

STATE OF EARLY LEARNING IN AUSTRALIA

2019

SUMMARY

Early Learning

**EVERYONE
BENEFITS**





Early learning in Australia can only be improved when we understand its strengths and limitations. The *State of early learning in Australia 2019* provides the most comprehensive summary of the early learning sector to date. The report nominates clear national goals and performance indicators to help track progress in the future.

The picture presented here is largely positive, but focusing on the detail reveals challenges. While the headline figures indicate strong national progress in early learning provision and quality, there are significant pockets of unmet need and problems associated with affordability and workforce planning. The picture also changes between states and territories, where differences in the early learning landscape combine with varying policy settings to produce inconsistent results for children and families.

The goal of fully realising the benefits of early learning for all children in Australia has not yet been reached. To make better progress, we need to:

- grasp the **benefits** of early learning for children, families and the wider community
- address unequal **access** to early learning by targeting the barriers to participation
- stabilise government **funding** for early learning and ensure that cost is not a barrier for families
- build the early learning **workforce**, in terms of numbers, qualifications and skills
- ensure the delivery of **high-quality** early learning and care, regardless of service type or location.

BENEFITS

The first five years of life are crucial to children’s cognitive, social and emotional development. When children have inclusive, positive and rich early learning experiences, they are more likely to go on to become successful learners, with high levels of wellbeing. Early childhood education and care (ECEC) is one important way of providing learning experiences, especially for children experiencing disadvantage or vulnerability.

International goal: The human, social and economic benefits of ECEC are realised (OECD, 2017).

Snapshot:

- Children who attend early learning services are less likely (by 33%) to be developmentally vulnerable when they start school than those who do not attend early learning services.
- Indigenous children are more likely to be developmentally vulnerable when they start school than non-Indigenous children.
- States where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are provided free or near-free access to preschool from age three tend to achieve the national Closing the Gap target of 95 per cent enrolment of Indigenous children in the year before school.
- Female labour force participation in Australia has increased over the past decade from 45.2 per cent to 46.7 per cent.
- As of 2017, of all two-parent families with at least one child aged up to four years, 57 per cent had both parents participating in the paid workforce.

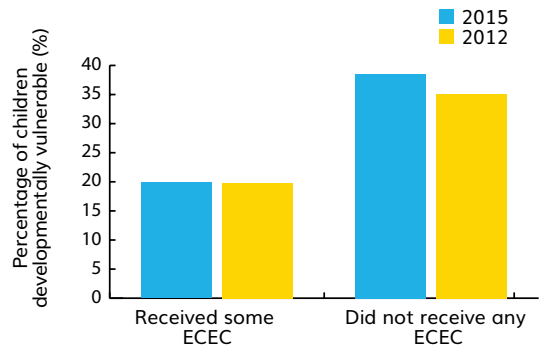


Figure B8. Developmental vulnerability in one or more domains by preschool attendance (2015, 2012) (Productivity Commission, 2019).

Age of child	Full-time (%)	Long part-time* (%)	Part-time** (%)	On leave (%)	Not in the labour force (%)
6 months	11	13	13	35	26
1 year	14	25	22	10	26
2 years	18	29	19	8	24
3 years	20	30	18	9	20
4 years	21	33	18	7	20

Figure B11. Percentage of mothers in each employment status group by child age (Hewitt et al., 2017).

* Long part-time refers to working 30–35 hours per week

** Part-time refers to working fewer than 30 hours per week

ACCESS

Access to high-quality early learning programs is central to achieving equity and positive developmental outcomes for all Australian children.

National goal: All Australian children are able to benefit from ECEC regardless of their family's background, circumstances or geographical location (Productivity Commission, 2017).

Snapshot:

- The number of children (aged up to 5 years) using early learning services has risen over the past 10 years, from just below 35 per cent in 2009 to nearly 45 per cent in 2018.
- There is inequity in access to early learning services. Children living in remote areas, children from Indigenous backgrounds, children from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB), and those with a disability are under-represented in early learning services.
- Over 90 per cent of children in Australia are enrolled in a preschool program in the year before full-time schooling. However, actual *attendance* at preschool varies widely across the states and territories.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are less likely to attend preschool than their non-Indigenous peers.
- Children who live in economically disadvantaged areas are under-represented at preschool.

- Proportion of all children in preschool programs
- Representation of children aged 3–5 years in the community, 2017

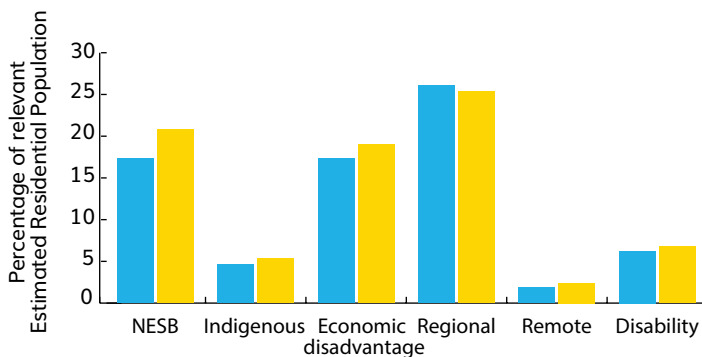


Figure A11. Representation of disadvantaged populations (3–5 years old) in the community versus enrolled in preschool services (Productivity Commission, 2019).



FUNDING

Adequate funding is paramount to providing high-quality early learning services for all children.

National goal: All Australian children are able to benefit from ECEC regardless of their family's income (Productivity Commission, 2019).

Snapshot:

- Australia's investment in early learning is below the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) average (0.7% of GDP). Australia is ranked 11th among 21 OECD nations.
- Australian Government's investment in early learning per child declined between 2016 and 2019.
- Low-income families devote a higher proportion of their income to early learning services, even with government subsidies. Those on the lowest incomes pay almost double the proportion of their income after subsidies (8%), compared with those on high incomes (4.7%) (2018).

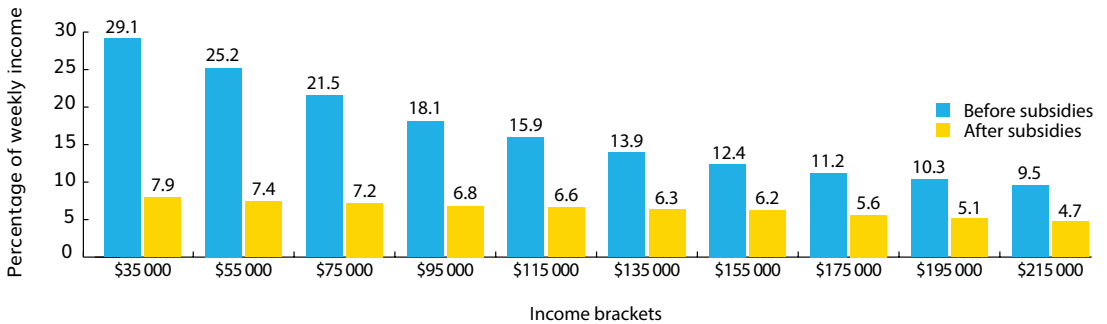


Figure F11. Centre-based day care: Out-of-pocket costs for families with one child in 30 hours child care, as a proportion of weekly disposable income, by gross annual family income (2018) (%) (Productivity Commission, 2019).

WORKFORCE

Delivery of high-quality early learning programs is dependent on the availability of appropriately qualified and supported educators.

National goal: Australia grows a skilled, stable and supported ECEC workforce to deliver positive outcomes for Australia's children (OECD, 2019; Queensland Government Department of Education, 2019; SCSEEC, 2012).

Snapshot:

- Between 2010 and 2017, there was an increase (16.3%) in educators' qualification levels, with the greatest gain (8%) in those achieving diploma qualifications.
- Staff turnover and loss to the sector is high (estimated at 30% to 50%), with the highest rates in remote areas.
- One in every five educators expresses an intention to leave the sector in the next year.
- Working conditions, support and staff wellbeing affect early learning service quality.

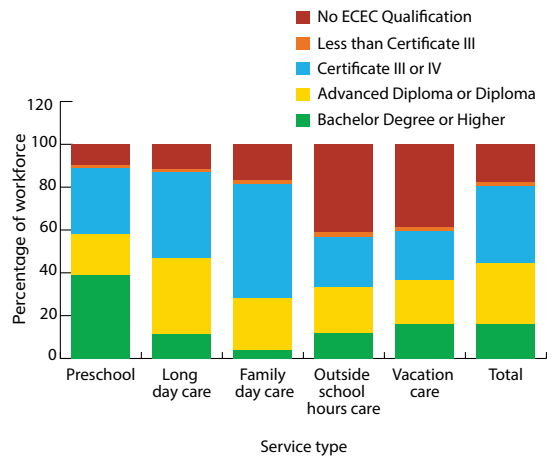


Figure W3. Educational attainment of the ECEC workforce by service type (2017) (The Social Research Centre, 2017).



PROVISION AND QUALITY

Quality matters. Early childhood education needs to be intellectually stimulating, socially inclusive and emotionally responsive in order to have positive long-term effects for children.

National goal: ECEC provision is of the highest quality necessary to deliver learning and development benefits for all of Australia's children (Productivity Commission, 2019).

Snapshot:

- Nationally, 94 per cent of early learning services hold a quality rating against the *National Quality Standard* (NQS). Of these, 74 per cent are Meeting or Exceeding the NQS. The Meeting or Exceeding rate varies between stand-alone preschools (92%), centre-based services (80%) and family day care services (46%).
- Using NQS ratings as an index, quality is improving—66 per cent of early learning services previously classified as Working Towards NQS improved their rating in their next assessment.
- More than half (56%) of the early learning services provided by state/territory and local governments are operating above the standard (Exceeding NQS). This compares with 42.5 per cent of early learning services provided by community-managed, not-for-profit organisations and 20 per cent of early learning services provided by private, for-profit organisations.

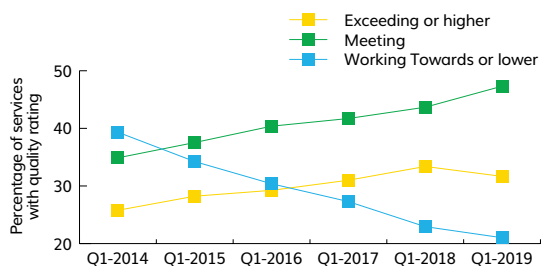


Figure P4. Proportional changes in quality ratings (Q1, 2014–19) (ACECQA, 2019).



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**EVERYONE
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W: www.everyonebenefits.org.au

E: everyonebenefits@earlychildhood.org.au

T: 0475 554 999 or (02) 6242 1800

A: PO BOX 86, Deakin West, ACT 2600