



**Early Childhood Australia**  
A voice for young children

**OUR  
VISION:  
EVERY  
YOUNG  
CHILD IS  
THRIVING  
AND  
LEARNING**

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# Senate Education and Employment References Committee Inquiry into the operation, regulation and funding of private vocational education and training (VET) providers in Australia

Submission from Early Childhood Australia

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### *About us*

Early Childhood Australia (ECA) is the national peak early childhood advocacy organisation, acting in the interests of young children, their families and those in the early childhood sector. ECA advocates for quality in education and care as well as social justice and equity for children from birth to eight years. We have a federated structure with branches in each state and territory. In 2013, ECA celebrated 75 years of continuous service to the Australian community.

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## Introduction

Early Childhood Australia (ECA) welcomes the opportunity to provide this submission on the operation, regulation and funding of private vocational education and training (VET) providers in Australia.

ECA's membership is diverse, encompassing providers of children's services across the spectrum of long day care, family day care, out-of-school hours care, rural/remote and mobile services and specialist service types; as well as Registered Training Organisations (RTOs), universities and individual professionals working across many of these settings.

An appropriately regulated training sector is important in guiding training organisations to deliver outcomes against the *National Quality Framework* through the provision of quality training for educators, and improving the quality of education and care provided to children.

ECA recently contributed to the review of the training package for Children's Services qualifications including Certificate III in Early Childhood Education and Care and Diploma of Early Childhood Education and Care on behalf of the members of ECA. The new training package has been delivered from July 2014.

The Australian Skills Quality Authority (ASQA) is also undertaking, and consulting on, the strategic review into early childhood development workforce training following the Productivity Commission's Inquiry into the Early Childhood Development Workforce.

ECA recognises that there have been significant steps towards improvements in the quality of training in early childhood over recent years. Many individual RTOs have significant strengths and are committed to continuous improvement in the quality of training being delivered. Nonetheless, significant concerns remain in the sector about the quality of training being delivered by some RTOs, particularly private RTOs, and the effect on the quality of graduates and their employment outcomes in early childhood services.

There are a range of views amongst ECA's membership about how to ensure that quality training is being provided through RTOs. To help inform this submission, and the Committee, ECA conducted a brief online survey of our members with 200 respondents from all states and territories. Respondents to the survey include educators, teachers and directors in early childhood services as well as students, administrative, teaching staff and management in universities and registered training organisations. Of the survey respondents, 12.5 per cent were from private RTOs.

ECA has also consulted with the Australian Council for Private Education and Training (ACPET) and some RTOs directly to help inform our survey and submission.

## The new training package

The response to the new training package has been positive. A large number of ECA members responding to the survey thought that the new training package has seen improvements in the quality of training, than those that didn't think there was improvement.

The changes to ensure units cover the *National Quality Framework* for Early Childhood Education Care (NQF) were seen as the most positive outcome of the training package.

*There seems to be quite a focus on NQF and EYLF with students being asked to become familiar with these documents prior to work placement. The structure of the new Diploma and Cert 3 courses is providing the students with experiences across all age groups much earlier in the course.*

—Early Childhood Teacher, NSW

Better content and the inclusion of a practical component were also highly regarded elements of the new package.

Despite the positivity towards the new training package, more survey respondents thought the transition had been difficult for students or training providers.

*The new training package tried to incorporate contemporary thinking about children's learning as well as the National Quality Agenda for ECEC. How well this has been taken on by RTOs remains to be seen.*

—ECEC Service Director, Vic.

## Training delivery issues

While the quality of training has improved, we recognise that there are still concerns about aspects of training delivery which can help to inform future practice and regulation of the sector.

Broadly, the sector is concerned about the quality of graduates. Early Childhood Australia's members were most concerned about the relationship between the quality of graduates, and courses being conducted over a short timeframe.

*The greatest concern in particular when dealing with private RTO's is the time factor. Time of delivery is too short, not enough time for appropriate learning within a holistic approach.*

—Teacher at an RTO, NSW

*We have no confidence in the competency of graduates of a number of RTOs, especially fast tracked courses with poor quality, 'tick & flick' content. Students with literacy issues routinely pass competencies without a clear understanding of content.*

—Early Childhood Teacher/Director, VIC

The quality of assessments or the capability of assessors is another issue, with a significant part of the sector also concerned that assessments are not rigorous enough.

*Trainers do not understand and therefore do not engage with the complex underpinning knowledge that is inherent in the training package but focus on demonstration of skills. The underpinning knowledge and theoretical understanding of the trainers is insufficient in many aspects to adequately build this in the students they are working with.*

—Member of teaching staff at a university, Vic.

Other respondents thought that some of the concerns about the quality of graduates stemmed from the role of early childhood services employing graduates, or placing students, while they were undergoing training.

*Employers are not always supportive of the needs of students and the tasks they may need to complete (i.e. not allowing students to change nappies or talk to parents).*

—Member of teaching staff at a private RTO, Tas.

*It's a challenge to gain quality feedback from busy centres who are at times reluctant to have students in their centres. Centres are not all equal in their practice and this presents its own challenges for the*

*RTO. Feedback is essential if RTOs are to meet/ teacher in line with industry, staff in RTOs need to be able to do PD easily to keep up professional industry competency.*

—Member of teaching staff at a private RTO, NSW

## Employment outcomes

Early Childhood Australia's members saw a strong link between the quality of training provided and employment outcomes.

*People are coming out of some qualifications unable to do the work they need to do. They haven't put theory into practice in a variety of situations, some are unfamiliar with the NQF. As a long time and reputable RTO we have been asked by organisations to come in and upskill graduates who are unable to get employment or do the work required of them because the qualification they did didn't prepare them for work in the sector.*

—Managerial staff at a Registered Training Organisation (RTO), Vic.

*We see this [poor quality training] in recruiting new staff, when applicants are unable to complete a job application and are unable to answer even simple questions about children's learning.*

—ECEC service Director, Vic.

*Not all graduates are able to obtain employment due to a number of reasons including inadequate or limited training (i.e. inconsistency knowledge and skills), inadequate English language skills (i.e. have graduated with Cert 3 or Diploma and are unable to write a application letter or converse well enough for an interview), limited experience with children (i.e. limited work experience placement opportunities during training) or lack of or no experience as Room Leaders (i.e. not part of work placement experience). Due to inexperience and needing to obtain employment many graduates take positions as Casuals or at a lower grade (i.e. paid less than they should be) particularly within private sector.*

—Early Childhood Teacher, NSW

Where graduates of RTOs have used recognition of prior learning to transition to studying a Bachelor's degree at a university, similar issues have arisen.

*Diploma graduates are applying for RPL into Bachelor courses, believing that they have received adequate preparation for this transition, when it is clear that the quality of their work (including familiarity with theory) is really poor. They carry the attitudes to learning that they have picked up in the RTO to their work and their expectations for further study - ie they've got the 'piece of paper', so that's enough.*

—Member of teaching staff at a TAFE, Vic.

## Regulation and monitoring

The monitoring and regulation of training providers was an issue of significant concern from the early childhood sector.

A significant number of survey respondents suggested that ASQA required better tools and powers to monitor RTOs, and that assessments of RTOs should be regular and rigorous.

*Assessments are set by RTO's and monitored by ASQA through audits of RTO's. There can be a few years between audits, so ASQA needs better mechanisms to monitor the quality of assessments being set by ECEC providers.*

—Member of managerial staff at an RTO, Qld

*A more rigorous assessment of the training offered by private training providers to ensure that training provided is of an appropriate quality and graduates are well skilled and knowledgeable and have completed placements in quality early childhood services.*

—Member of teaching staff at a TAFE, Qld

Some respondents also suggested other solutions to improve the quality of training and graduates, including:

- a standardisation or consistency provided in delivery times for courses delivered by RTOs/TAFEs
- more rigorous screening student capabilities before they enter courses
- requirements for staff of training providers to return to industry regularly to keep their skills up-to-date.
- increasing the length of placements

- ensuring family day care educators participate in placements in other educator services under supervision.

## Remuneration issues

Other extraneous factors to the delivery of training in the early childhood sector were recognised by survey respondents. The low wages of early childhood educators and professional status of the sector was often seen as a factor in the limited capability of students enrolled to study early childhood qualifications. Remuneration was also seen as a factor in poor employment outcomes, even once students had graduated, mainly because graduates sought employment in other sectors for greater remuneration.

## Conclusion

The quality of training providers is of high importance to ECA and our members because of the effect on graduates, services, other staff—and ultimately children. ECA strongly believes that the benefits of the NQF's qualification standards hinge on the quality of training delivered. It is important that these outcomes are also reflected in the regulation of training providers.

We hope that this submission has been useful in informing the Committee's Inquiry. Early Childhood Australia would be happy to provide any further information that the Committee requires, or attend a public hearing of the Inquiry to answer questions.