian Labor Party ended the eleven-year reign of the conservative Coalition Government in 2007 it brought with it a visionary education policy that included a commitment to raise participation in early childhood education for children in the year before school entry.¹² And with it came the first official acknowledgement of a key theme in the literature that followed – the challenge of building the ECEC workforce.

The policy was published in January 2007 and presented the case for investment in human capital by improving the quality of educational outcomes to drive productivity and to support the national economy. It was significant that it explicitly promised investment 'in every level of education from early childhood to mature age'.¹³ The evidence cited for investment in early childhood education drew on Australia's poor performance in participation in pre-primary education for children 3 and 4 years old with this investment the lowest among Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development countries at that time.

After winning government later in 2007 the Australian Labor Party Government set about implementing its ambitious reform agenda.

In mid-2009 the Council of Australian Governments published its agreement on implementation of significant reform of ECEC.¹⁴ The vision of the *National Early Childhood Development Strategy* was 'that by 2020 all children have the best start in life to create a better future for themselves and for the nation.'¹⁵

The Strategy explicitly referenced Fraser Mustard, Jack Shonkoff, James Heckman and Iram Siraj-Blatchford. It included strategies for early childhood health and wellbeing as well as early childhood education.

Its purpose included increasing social inclusion, human capital and productivity by achieving positive early childhood development outcomes and reducing inequality in outcomes. It also promised the remarkable achievement of gaining the active participation of all state and territory governments with the federal government working collaboratively on the key reform initiatives. The initiatives in ECEC were:

- *National Partnership Agreements on Early Childhood Education* for universal access to quality early childhood education for all children in the year before school entry by 2013
- *National Quality Agenda* for ECEC including improved standards and regulation, a new rating system and the *Early Years Learning Framework*
- National ECEC workforce initiative

¹² Australian Labor Party [The Australian Economy Needs an Education Revolution](#) ACT 2007 accessed 7.10.21

¹³ Australian Labor Party p 5

¹⁴ Council of Australian Governments [Investing in the Early Years – A National Early Childhood Development Strategy](#) 2009 accessed 7.10.21

¹⁵ Council of Australian Governments p4

- Closing the Gap initiatives for participation in early childhood education for First Nations children.

The *Early Years Learning Framework* was also published in 2009, the first early childhood curriculum document in Australia.¹⁶ It aimed to ensure that children in all ECEC services receive quality teaching and learning with an emphasis on play-based learning, communication, language including early literacy and numeracy and social and emotional development.

A *Framework for School Age Care in Australia* was developed to extend and enrich children's wellbeing and development in school age care settings by recognising the importance of play and leisure in children's learning and supporting the provision of quality experiences that provide opportunities for learning, personal development and citizenship.¹⁷

At the end of 2009 the Council of Australian Governments published the *National Quality Standard for Early Childhood Education and Care and School Age Care* (NQS) placing the Standards and rating system in the context of a new *National Quality Framework* (NQF).¹⁸ From 1 July 2010 the NQF applied to long day care, family day care and outside school hours care and from 1 January 2012 it also applied to preschools. Staffing arrangements were to be implemented progressively up until 2020.

Again this document stated the rationale as ensuring the wellbeing of children and lifting national productivity, supported by the evidence of the extent to which early life experiences shape future health, development and wellbeing. It also stated the clear intentions of:

- Joining up service delivery across sectors
- Streamlining regulations
- Implementing the NQS, the *Early Years Learning Framework* and a new quality rating system
- Establishing a new national body governed by the Commonwealth, state and territory governments.

This signalled a radically new level of cooperation and coordination across the nation to eliminate inconsistencies and ensure for the first time that all ECEC services were held accountable to strong quality standards.

The guiding principles were defined as follows:

- The rights of the child are paramount
- Children are successful, competent and capable learners.

¹⁶ Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [*Belonging, Being and Becoming: Early Years Learning Framework for Australia*](#) Commonwealth of Australia Canberra 2009 accessed 7.10.21

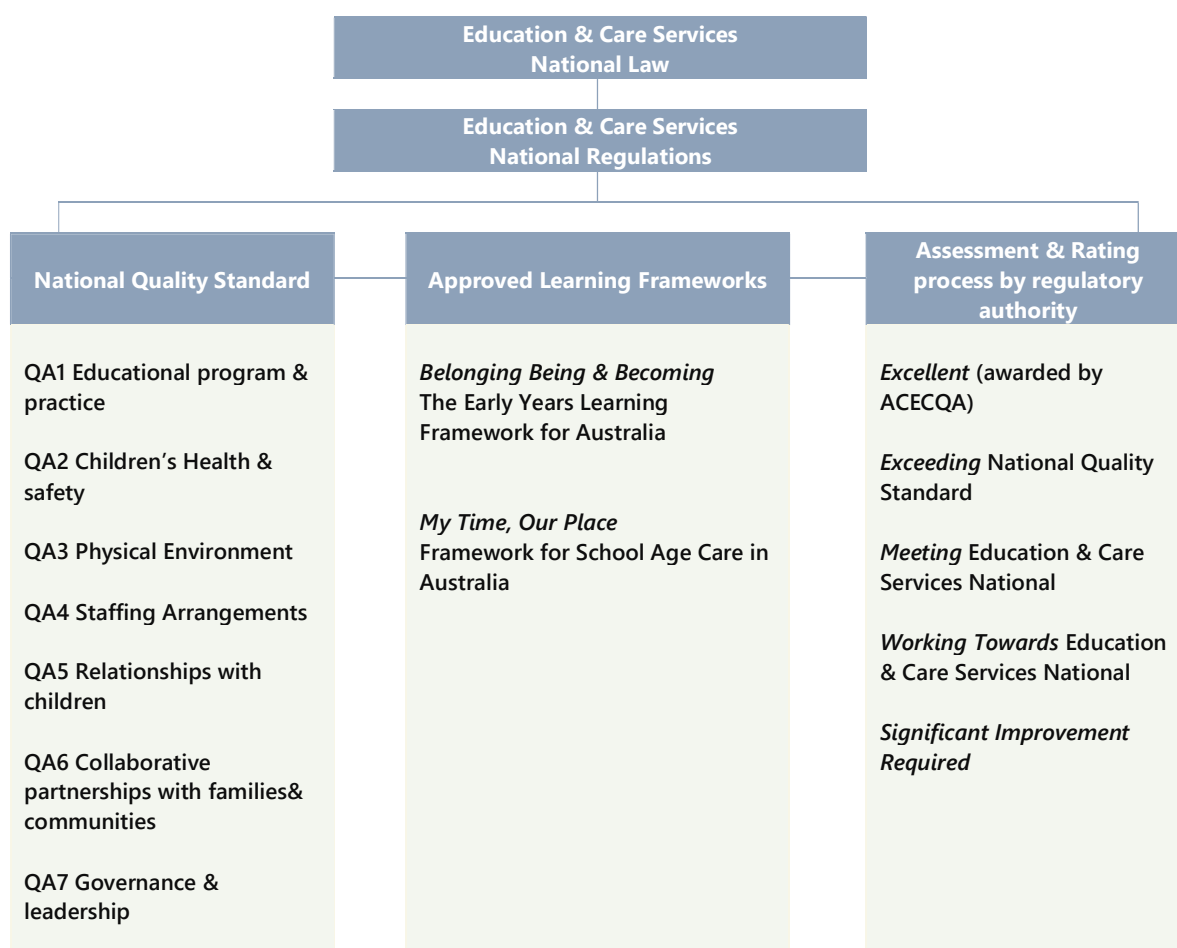
¹⁷ Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [*My Time Our Place Framework for School Age Care in Australia*](#) Commonwealth of Australia Canberra n.d. accessed 7.10.21

¹⁸ Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [*National Quality Standard for Early Childhood Education and Care and School Age Care*](#) Commonwealth of Australia Canberra 2009 accessed 7.10.21

- Equity, inclusion and diversity
- Valuing Australia's First Nations cultures
- The role of parents and families is respected and supported¹⁹.

The document set out several quality areas, each with defined standards and elements against which licensed services are assessed and rated.

Figure 1: The National Quality Framework



Source: National Quality Framework Review Issues Paper 2019

The *National Law* sets a national standard for children's education and care across Australia. The *National Regulations* support the *National Law* by providing detail on a range of operational requirements for an education and care service. The *National Quality Standard* (NQS) sets a high national benchmark for ECEC and outside school hours care services in Australia.

¹⁹ Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [National Quality Standard for Early Childhood Education and Care and School Age Care](#) Commonwealth of Australia Canberra 2009 p.10 accessed 7.10.21

For the first time, Australia would have an ECEC service system based on both children's developmental needs and supporting parental participation in the workforce, with a nationally consistent regulatory framework and qualification requirements across preschools, long day care and family day care settings.²⁰

The ECEC sector welcomed the NQF and urged the new minority Australian Labor Party Government elected in 2010 to proceed with implementation.²¹

The NQS were mandated incrementally over 8 years from 2012 to 2020. These years were very eventful with two national reviews of the NQF eliciting varying feedback from ECEC advocacy organisations and some adjustments made. As the peak body for community owned children's services ACCS conducted six surveys of the sector it represents which demonstrated significant success in the implementation of the Standards as well as some challenges.

²⁰ Department of Education *2013 Early Childhood Education and Care Workforce Review* Price Waterhouse Coopers Feb 2014 accessed 7.10.21

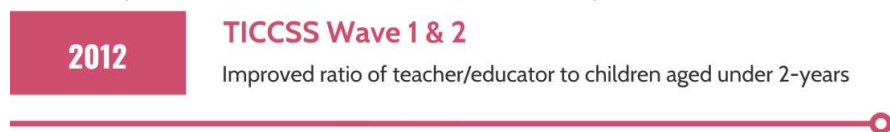
²¹ See for example the election policy demands of the Australian Community Children's Services Association calling in particular for the improved child:staff ratios, qualifications and numbers of qualified early childhood educators at http://ausccs.org.au/?page_id=2 accessed 23.8.21

TICCSS and the public debate – A review of the literature

The literature reviewed in this report is organised chronologically through the years of the staged rollout of the NQS and the year following completion. It includes key government documents, submissions to the various reviews conducted during this rollout and other relevant policy statements, research findings and academic analysis that was easily accessible to the general public during this period. Figure 2 lists the documents reviewed by year.

Implementation of National Quality Reform begins

Figure 2: Key literature in the rollout of National Quality Standards 2012



2012: Commencement of the National Quality Standards with improvement in the ratio of educators to children aged under two-years

The first step in the NQS was mandated from the start of 2012 when the minimum ratio of educators to children up to the age of two years was set at 1:4. While this was a challenge to many services, particularly for-profit services which were operating at previous minimums of 1:5, the community NfP services adapted easily as most were already operating at the newly mandated level of staffing or higher.

The new national quality agency ACECQA was formed to govern the implementation of the NQS itself, governed by a Board made up of Education Ministers from every state and territory. Each state and territory government established a regulatory authority to conduct assessment and rating of ECEC services under the guidance of ACECQA.

TICCSS Commences

From the start of the NQS ACCS was keen to gather evidence of how the community sector was adapting to the new minimum standards to inform its advice to government and to counter lobbying by the private sector resisting the improved standards. And so the TICCSS research was established to survey the sector periodically during the eight-year phased implementation of the NQS. A number of other surveys were conducted in the ECEC sector during this period but none focussed on the NQF quality reform.²²

²² See for example Australian Bureau of Statistics [Childhood Education and Care Survey 2008 – 2017](#); Australian Childcare Alliance [member surveys](#) 2014, 2015 and 2018 accessed 7.10.21

Figure 3: Key literature in each stage of rollout of National Quality Standards

TICCSS Wave 1 & 2		TICCSS Wave 3		TICCSS Wave 4		TICCSS Wave 5		TICCSS Wave 6	
2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Improved Ratio of Teacher/Educator to Children Aged Under 2 years	Universal access to preschool Workforce studies ACECQA quarterly snapshot Academic research ACECQA Review of regulatory burden	Improved qualification requirements for ECEC staff ACECQA quarterly snapshot Review of National Partnership Agreement for NQF Productivity Commission inquiry into child care & early childhood learning Cost: Benefit Analysis of ECEC Academic research	ACECQA Report on NQF and the Regulatory Burden – Wave 3 ACECQA quarterly snapshot	Improved Ratio of Teacher/Educator to Children Aged 2 to 5 years	Improved Ratio of Educators to Children in School Age Care and in Family Day Care Early Childhood Workforce Census Academic research	National Partnership Agreement Review Implementation - Adjustments to NQF Streamlined Government Fee Subsidy ACECQA quarterly snapshot Senate Select Committee on Red Tape Casting quality & affordability in opposition Academic research	Second NQF Review Commences Further workforce research Proposed government investment in professional wages Academic research	Finalisation of NQS with Additional Early Childhood Teacher in larger services A proposal for an early childhood workforce strategy	Second NQF review – the next steps Further research on children experiencing vulnerability Ten Year National Children's Education & Care Workforce Strategy 2021-30 ACECQA quarterly snapshot Further Research on Quality in For-Profit Services FairWork Commission decision on equal remuneration & work value case for early childhood teachers

This was not the first time that the community early childhood sector drew on survey data to support its call for quality improvement. In 2007 the precursor to ACCS, the National Association of Community Based Children's Services cited survey evidence to oppose a proposed watering down of the Child Care Quality Assurance system, showing the vast majority of practitioners valued continuous improvement, parents and practitioners opposed the proposed deletion of the word "quality" from the child care accreditation system and parents preferred a graded assessment – such as unsatisfactory, satisfactory, good or high-quality – rather than a bald classification of accredited or non-accredited.²³

In the first year of implementation of the NQS ACCS surveyed the sector twice, first in mid-2012 to test claims that fees would increase and services would close infant places due to inability to staff the 1:4 ratio resulting in families losing access to services.²⁴

A second survey was conducted later in 2012 to document the experience of the community sector after nearly a full year of this increase in standards.²⁵

The findings showed fee increases were modest and did not cause families to withdraw children. Utilisation rates remained high and many services were already operating at higher than the new minimum standards with infant rooms operating at 1:3 staff to child ratios and some long day care centres already employing qualified early childhood teachers. Workforce supply challenges were addressed by upskilling the existing workforce.

The vast majority of staff in the respondent community owned services held an early childhood qualification, two-thirds of long day care centres employed at least one university qualified early childhood teacher and one-quarter of respondent services employed at least one educator working towards an early childhood teaching degree.

TICCSS Wave 2 reported difficulties in recruitment due to low wages especially for teachers in long day care compared with those in primary schools. It also showed the community owned sector offering more support for professional development than the sector as a whole, with two-thirds providing time off for short courses and an even higher percentage paying course fees.

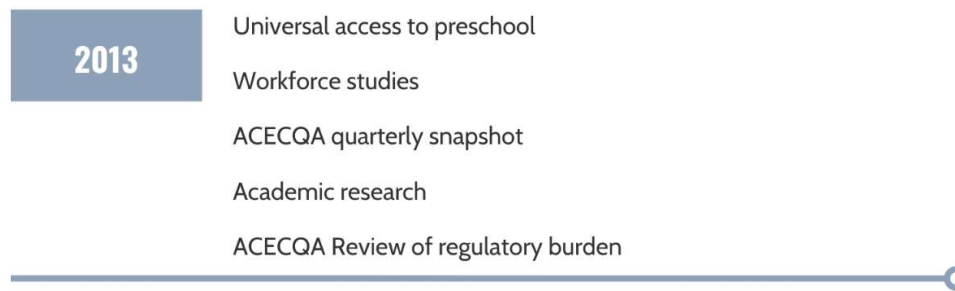
Most services reported an increased number of children experiencing vulnerability attending, many due to family financial stress.

²³ NACBCS *A National Policy for Australia 2007 and Beyond*

²⁴ Australian Community Children's Services [*ACCS Trends in Community Children's Services Survey 2012 1st Wave National Report*](#) accessed 7.10.21

²⁵ Australian Community Children's Services [*ACCS Trends in Community Children's Services Survey Second Wave National Report 2013*](#) accessed 7.10.21

Figure 4: Key literature in the rollout of National Quality Standards 2013



2013: Universal access to preschool

The second step in the NQS was universal access for all children to 15 hours per week of early childhood education delivered by tertiary qualified Early Childhood Teachers in the year before school entry, jointly funded by federal and state/territory governments.

Workforce studies

At this time the Federal Government conducted a national census of the early childhood workforce, the first for three years. It found that the vast majority of contact staff held ECEC-related qualifications, a significant improvement on the proportion three years earlier.²⁶ There was a significant increase in degree qualified staff working in long day care services and Certificate qualified staff working in preschools.

The Census showed stability in staffing with over a quarter of people working in ECEC having ten years or more experience in the sector and one in ten having been with their current service for over ten years.

The vast majority were satisfied with their current job but less than half were satisfied with their pay and conditions. This was a key reason cited by people who indicated they did not anticipate being in their current job in a year's time while one in five cited the stress of the job as a reason to move on.

The sector was actively working towards the new minimum qualification requirements to be mandated in 2014. Almost one third were studying in an ECEC-related field with a significant increase in the proportion of staff studying for a 4-year bachelor degree or equivalent. Those who were not studying cited the barriers to study as the time involved, the limited financial reward of gaining higher qualifications and the cost of study. These findings are consistent with the findings of TICCSS.

The government *Census* showed strong uptake of the *Early Years Learning Framework*, up from about two-thirds previously to over 90% in 2013.

²⁶ Australian Bureau of Statistics [National Early Childhood Workforce Census 2013](#) accessed 7.10.21

The government workforce study was conducted in part to inform the *Early Childhood Workforce Review* conducted by Price Waterhouse Coopers for the Department of Education.²⁷ The Workforce Review was a requirement of the *National Partnership Agreement on the National Quality Agenda* for ECEC. Its purpose was to review the progress of the sector in moving towards meeting the qualification requirements mandated from 2014.

A strong finding of the *Review* was the high level of support within the ECEC sector for qualification requirements to not be watered down in light of insufficient supply of Early Childhood Teachers for long day care and qualified staff in rural and remote areas. The sector had long advocated for these reforms and expressed a determination to find ways to achieve them.

The Review found that the sector was well advanced towards meeting the new minimum qualification requirements, with a significant decrease in the number of unqualified educators.

Key challenges identified by the *Workforce Review* included pay and conditions as a barrier to recruitment and retention of educators, supply in rural and remote areas, barriers to training for First Nations educators and limited availability of paid leave for study and professional development.

ACECQA quarterly snapshot of progress in implementation of National Quality Framework

In 2013 ACECQA commenced publication of a snapshot every quarter reporting on the progress of the sector in implementing the NQF. The first snapshot showed that only 13% of the services in the sector had been assessed and rated under the new NQS and just over half of these services were rated as *Meeting or Exceeding* the Standards.

Academic research

An academic article published midway through 2013 criticising the quality of ECEC services.²⁸ The analysis drew on data from the longitudinal E4Kids study collected in 2010 before the NQF began implementation. It found that kindergartens displayed significantly higher quality than long day care centres. This was unsurprising given that at that time most states required kindergartens and preschools to employ degree qualified early childhood teachers and long day care was not required to do so. The study also found that while ECEC services showed stronger classroom organisation and instructional support than early childhood services in the USA they were slightly weaker regarding the developmental appropriateness of the classroom practices.

²⁷ Department of Education [2013 Early Childhood Education and Care Workforce Review](#) Price Waterhouse Coopers Feb 2014 accessed 7.10.21

²⁸ C Tayler, K Ishimine, D Cooney, G Cleveland, K Thorpe [‘The Quality of Early Childhood Education and Care Services in Australia’](#) *Australian Journal of Early Childhood* June 1, 2013

ACECQA Review of the Regulatory Burden of National Quality Framework

ACECQA surveyed the ECEC sector throughout 2012 and 2013 to gather evidence for a review of the regulatory burden of the new NQF. It reported that despite the perception of a high burden of administration of the new assessment and rating system the sector was supportive of the reforms.²⁹ Support was strongest among services that had completed the assessment and rating process, suggesting that the perception of a heightened burden was likely to reduce as all services went through the process.

ACECQA concluded that any attempt to streamline the administration must not diminish the focus on improving the quality of the services. It made several recommendations and ultimately simplified the assessment process by reducing the number of quality standards.

Again the community children's services sector called out for the next Australian Government in 2013 to continue to full implementation of the NQF.³⁰

Late in 2013, a Conservative government was elected. One of its earliest initiatives was to announce its Regulatory Reform Agenda (later known perhaps more transparently as the Deregulation Agenda) with the aim of reducing the burden of regulation and improving the practice of government regulation.³¹

A key goal was to 'reduce the cost to businesses, community organisations and individuals of complying with Australian Government regulation'.³² It eventually turned its attention to ECEC in late 2017 characterising the NQF as a regulatory burden.

²⁹ Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority [*Report on the National Quality Framework & Regulatory Burden 2013*](#) accessed 7.10.21

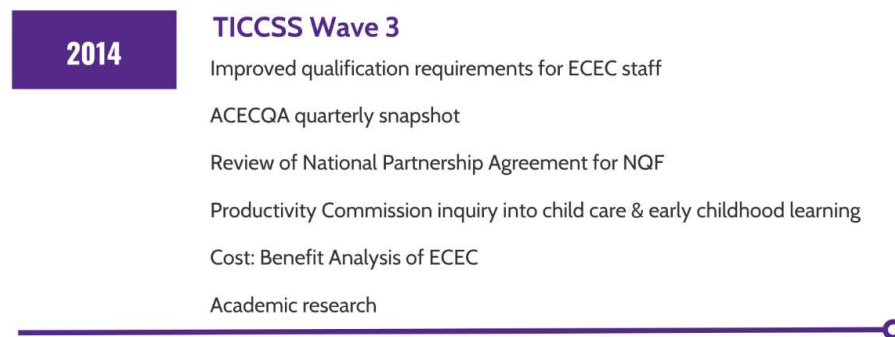
³⁰ ACCS [*Election Demands 2013*](#) accessed 23.8.21

³¹ See <https://deregulation.pmc.gov.au/> accessed 27.9.21

³² Senate Select Committee on Red Tape [*Effect of red tape on child care Interim report*](#) August 2018 p. 6 accessed 7.10.21

The middle years of the reform period

Figure 5: Key literature in the rollout of National Quality Standards 2014



2014: Increased qualification requirements for early childhood education and care staff

The third step in the NQS was the requirement for every long day care centre and preschool to employ or have access to at least one tertiary qualified Early Childhood Teacher. This had been a requirement for some time in ECEC services delivering state-funded kindergarten programs in Victoria and centre-based services in New South Wales but it was a new challenge for many other ECEC services. However, the sector had been given several years' notice of this requirement and the other increased minimum staff qualification requirements for at least 50% of educators to have completed or be actively pursuing a Diploma in Early Childhood and all other educators to have completed or be actively pursuing a Certificate III in Early Childhood.

ACECQA quarterly snapshot

ACECQA quarterly snapshots showed steady growth in the percentage of ECEC services assessed and rated under the new NQF. By the final quarter of 2014 just over half of all services had been assessed and of these 65% were found to be *Meeting or Exceeding the NQS*.³³

TICCSS Wave 3

ACCS conducted the third TICCSS in mid-2014 which found that community ECEC services were meeting the new ratio for children under two years of age and many continuing to exceed it.³⁴

The workforce was stable and fewer vacancies were reported. Services were finding it easier to recruit at all qualification levels and there was no increase in reports of waivers from this requirement. However, services reported that inadequate wages were a problem and many

³³ ACECQA [NQF Snapshot Q4 2014](#) accessed on 27.9.21

³⁴ ACCS [ACCS Trends in Community Children's Services Survey 2014 Third Wave National Report](#) 2015 accessed 7.10.21

opted to pay above the relevant Awards. Another common problem reported was poor quality training in private registered training organisations.

Again community services reported no decrease in utilisation or increase in waiting times for a place. Fee increases stayed within normal parameters and very few services reported that compliance with NQS requirements contributed to the increases. However, there were some reports of negative responses from families to these fee increases, suggesting that financial stress was a growing problem in the community.

Most community services that had been rated for quality were assessed as *Meeting* or *Exceeding* NQS. Quality improvement plans were supporting improvements in educational programming, the physical environment and relations with families. Services again reported that the assessment and rating process was clear and accurate. There was a high level of satisfaction with the NQF and the perception that the workload was decreasing. However, some services reported dissatisfaction with the process of providing feedback on the draft assessment and the review process.

Again services reported an increase in the number of children enrolled who were experiencing vulnerability and an increase in the range of vulnerabilities they faced.

Review of the National Partnership Agreement for the National Quality Framework

The first national review mandated in the National Partnership Agreement set out to determine if the goal of improving quality in education and care services was being met in the most efficient and effective way. It aimed to identify what was working well, areas for improvement and any unintended consequences from implementation of the NQF.³⁵

Strong support for the NQF continued to be shown in the submissions to the review. A key teachers' union characterised the quality reforms as an important first step in the professionalisation of the ECEC workforce and warned against a narrow focus on efficiency, suggesting that the cost: benefit assessment must take into account the long term productivity gain of ECEC.³⁶

A large NfP provider of a range of early and middle childhood education and care services reported overwhelming support for the quality reforms from its 58 services.³⁷ It made several recommendations for improvements to the processes, including making the rating system clearer for families, funding support for full-time early childhood teachers in smaller services and support for professional wages. It also called for increased collaboration between state and territory regulatory authorities to improve consistency in assessment and rating.

³⁵ Community Child Care website ["Review of the NPA on the NQA"](#) accessed 19.8.21

³⁶ Independent Education Union [Submission to the 2014 Review of the National Partnership Agreement for Early Childhood Education and Care](#) accessed 10.8.21

³⁷ UnitingCare Children's Services [Submission to the 2014 Review of the National Partnership Agreement for Early Childhood Education and Care](#) accessed 10.8.21

ACCS also expressed its strong support for full implementation of the NQF and cited its TICCSS research findings as evidence of the benefits of a nationally consistent regulatory framework providing certainty for families, clarity for educators and streamlined administrative processes.³⁸ It also cited evidence for the successful introduction of minimum qualifications, improved professional recognition of educators and improved ratios of educators to children. It recommended improvements to the processes of rating services that are not yet meeting the National Quality Standards and to those who are rated as *Excellent*. It called for ECEC that were not yet part of the NQS to be brought into scope.

ACCS articulated a vision for the future with a call for further improvement to the ratio of staff to children under 12 months of age, from 1:4 to 1:3.

The outcomes of the review of the NPA did not impact the sector for four more years, with changes to the NQS implemented in 2018.

Productivity Commission Inquiry into Child Care and Early Childhood Learning

The new Conservative Government charged the Productivity Commission to inquire into future options for ECEC with a focus on supporting parental workforce participation and children's learning and development needs.

An issues paper was released setting out the challenge of identifying more flexible models within current funding parameters to suit families with non-standard work hours, disadvantaged children and families in regional areas and funding arrangements to support such models.³⁹ The limited funding parameters effectively excluded most flexible models of ECEC as existing funding left services reliant on high utilisation which was best achieved by providing services to parents working in the mainstream workforce in weekday office hours.

Throughout 2014 the Productivity Commission published a draft report and final report which characterised as vital the role of children's services in children's development, preparation for school and the role of parents in the workforce. It acknowledged the benefits of early identification and intervention for children with developmental vulnerabilities and proposed that the NQF be retained, modified and extended to all government-funded services.

It also proposed focussing government assistance on a single subsidy (combining Child Care Benefit and Child Care Rebate) based on a means test and activity test, with top-up payments for children with additional needs. It proposed expansion of the NQF and federal child care subsidies to informal care (such as nannies). It also supported the continuation of the federal government funding for universal access to pre-school in the year before school entry.

³⁸ Australian Community Children's Services [Submission to the 2014 Review of the National Partnership Agreement for Early Childhood Education and Care](#) accessed 5.10.21

³⁹ Productivity Commission [Childcare and Early Learning Inquiry Issues Paper](#) Dec 2013 accessed 5.10.21

Diverse responses were given by the many submissions received in response to the initial issues paper and a draft final report including the following major national organisations whose submissions directly addressed the NQF.

The peak body for the commercial child care sector Australian Childcare Alliance (ACA) submitted to the Productivity Commission that while it fully supported the NQF reforms it had deep concerns about the ability of parents to afford the increased costs it imposed and called for increased government subsidies. It also asserted that the assessment and rating system was inefficient and did not give a true assessment of the quality provided. ACA proposed an alternative model.⁴⁰

It based these views on the findings of a member survey carried out to gather evidence for its submission to the Inquiry. The survey revealed the inevitable tension in the effort to focus on both the best interests of the users of a service and the profitability of the business. While most respondents believed that improved staff to child ratios under the NQS improved outcomes for children they were divided on whether increased qualification requirements and the focus on programming and documentation were also good for the children in their care.

Most reported underutilisation of places and ongoing concerns about viability. They reported that price competition from other providers acted as a barrier to investing in quality improvement initiatives. Most of the commercial services perceived inconsistencies and red tape burdens in all aspects of the NQF.

In contrast, another key national peak body for business, the Business Council of Australia expressed support for NQF without qualification. It also supported the extension of the federally funded program to support universal access to early education in the year before school and cited the NQF as a tool for supporting the urgently needed expansion of the available workforce by supporting unemployed and under-employed parents to take on paid work.

The community children's services sector through the peak body ACCS called for continued implementation of the NQF as planned through to 2020.⁴¹ ACCS echoed the ACA call for increased government subsidies to support affordability and added a call for additional financial support for families on low incomes, children known to child protection and other vulnerable groups. ACCS also recommended the reintroduction of planning controls to prevent over-supply and for direct investment in professional wages.

It also proposed that ACECQA report a breakdown of quality ratings according to ownership type – Not For Profit and 'private' commercial – an idea that was enacted in late 2015 and

⁴⁰ ACA [*Submission to the Productivity Commission Review into Childcare and Early Childhood Learning*](#) February 2014 accessed 5.10.21

⁴¹ ACCS [*Submission to Inquiry into Child Care and Early Childhood Learning*](#) January 2014 accessed 5.10.21

which confirmed the fears of ACA that commercial services represented the highest proportion of services rated as *Working Towards* minimum quality standards.⁴²

The national peak body for the broader social services sector Australian Council of Social Services supported the proposal to combine the multiple subsidies into one with more assistance to lower-income households and maintenance of federal support for universal access to preschool. However, it strongly opposed the application of activity testing as a barrier to ECEC for low-income families, citing the Price Waterhouse Coopers return on investment in disadvantaged children outlined below.⁴³

The Australian Human Rights Commission provided a submission addressing the interlinked issues of child care, women's rights and children's rights. It supported the call for a continued commitment to completing the implementation of the NQF as well as increased investment, the development of options for families requiring non-standard hours of care and ensuring access to quality services for vulnerable children. It also recommended simplification of the government fee subsidies and improvements in access to additional subsidised for families in need.⁴⁴

The final report of the Productivity Commission Inquiry was released in April 2015. It reiterated the findings of the draft report and added recommendations for government assistance to focus on inclusion of children with additional needs, access to services in highly disadvantaged communities and integration of ECEC with schools and other child and family services.⁴⁵

Cost: benefit analysis of early childhood education and care

In late 2014 Price Waterhouse Coopers published a cost-benefit analysis of ECEC in Australia to supplement the international evidence of the return of investment in early childhood.⁴⁶ The report analysed the value to the Australian economy of investment in early childhood, especially in quality, in order to inform government decision making on the ECEC system. It also aimed to contribute to a growing bank of evidence of the contribution of a range of social services that contribute to the productivity improvements required to combat issues to do with an ageing population.

The analysis quantifies the benefits of improving female workforce participation, helping to realise the full potential of Australian children through participation in quality ECEC and reducing the impacts of disadvantage. It focussed on savings to the taxpayer of reduced

⁴² ACECQA [NQF Snapshot Q4 2015](#) accessed 5.10.21

⁴³ ACOSS [Submission to the Productivity Commission Inquiry into Child Care and Early Childhood Learning](#) September 2014 accessed 7.10.21

⁴⁴ AHRC [Submission to the Productivity Commission Inquiry into Childcare and Early Childhood Learning](#) May 2014 accessed 7.10.21

⁴⁵ Productivity Commission [Childcare and Early Childhood Learning Inquiry Report](#) April 2015 accessed 7.10.21

⁴⁶ PwC [Putting a Value on Early Childhood Education and Care in Australia](#) September 2014 accessed 7.10.21

government expenditure on remedial education, criminal justice, youth offending and health services that result from improved education and life outcomes for vulnerable children.

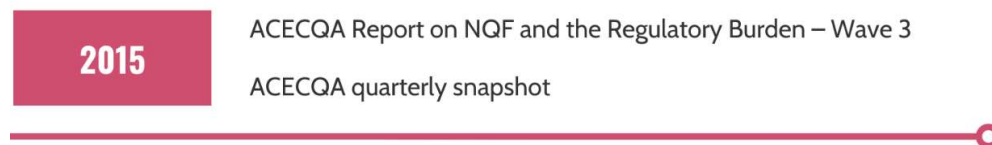
It concluded that expenditure on increased access to quality ECEC brings an increase in Gross Domestic Product of \$7 billion to \$9.3 billion.

Academic research

A study of how the early childhood leaders in the sector understood leadership was published in this second year of implementation of the NQS showed that opportunities for driving quality improvement through mentoring and modelling were being missed due to the focus by the leaders on the relational aspects of their role rather than critiquing quality praxis.⁴⁷ It recommended more effort to go into developing the early childhood profession's understanding of quality and of leadership itself to build excellence in quality improvement at the centre level.

Late in 2014 a case study was published examining the extent to which the professional development available to early childhood educators met their needs in relation to the NQS for program and practice.⁴⁸ It concluded that the professional learning needs were not met. The article did not recommend any dilution of the NQS but rather provision of more participative, evidence-based professional development.

Figure 6: Key literature in the rollout of National Quality Standards 2015



2015: ACECQA report on National Quality Framework and the regulatory burden

The 2013 survey of the sector's perception of regulatory burden from the NQF was repeated in 2014 and 2015.⁴⁹ ACECQA reported consistently high levels of support for the NQF and reduced perceptions of a high level of burden – 9% of respondents in the final wave, down from 15% in the first wave.

There was a significant improvement in the perception that the administrative requirements were simpler than the previous system of assessment and rating and that the administrative

⁴⁷ M Sims, R Forrest, A Semann, C Slattery [*Conceptions of early childhood leadership: driving new professionalism?*](#) International Journal of Leadership in Education Theory and Practice, vol. 18, 2015 – Issue 2 published online September 2014 accessed 7.10.21

⁴⁸ H Barber, C Cohrsen, A Church [*Meeting the Australian National Quality Standards: A case study of the professional learning needs of early childhood educators*](#) Australian Journal of Early Childhood vol. 39 No. 4 Dec 2014 accessed 7.10.21

⁴⁹ ACECQA [*Report on the National Quality Framework and Regulatory Burden – Wave III*](#) Nov 2015 accessed 7.10.21

burden was reducing. This perception of a reducing burden was strongest among NfP services and preschools/kindergartens that previously operated under state regulations.

However, there was a perception of increased burden from the quality and assessment visits especially in relation to the preparation of staff and paperwork. Documentation of quality improvement plans and children's learning attracted a persistently high perception of burden. ACECQA addressed this with initiatives to reinforce awareness that quality assessment focussed less on the quantity of documentation and more on how it informs planning to extend children's thinking and learning.

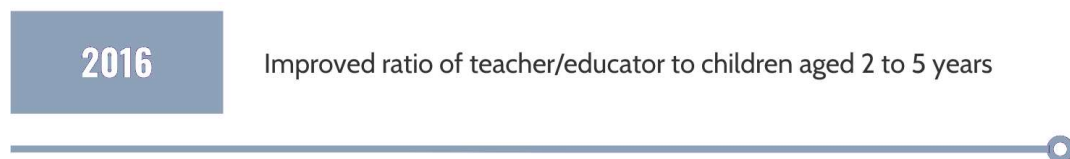
ACECQA quarterly snapshot

In the final quarter of 2015, ACECQA reported that over half of the services had been rated with two-thirds of these services *Meeting or Exceeding the NQS*.⁵⁰ At this stage ACECQA introduced the new measure recommended by ACCS comparing the ratings of for-profit services to those under various NfP management types. The proportion of private for-profit services rated as *Meeting or Exceeding NQS* was 60% compared with 74% of all NfP services; the highest rate of success was in the private NfP community managed services at 75%.⁵¹

Academic research

An academic article published in 2015 examined evidence of how early childhood educators were grappling with the new concept of 'intentional teaching' within the NQF. It asserted that this has resulted in services abandoning group time experiences. The authors argue that this is in tension with concepts in the *Early Years Learning Framework* which place young children as part of a community of learners. Group experiences, they assert, are vital to a child's developing sense of identity and active citizenry.⁵²

Figure 7: Key literature in the rollout of National Quality Standards 2016



2016: Improved ratio of educators to children aged two to five-years

The next stage in the rollout of the NQS was a mandatory minimum ratio of staff to two-year-old children of 1:6 and 1:11 for three to five-year-old children.

⁵⁰ ACECQA [NQF Snapshot Q4 2015 A Quarterly Report from the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority](#) accessed 7.10.21

⁵¹ ACECQA [NQF Snapshot Q4 2015](#) p. 13 accessed 7.10.21

⁵² N Legett, M Ford [Group Time Experiences: Belonging, Being and Becoming Through Active Participation Within Early Childhood Communities](#) Early Childhood Education Journal 44, 2016 pp191-200 accessed 7.10.21

Academic research

The longitudinal study *E4Kids* published key findings about quality in late 2016.⁵³ While data was collected in 2010-11, before the implementation of the NQF the research was informed by what was known about the NQF and the quality areas it would address.

The research identified which aspects of a program in everyday ECEC were linked to demonstrable improvements in child development outcomes. It concluded that not all children benefit from everyday ECEC but there are dimensions of teaching and learning that do make a significant difference to children's outcomes. Instructional support promotes understanding of everyday concepts by encouraging and affirming children's thinking through conversations and the use of language.

The study found however that ECEC services in Australia at that time showed only low levels of instructional support while showing high levels of emotional support and moderate levels of room organisation that facilitates children's learning. Instructional support was lowest in services in disadvantaged areas. Low levels on all quality measures were demonstrated in ECEC classrooms that include more children such as where more than one child was enrolled for each licenced place by charging for booked hours rather than whole sessions.

The paper recommends that significant growth in children's achievement can be achieved through professional training, mentoring and coaching on instructional support within play and play-based learning activities. It also asserts that governments can be more confident that services rated highly under the NQF are making a positive difference to children's outcomes by ensuring that rating of quality in the NQF adequately captures the quality of interactions between educators and children.

The lead researcher in the EPPE Study that informed the NQA in Australia Professor Iram Siraj published a paper with Australian colleagues in 2016 which reviewed the latest international evidence at this key half-way point in the implementation of the NQF.⁵⁴ The paper concluded that children who attend ECEC are more likely than those who do not to experience better outcomes in learning and behaviour. These benefits last into adolescence.

School performance was shown to be most enhanced by ECEC systems with longer duration of early childhood education, higher ratios of teachers to children and higher public expenditure. However the quality of the ECEC service was also crucial - attendance at higher quality early childhood programs predicted higher academic achievement into adolescence

⁵³ C Taylor *The E4Kids Study: Assessing the Effectiveness of Australian Early Childhood Education and Care – Overview of findings at 2016* accessed 7.10.21

⁵⁴ I Siraj et al *Fostering Effective Learning: A review of the current international evidence considering quality in ECEC programmes – in delivery, pedagogy and child outcomes* University of Wollongong 2016 accessed 7.10.21

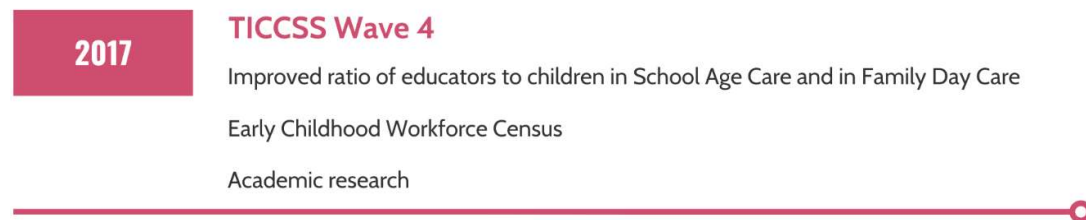
The quality of children's relations with educators⁵⁵ and teachers in the first three years of life predicts greater task attentiveness and emotional regulation in school. And these benefits are most marked in children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The study identified worrying evidence that attendance at low-quality ECEC may damage children's outcomes.

In considering the evidence for effective ways to improve ECEC to support children's outcomes the paper concludes that structural quality (such as ratios, qualification and resources) are important because they support process quality - staff/child interactions, which in turn support children's cognitive, social, emotional and physical development.

Studies of the impact of professional development on these interactions show that it is less than that of formal early childhood qualifications. The presence of a qualified early childhood teacher is the strongest predictor of behavioural outcomes, language development and academic progress.

Figure 8: Key literature in the rollout of National Quality Standards 2017



2017: Improved ratio of educators to children in school age care and in family day care

The second last mandatory quality improvement was a ratio of staff to children in outside school hours care of 1 to 15 and in family day care the ratio of Coordinators to children of 1:15 in the first year of operation and 1:24 in subsequent years.

TICCSS Wave 4

The fourth wave of survey research in the community ECEC sector found evidence that the sector continued to lead in the quality of its services, its commitment to continuous quality improvement and strong support for the NQF.⁵⁶

This was demonstrated by the majority of respondent community services which had been assessed under the system receiving the rating of *Exceeding NQS* with a further large minority assessed as *Meeting NQS*. This result was confirmed as typical of the broader community sector

⁵⁵ The report uses the term 'carers' in referring to research conducted in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. This term is now superseded by 'educator' as awareness has grown of this important component of the role.

⁵⁶ ACCS [Trends in Community Children's Services 2017 Fourth Wave National Report](#) 2018 accessed 7.10.21

in the ACECQA quarterly snapshot which showed that with 95% of the sector rated 83% of private NfP community managed services were *Meeting or Exceeding NQS*.⁵⁷

The sector was adapting to the new NQF and reported a further reduction in the perception that it presented a heavy load of paperwork or that there was insufficient time to complete the necessary tasks. The focus of service improvement in community services at this stage in the rollout of NQS had shifted to working with the wider community. Services also reported that educators had increased engagement with programming and planning, reflective practice and improving learning outcomes for children.

Community services continued to pay above Award wages to limit staff turnover.

Services also reported further increases in children experiencing vulnerability including financial hardship often related to family violence, mental health, substance abuse and family breakdown. There were strong calls for increased subsidies to support participation in ECEC by families experiencing these vulnerabilities.

The sector noted changes other than the NQF which were impacting families. The introduction of the National Disability Insurance Scheme as a means for families to access support for their children while in ECEC was initially confusing for families. Further, the activity test introduced for access to Child Care Subsidy for all families reduced access to subsidised ECEC for vulnerable families and community services were concerned about the resultant increase in their disadvantage and compromising of the child's learning and development.

Early Childhood Workforce Census

The next Early Childhood Workforce Census was taken in 2016 and the report was published late in 2017.⁵⁸ It was designed to fill gaps in available information on the workforce as well as provision of preschool programs and participation of children with additional needs. It informed understandings of the challenges in providing quality ECEC, assessment of the capacity to meet future demand and future policy strategies.

It found a significant increase in the size of the workforce in the three years since the previous census, with increases varying from nearly half in long day care to a 132% increase in family day care. The vast majority of staff had an early childhood qualification and over a quarter were working towards an early childhood qualification. Only 15% of contact staff did not have an early childhood qualification, down from 20% three years earlier. There was an increase in the proportion of contact staff with a Diploma or Advanced Diploma.

Average years of experience in the ECEC sector and the tenure at the current service was higher for early childhood qualified staff.

⁵⁷ ACECQA [Snapshot Q4 2017](#) accessed 7.10.21

⁵⁸ Social Research Centre [2016 Early Childhood Education and Care National Workforce Census](#) Sept 2017, Department of Education and Training, Canberra accessed 7.10.21

The number of children attending a service increased by 130,000. Nearly one-quarter had a family who spoke a language other than English at home, 3% had a disability or long term health condition and 1% were from refugee families.

The vast majority of preschool programs were based on the *Early Years Learning Framework* either solely or in combination with another early childhood curriculum framework.

Academic research

A 2017 report by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development identified that in ECEC services 'teachers and pedagogical staff are the most important factors that influence child well-being, development and learning'.⁵⁹ Similarly, a report from the Mitchell Institute noted that 'effective teachers and educators who can skilfully combine explicit teaching of skills and concepts with sensitive and warm interactions is at the core of quality early education'.⁶⁰

Another academic paper published that year revisited evidence of the return on investment in ECEC. It concluded the considerable body of international research on the economic benefits of ECEC shows benefit-cost ratios varying from 2.62 to 17.07 for every dollar spent, with some of these benefits still impacting 20 years after the ECEC participation.⁶¹

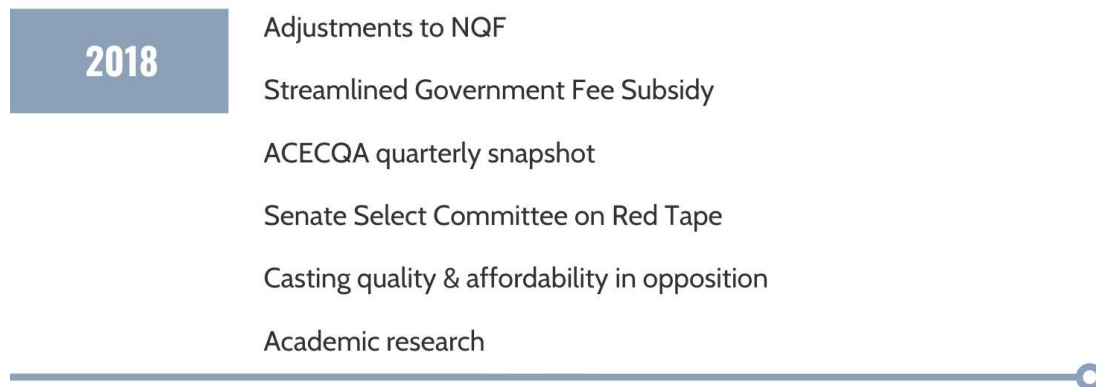
⁵⁹ Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [*Starting Strong 2017: Key Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development Indicators on Early Childhood Education and Care*](#) Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development Publishing, Paris 2017 p 101 accessed 7.10.21

⁶⁰ K Torii, S Fox & D Cloney [*Quality is key in Early Childhood Education in Australia*](#) Mitchell Institute Policy Paper No. 01/2017, Mitchell Institute, Melbourne p iii. accessed 7.10.21

⁶¹ S Pascoe, D Brennan [*Lifting Our Game: Report of the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools through Early Childhood Interventions*](#) Education NSW 2017 p 41 accessed 7.10.21

Final stages of the national quality reforms – for now

Figure 9: Key literature in the rollout of National Quality Standards 2018



2018: Adjustments to the National Quality Framework

ACECQA announced changes to the National Law and Regulation arising from the Review of the National Partnership Agreement for the NQF including a revised NQS commencing in early 2018.⁶² The main changes were:

- Streamlining the NQS by combining and reducing the standards from 18 to 15 and the elements from 58 to 40
- Changing the definition of the rating '*Significant Improvement Required*' from 'unacceptable risk' to 'significant risk'
- Requiring a rating of *Exceeding NQS* for all standards in a Quality Area as a prerequisite for rating as *Exceeding NQS* in that Quality Area.

Streamlined government fee subsidy

In mid-2018 the Australian Government acted on a recommendation of the Productivity Commission inquiry, supported by submissions from the sector and replaced the fragmented fee subsidy system with a single payment – Child Care Subsidy – with supplementary funding for high needs families through Additional Child Care Subsidy.

Access to subsidies was reduced for non-working families who did not meet the new activity test.

⁶² ACECQA Quality Assessment and Regulation Division [Changes to the National Quality Framework](#) 2017 accessed 7.10.21

ACECQA Quarterly Snapshot

By 2018, the quarterly snapshot of assessment and ratings showed that 93% of ECEC services had been rated under the NQS. This appears to be the saturation level, presumably due to services closing and new services opening up, and has since been maintained through to 2021. Of the services rated in the first quarter of 2018 the vast majority had achieved NQS or better and again private NfP community managed services led the way with 88% *Meeting or Exceeding NQS* compared with 69% of for-profit services.⁶³

Senate Select Committee on Red Tape

The Senate Select Committee on Red Tape turned its attention to the effect of red tape in child care in 2017 and in early 2018 called for submissions on the costs of compliance with the NQF.

ACCS responded with the assertion that the cost of compliance with regulation within the NQF must be balanced against the protection it provides against the use of government funds to subsidise poor quality and unsafe services with the potential to harm children.⁶⁴ It cited evidence that regulation for high-quality standards brings economic benefits over a life cycle and improves employment opportunities for a workforce with higher qualifications, improved wages and conditions and resultant longer tenure. It asserted that rather than creating a burden, the uniform regulations, ratings and assessment system streamlines administration and compliance.

However, ACCS expressed concern about the additional burden for families and services created by the new activity test for Child Care Subsidy.

The commercial sector peak body ACA took a different view.⁶⁵ While agreeing that the introduction of the activity test significantly complicated the process it also raised many other complaints about aspects of the new subsidy arrangements. Again ACA expressed support for the intentions of the NQF but complained about a heavy burden in particular in regard to documentation. It complained about a list of activities that require documentation, many of which appear to be usual practice in the community sector such as documentation of staff meetings, communications with parents, staff qualifications and professional development, child accidents and illness, risk assessments and many more. These were listed with documentation required specifically by the NQF such as children's progress, an issue which ACECQA addressed in its 2015 report on regulatory burden – but three years later the commercial sector was still struggling with the expectation that programming and children's outcomes should be transparent.

⁶³ ACECQA [NQF Snapshot Q1 2018](#) accessed 7.10.21

⁶⁴ ACCS [Submission to Red Tape Committee](#) March 2018 accessed 7.10.21

⁶⁵ ACA [Submission to Red Tape Committee 2018](#) accessed 7.10.21

Again it was no surprise that the *Interim Report on the Effect of Red Tape on Child Care* opened with quotes from ACA and the conservative think tank the Centre for Independent Studies.⁶⁶ It recommended that government compile evidence that staff ratios and qualifications contribute to quality, something published by Siraj and colleagues two years earlier.

It also recommended the regulatory burden of the activity test for Child Care Subsidy be monitored and steps taken to ensure that the Subsidy is targeted to maternal workforce participation and children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Casting quality and affordability in opposition

A conservative think tank published a paper in mid-2018 supporting the view of the private commercial early childhood sector that the national quality reforms were making ECEC unaffordable for families.⁶⁷

Right from the title *Why childcare is not affordable* the paper assumed a crisis in affordability. This is in stark contrast to the TICCSS findings that in the community children's services sector fees had not increased significantly nor had parents reduced hours or withdrawn their children in large numbers.

The key evidence on which the paper relied for its underlying conclusion appears to be misrepresented. It cited a government report of an average of 6.5% increase in long day care fees for the previous 10 years and ascribed this to the costs of implementing the NQS.⁶⁸ However it fails to report that this decade began well before the start of the NQS with a much higher annual increase close to 10%, well above the Consumer Price Index. It vacillated around this 10-year average for 4 years and then importantly it fell steadily from the start of the NQS to 4% – much closer to the Consumer Price Index.

This obfuscation casts a shadow over the credibility of the analysis that followed which attempts to identify the reasons for purported very high fee increases.

The paper declared an unresolvable tension between quality and affordability and dismissed out of hand the large body of research evidence for the positive impact on children's outcomes of formal qualifications and high staff to child ratios citing instead a paper from the same think tank.

ACCS published a rebuttal of the arguments in this paper citing evidence from its own TICCSS research of modest fee increases since the introduction of the NQF.⁶⁹ It argued that quality

⁶⁶ Senate Select Committee on Red Tape [Effect of red tape on child care Interim Report](#) August 2018 accessed 7.10.21 (Note: there is no record of a final report on the Senate inquiry web page)

⁶⁷ W Joseph [Why childcare is not affordable](#) Research Report no. 37 Aug 2018 Centre for Independent Studies Sydney accessed 7.10.21

⁶⁸ Department of Education and Training [Early Childhood and Child Care Summary, September Quarter 2017](#) Canberra accessed 7.10.21

⁶⁹ ACCS *Support for the National Quality Framework In response to the critique by the Centre for Independent Studies* March 2019

and affordability are complementary goals of government policy and reiterated the academic evidence for the benefits of quality for children.

Academic research

An article published in 2018 provides a critique of the discourse on quality as a means of delivering economic benefits.⁷⁰ It argued that this focus results in an NQF which intensifies performance-related standards and ignores the complex, contestable notion of quality in ECEC.

Another article published around this time reported on a study of a participatory approach to professional development for early childhood educators that demonstrates significant meaningful improvements in staff practice and child outcomes.⁷¹

Figure 10: Key literature in the rollout of National Quality Standards 2019



2019: Second National Quality Framework Review commences

The second review of the NQF built on the first review with the aim of ensuring that the NQF continued to meet its objectives under the National Law with respect to children (safety, health and wellbeing and educational outcomes), services (support continuous improvement and reducing regulatory burden), governments (integrated administration across jurisdictions) and the public (knowledge of quality in ECEC services).

An issues paper attracted substantial responses summarised in a report which highlighted feedback on key issues in approvals (expanding the NQF to out-of-scope services with support for viability), operations (potential impact on affordability for families and viability of services), public awareness of quality (public promotions) and compliance and enforcement (education before sanctions).⁷² Issues regarding workforce were raised in the consultations including staff shortages, difficulties in regional and remote areas, wages and conditions and quality of pre-service training.

⁷⁰ E Hunkin 'Whose Quality? The (mis)use of quality reform in early childhood and education policy' in Journal of Education Policy Vol. 33, 2018 – issue 4 pages 443-456 accessed 7.10.21

⁷¹ I Siraj, E Meluish, S Howard, CM Neilsen-Hewett, D Kingston, M de Rosnay, E Duursma, X Feng B & Luu *Fostering Effective Early Learning (FEEL) Study: Final Report* Sydney, Australia: NSW Department of Education 2018 accessed 7.10.21

⁷² Education Services Australia *National Quality Framework Review 2019 Consultation summary report* December 2019 accessed 7.10.21

Further workforce research

A skills forecast for the children's education and care industry was published in 2019.⁷³ It identified key challenges in the projected growth of the workforce including attraction and retention of staff and the need for ongoing professional development. It anticipated specific skill development that would be required included areas of high priority in broader Australian Government social policy:

- Prevention of institutional child sexual abuse
- Raised awareness and understanding of the complexity of family violence, including intersectional approaches
- Familiarity with matters of First Nations cultural significance
- Pedagogical leadership
- Reflective practice
- Communication with families, peers and allied health professionals.

Government investment in professional wages

In April 2019 the Australian Labor Party Federal Opposition published an election policy commitment to fund a 20% pay increase over 8 years for all early childhood educators.⁷⁴ It described the purpose of this investment as attracting and retaining qualified educators which is good for jobs and the economy. It assured parents that it would not lead to an increase in fees as it was to be fully government-funded.

Academic research

The discourse of quality in early childhood was examined in an article asserting a dilemma that 'not quality' is positioned as potentially harmful and yet the early childhood workforce can never be 'quality enough'.⁷⁵

⁷³ SkillsIQ [Children's Education and Care Industry Reference Committee Industry Skills Forecast 2019](#) accessed 7.10.21

⁷⁴ Australian Labor Party [Better Pay for Early Childhood Educators](#) Bill Shorten website accessed 13.9.21

⁷⁵ E Hunkin ['If not quality, then what? The discursive risks in early childhood quality reform'](#) in *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* Vol 40, 2019 – issue 6 pp 917-929 accessed 7.10.21

Figure 11: Key literature in the rollout of National Quality Standards 2020

2020

TICCSS Wave 5

Finalisation of NQS with Additional Early Childhood Teacher in larger services

A proposal for an early childhood workforce strategy

2020: Finalisation of National Quality Standards with additional Early Childhood Teacher in larger services

The final increase in mandatory standards required additional Early Childhood Teacher or equivalent qualification in long day care and preschools with more than 60 child places.

Shortly after this quality improvement was mandated the COVID-19 pandemic struck with its devastating impact on children, families and the ECEC services on which they rely.

TICCSS Wave 5

The next TICCSS was conducted in 2019 and published in 2020.⁷⁶ It presented evidence that many community children's services were continuing to operate at better ratios than the minimums mandated in the NQS.

Educational Leaders were well supported with paid time allocated to this role outside of the regular time allocated to education and care of children and only 3% of the workforce held no early childhood qualifications. Community services continued to pay above the Award and offer financial support and time-release for ongoing professional development.

The sector displayed an even higher profile of quality ratings than previous surveys with higher rates of *Exceeding NQS* and *Excellent* ratings than those reported elsewhere for the sector as a whole. Community services retained staff especially those with higher quality ratings.

Minimal fee increases were again reported and many services amended their fee structures to maximise family entitlements under the new Child Care Subsidy system.

Once again, utilisation remained high.

There was an increase in services reporting challenges created by a high burden of paperwork. However, this may have been due to the transition to the new Child Care Subsidy which had been introduced a year before TICCSS Wave 5.

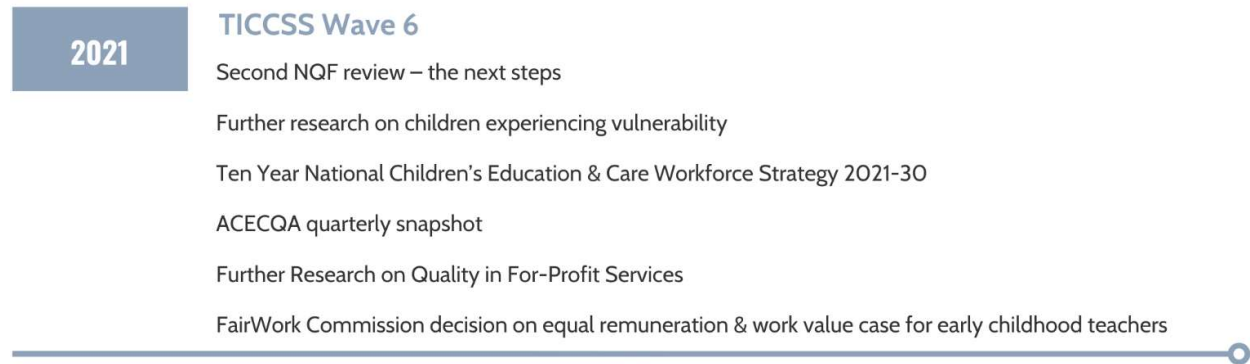
Concerns continued to be raised about the processes of giving feedback on draft assessment reports and of seeking a review of an assessment.

A Proposal for an Early Childhood Workforce strategy

⁷⁶ ACCS [Not-for-profit Education and Care: high quality, accessible and resilient Findings of the 2019 Trends In Community Children's Services Survey](#) Nov 2020 accessed 7.10.21

The Mitchell Institute published a detailed proposal developed in collaboration with practising educators in preparation for the upcoming ACECQA national workforce strategy for ECEC.⁷⁷ It included ambitious proposals to develop a sustainable model of collaborative investment in ECEC wages to establish a national approach to professional pay and conditions to address the difficulty in recruiting sufficient educators to meet demand.

Figure 12: Key literature in the rollout of National Quality Standards 2021



2021: What now after full implementation of National Quality Standards?

The year after completion of the final steps in the rollout of the NQS has seen another outpouring of documents relating to the NQF.

Second National Quality Framework Review – The next step

The 2019 Review of the NQF continued with the publication of a Consultation Regulatory Impact Statement early in 2021.⁷⁸ It included options for addressing issues in relation to children's safety, health and wellbeing especially in regard to sleep and transport, alignment with the recommendations of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, improving family day care and outside schools hours care, reducing staffing pressures while retaining the benefits of a highly qualified and professional workforce, improving families' understanding of the quality rating system, some changes to fees for regulatory authorities and adaptations of the NQF for emerging complex management structures in ECEC.

ACCS focussed its response on the second issue, asserting that the National Child Safe Principles recommended by the Royal Commission had the potential to amplify the role of ECEC in prevention, identification and response to abuse of children.⁷⁹ It supported the most

⁷⁷ J Jackson *Every educator matters: Evidence for a new early childhood workforce strategy for Australia* Mitchell Institute, Victoria University 2020 accessed 7.10.21

⁷⁸ Education Services Australia *National Quality Framework Review 2019 Consultation Regulatory Impact Statement* January 2021 accessed 7.10.21

⁷⁹ ACCS *Submission to NQF Review* 30.4.21

rigorous option which included proactive child protection training and an obligation to create a child-safe culture.

In contrast, the submission from ACA characterised this issue as only a moderate problem and the most rigorous option in response as creating unnecessary administration and compliance processes.⁸⁰ Its submission placed greater emphasis on emergency evacuation of multistorey buildings and workforce issues. It recommended weakening qualification requirements of staff providing short term relief and retaining weak requirements for educators who have not yet completed mandatory qualifications.

At the time of writing the final outcome of the 2019 Review of the NQF is not known.

TICCSS Wave 6

ACCS conducted its final TICCSS in 2020 and published the report the following year.⁸¹ It reported continued success for the community services in achieving ratings of *Exceeding NQS* and *Excellent*. Impressively, nearly half of the respondent services were exceeding the minimum staffing ratios for all age groups.

The survey showed continued high proportions of staff with diploma and four-year early childhood teaching qualifications as well as good support for Educational Leaders including time release.

The sector continued to pay above Award rates and to retain staff for more than three years. A range of options was offered to staff for professional development.

Most services did not increase fees in 2020, others increased fees by less than 5%. The lowest waiting lists were reported of any of the TICCSS but still over half of the services carried a waiting list.

Paperwork to meet legal and regulatory obligations continued to be reported as the greatest challenge of the NQF.

Specific questions were asked about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. In planning this inclusion ACCS was aware that its survey would compete with the added workload of the pandemic and a number of other surveys of the whole ECEC sector. ACCS decided to proceed with these additional questions confident that the community children's services sector was familiar with TICCSS as a vehicle to articulate their experiences in the knowledge that it would be communicated to the Australian Government and other policymakers.

The survey revealed a decline in enrolments contributing to the reduction in waiting lists as well as an increase in staff vacancies and in the use of casual staff. As a result of pandemic public health lockdowns nearly half of respondent services needed to reduce staff hours or ask staff to take leave. A very small proportion laid off staff.

⁸⁰ ACA [National Quality Framework \(NQF\) Review](#) 30 April 2021 p.9 accessed 7.10.21

⁸¹ ACCS [Not-for-profit Education and Care: high quality, accessible and resilient Findings of the 2020/2021 Trends in Community Children's Services Survey](#) May 2021 accessed 7.10.21

Utilisation fell but most services remained at viable enrolments; others relied on government support to remain open.

Again a growing majority of services reported supporting families and children experiencing vulnerability. There was an increase in families presenting with stress, mental health issues, domestic violence, child abuse and neglect and use of out-of-home care. Services made increased use of Additional Child Care Subsidy.

Children exhibited increased anxiety and services were concerned about the transition to school for the children who were in need of more time in ECEC.

A review of TICCSS over the eight years of the rollout of the NQF showed that the community children's services sector has been successful in increasing the qualifications profile of its workforce.⁸² The proportion of educators with no qualifications has declined over the life of the NQF from 12% to only 3%. The proportion of educators with a diploma has grown from 34% to 40% and the proportion of 4-year bachelor degrees in early childhood teaching has grown from 8% to 10%. Those with a post-graduate qualification have increased from 1.7% to 4%.

The surveys also show a significant increase in educators employed in community children's services who are enrolled in a 4-year degree program in early childhood teaching - up from 20% to 35%.

The TICCSS research shows that NfP community children's services are working closely with the wider community and are seeing an increase in the percentage of families who are experiencing vulnerability. Fees were reported to be the main barrier to participation by these families and community services called for free ECEC for children experiencing vulnerability without the onerous process of accessing Additional Child Care Subsidy so that the children can benefit from the stable and supportive environment in ECEC.

Further research on children experiencing vulnerability

A report examining trends in the early development of children from culturally and linguistically diverse families published in 2021 analysed preschool attendance and developmental vulnerability for children from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) families.⁸³ It showed that twice as many of these children do not attend preschool than children from non-CALD families and they are more likely to be developmentally delayed on school entry. Attendance at preschool by children from CALD families was reported to reduce the likelihood of developmental delay (from 33% to just 20%).

⁸² Reports available at [ACCS website](#)

⁸³ H Rajwani, I Culos & T McMahon *Stronger Starts, Brighter Futures: Exploring trends in the early development of children from cultural and linguistically diverse backgrounds in Australia* Settlement Services International Occasional Paper no. 3 March 2021 accessed 7.10.21

Ten Year National Children's Education and Care Workforce Strategy 2021-30

ACECQA was commissioned to develop a *Ten Year National Children's Education and Care Workforce Strategy (2021-30)*.⁸⁴ In 2021 ACECQA identified the following key issues facing the workforce:

- Attraction, supply and retention especially of early childhood teachers
- Quality of the workforce
- Declining enrolments in vocational education courses approved by the NQF
- Increasing waivers from operators in regard to minimum qualifications of staff
- Diversity of ownership and management models of providers.

ACECQA also recognised that pay and conditions in the ECEC sector are problematic, especially for educators and child care centre managers. While early childhood teachers generally earn salaries close to the average for all occupations, centre managers generally earn only 87% of the average of all occupations and vocationally qualified educators earn only 65% of the average for all occupations.

ACECQA cited the federal government's employment projections for the five years to 2024:

- An additional 30,000 educators (20% increase)
- An additional 7,000 early childhood teachers (16% increase).

ACECQA quarterly snapshot

The ACECQA quarterly snapshot for the first quarter of 2021 showed that the proportion of services with a waiver of minimum staffing requirements hit an all-time high after the final quality improvement in staffing was mandated in 2020 – the requirement for a second Early Childhood Teacher in larger services.⁸⁵

The proportion of services with staffing waivers bounced around between 3% and 5% for the first five years of the NQS when the first two improvements to staffing quality were introduced. Then it crept up from 2018 and peaked at 7% after the final improvement was mandated. In early 2021 it was still at 6%. The challenge of meeting the minimum staffing standards is felt most acutely in regional and remote Australia.

The snapshot showed 84% of services had achieved NQS or better. Again private for-profit services showed lower levels at 81% and private NfP services performed particularly well with 88% *Meeting or Exceeding NQS*.

⁸⁴ ACECQA [Consultation on a Ten Year National Children's Education and Care Workforce Strategy \(2021-30\)](#) 2021 accessed 7.10.21

⁸⁵ ACECQA [NQF Snapshot Q1 2021](#) accessed 7.10.21

Further research on quality in for-profit services

The union that represents educators in ECEC services published research into indicators of poor quality in for-profit services.⁸⁶ Drawing on the ACECQA quarterly snapshot data, as well as its own research using previously confidential data obtained through Freedom of Information (FOI) requests to regulatory authorities, the union asserted that the for-profit sector performed worse than the NfP sector on quality and compliance. FOI data showed that for-profit services were more frequently sanctioned for non-compliance with minimum standards, with 74% of enforcement actions in the six years to 2021 involving for-profit services.

The report raised particular concerns in regard to children's safety during the COVID-19 pandemic, with for-profit services falling behind the rest of the sector in regard to children's health and safety.

FairWork Commission decision on equal remuneration and work value case for early childhood teachers

In 2021 the FairWork Commission published its decision on the Independent Education Union's application for equal remuneration for Early Childhood Teachers working in ECEC with teachers in schools and for an increase to salaries in the Education Services (Teachers) Award on the grounds of increased work value.

The Commission dismissed the equal remuneration order but agreed to the work value application, acknowledging the impact of changes in entry-level qualification requirements, teacher registration requirements and increased scrutiny of teacher performance including in the delivery of the *Early Years Learning Framework*. It also acknowledged the increased requirements for best practice in intentional teaching focussed on the needs of the individual child. It granted a new classification and salary structure and an allowance for teachers appointed as Educational Leaders in ECEC services.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ United Workers Union [*Unsafe and Non-compliant: Profits above Safety in Australia's early learning sector*](#) accessed 20.10.21

⁸⁷ FairWork Commission [*Summary of Decision 19 April 2021 Equal Remuneration and Work Value Case \[2021\] FWCFB 2051*](#) accessed 7.10.21

Conclusion

The literature published before, during and immediately after the rollout of the NQF demonstrates a strong consensus on the value of investment in improving the quality of ECEC in Australia for children and for broader society.

It also shows lively debate testing various elements of the NQF to ensure the reform process did not founder on unproductive administrative burdens or inability to recruit skilled and qualified staff.

The contribution to this debate by the TICCSS research was influential in demonstrating that the new quality standards were achievable without causing services to become unaffordable for families. It also demonstrated that it was possible to build the workforce largely by starting with upskilling existing educators. Solutions have not yet emerged to the challenge of attracting and retaining sufficient early childhood teachers in the absence of pay equity for teachers with similar qualifications working in schools most often with better conditions.

TICCSS flagged the emerging challenges of growing vulnerabilities experienced by children and their families and when the COVID pandemic hit in the final year of the rollout of NQF TICCSS was an ideal vehicle to gather firsthand experiences of the impacts of public health lockdowns on children, their families and on the children's services themselves.

It is striking that the publicly available literature discovered for this report did not include a significant focus on the outcomes of the reforms for children. Perhaps with full implementation established for less than twelve months, it is too soon to see measurable change. Perhaps the three-yearly *Australian Early Development Census*⁸⁸ will document improvements in the percentage of children in the first year of school who are developmentally on track for each of the five AEDC domains. In the meantime the best indicator of positive impact for children is provided in the ACECQA Quarterly Snapshot trends in the percentage of ECEC services that meet or exceed the national standards for the three quality areas which speak most directly to this question – children's health and safety while attending ECEC, relations between teachers, educators and the children and the educational program and practice in the service. On all of these quality areas, ACECQA reports increasing compliance, from a low of two-thirds of services compliant with minimum standards in educational programming and practice in 2013 up to over 90% for all three areas in 2021.

As the NQF is bedded down the TICCSS research is now completed.

The reports on the six waves of the survey research and this contextual report will stand as a testament to the resilience of the community ECEC sector, showing leadership in times of

⁸⁸ [Australian Early Development Census](#) accessed 26.10.21

positive change and speaking out about the impacts of calamitous changes like fires and pandemics as well as the everyday vulnerabilities experienced by children and families.

Appendix 1: Acronyms

ACA	Australian Childcare Alliance
ACECQA	Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority
ACCS	Australian Community Children's Services
CPI	Consumer Price Index
COVID	Coronavirus Disease
ECEC	Early Childhood Education and Care
NACBCS	National Association of Community Based Children's Services
NfP	Not for Profit
NQA	National Quality Agenda – commitment in a National Partnership Agreement to create a national quality framework for the early years including an integrated and unified national system for ECEC
NQF	National Quality Framework – guides regulation and quality assessment for ECEC services
NQS	National Quality Standards – set high national benchmarks for ECEC and outside school hours care in Australia
TICCSS	Trends In Community Children's Services Survey