

29 January 2024

About us

Early Childhood Australia (ECA) is a not-for-profit, membership-based organisation that was first incorporated in 1938. We work at both the national and local level, with active State and Territory Committees in each Australian jurisdiction and a National Board of Directors. Our membership includes early childhood professionals, services, schools and organisations that share a commitment to the rights and wellbeing of young children.

Our vision is that every young child is thriving and learning. To achieve this, we champion the rights of young children to thrive and learn at home, in the community, within early learning settings and through the early years of school.

Our work builds the capacity of our society and the early childhood sector to realise the potential of every child during the critical early years from birth to the age of eight. ECA particularly acknowledges the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families, and the past and current injustices and realities for them around Australia.

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Acknowledgement of Country

Early Childhood Australia acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia and their continuing connection to land and community. We pay our respect to them and their cultures, and to the Elders both past and present.

Background and introduction

The early childhood sector is critical to Australian society, and the goals of every government for a prosperous and thriving society. As such, the early childhood education and care (ECEC) workforce plays a valuable, yet poorly appreciated, contribution to children, families, and the wider community. ECA welcomes the Australian Government attention on the critical early childhood years and are pleased the Government is taking the ECEC workforce crisis seriously.

To this end, Jobs and Skills Australia (JSA) have been asked to explore, in detail, the ECEC workforce in its current state, understand the challenges, upcoming demands and needs and make recommendations for how the sector can adapt to ensure it is ready for the future. The Terms of Reference appear to broadly align with this goal, yet have sufficient detail to allow understandings of local contexts and unique challenges.

Several key Government projects that are currently underway, including the Early Years Strategy, the ACCC and Productivity Commission inquiries, will inform national ECEC workforce priorities and agendas. There has been a pressing need to plan for and implement strategies to ensure a qualified, skilled, stable, supported and sustainable workforce into the future. This is necessary for all Australian Governments to deliver on these multiple policy reforms. ECA advocates for a coordinated approach to reduce duplication of efforts and sustained investment where it matters.

ECA's response to this scoping paper outlines the knowledge and broad professional experiences of our members presented according to the guiding research questions posed by JSA in the Consultation Paper¹. Please note, ECA has not formally consulted with our members about this submission, owing to the timeframe and time of year. Where a question was considered to be out of scope for ECA to provide expert advice on, or it has been answered by an earlier response, it has been omitted from this response.

The scope of the ECEC Capacity Study is large and ambitious, the timeframe tight and the importance of getting this right cannot be overstated. As the national peak body for early childhood services, ECA would be a value-add on one of the Steering Groups and we would like to offer our contributions in this space. This would allow us to expand on this submission and importantly, inform the study with practical knowledge and experiences from the coalface of early childhood from the real experts: the educators.

1. What are the challenges and opportunities facing the ECEC workforce? How do different ECEC service delivery types (e.g. centre based care, family day care, pre-school) impact workforce challenges and opportunities?

The ECEC workforce is an unusual one. It can be described as a mixed market, both in terms of the services that make up the sector as well as the hybrid range of professionals that deliver these services.

¹ <https://www.jobsandskills.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-11/Early%20Childhood%20Education%20and%20Care%20capacity%20study%20-%20Consultation%20paper.pdf>

According to the national regulator, the Australian Children Education & Care Quality Authority (ACECQA), 1% of ECEC providers are large operators (owning 25 or more services), 19% are medium-sized (2-24 services) and 80% are classed as small providers (owning 1 service)².

According to the NQF Annual Performance Report (2023), providers are approved to operate around 17,300 services, including:

- 8855 long day care services (51% of approved services)
- 4954 outside school hours care services (29%)
- 3062 preschools/kindergartens (18%)
- 448 family day care services (3%).

The greatest area of growth has been in the long day care setting, who have close to three-quarters of ECEC educators in these services³.

Even within a single service type, there are a range of staff qualification levels and qualification pathways that apply to the diverse sectors. The ECEC profession is comprised of certificate, diploma, and degree-qualified practitioners. This provides unique team structures that are often organised with high levels of collaboration and teamwork. Many staff progress from certificate and diploma qualifications into educator roles while they continue to work in the sector – bringing with them significant experience. Similarly, the variety of degree structures has created multiple pathways into the profession resulting in a diverse range of teaching qualifications existing in the sector, not all equally recognised by different employers. Finally, in a strained workforce that is struggling to staff services with qualified educators, trainees are the backbone of a lot of services, particularly in centre-based care services.

The need to increase the supply of early childhood teachers is in tension with the imperative of ensuring that qualifications maintain a high standard and quality of teacher practice. There is evidence of high-quality across settings and service types but there are also examples of poor quality and inconsistent quality – largely due to workforce challenges and a failure to invest in some communities and cohorts (thin markets, vulnerable cohorts and ‘out of scope’ service types)². Every service and setting providing ECEC programs for children and families should be compliant with the NQS and consistently high-quality.

There is evidence of high quality across settings and service types, but there are also examples of poor quality and inconsistent quality—largely due to workforce challenges and a failure to invest in some communities and cohorts (thin markets, vulnerable cohorts and ‘out of scope’ service types)⁸. Every service and setting providing ECEC programs for children and families should be compliant with the *National Quality Standard* (NQS) and consistently high quality³.

² Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA). (2023). *NQF Annual performance report. National Quality Framework*. https://www.acecqa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-11/2023-NQF-Annual-Performance-Report-FINAL_0.pdf

Occasional Care as an out-of-scope service is often employed by communities unable to establish a regulated ECEC service. These are often found in small communities ('thin markets') where there is a demand but not enough to warrant a viable service, or one which may be attractive to a third-party provider.

ECA are very interested in finding out the results of this present study and in particular, the disaggregated results for different service types. The ECEC study seeks to "*identify and analyse occupations for each of the different parts of the sector (pre-schools and kindergartens, centre-based day care, family day care, home-based care, and outside school hours care), their respective supply and demand factors and geographical considerations to understand factors that impact training, attracting, and retaining ECEC workers*". Such data would assist in workforce planning and is a current evidence gap within the sector. Going one step further, ECA are also keen to understand how many graduates from early childhood degrees move into employment within the school sector, and their reasons for doing so (whether it be wages, job security, hours and conditions, status etc).

2. Are there differences between workforce requirements or demand (for example, employer needs) and supply (for example, jobseeker availability and skills)?

One of the most significant issues facing the education and care sector is ensuring that there are enough qualified teachers to deliver early childhood education and care (ECEC) in line with the National Quality Framework, and preschool under the National Preschool Reform Agreement. Currently, there are shortages of qualified teachers and educators across the sector, a trend that has been steadily increasing since 2019. Due to these shortages the ECEC sector has not been able to fully meet the staffing qualification requirements of the NQF since its implementation in 2012.

Increasing attrition of the workforce and ongoing recruitment challenges mean that many services are reducing their capacity in response. At the same time, cost of living pressures mean that parents are working harder than ever before to balance their work and care responsibilities. This combination of high demand and low supply of a qualified workforce is very problematic for the sector and the families have been directly impacted.

Only when the ECEC workforce is supported and well-resourced, can it deliver long-term benefits to children, families and society. Hence, these issues have a direct relationship with the implementation of the Government's affordability measures.

The workforce shortage is a national problem, however some areas and services are more heavily impacted than others. Depending on the jurisdiction, staff shortage types vary. For example, in Tasmania, the shortages are across all levels and all services. In NSW, the greatest need is for early childhood leaders with an understanding of the policy environment tempered with experience on the ground. In the NT, they face issues with a large number of graduates moving there from interstate for the DAMA II Visa, which is a time consuming and expensive process.

Strategies to address shortages and stabilise the ECEC sector need to be substantial in terms of scale because it is a very large workforce. The ECEC sector has a significant role in the Australian economy and society, underpinning both the education outcomes of children (the workforce of the future) and the capacity of more than one million family households to participate in the workforce – shortages in this sector have an amplified impact on the Australian workforce more broadly.

3. How well is the current system responding to workforce challenges?

The system is understandably struggling with current challenges. The issues facing the ECEC sector are well understood and documented in the National Children's Education and Care Workforce Strategy—*Shaping our Future: A ten-year strategy to ensure a sustainable, high-quality children's education and care workforce 2022–2031* published in September 2021. ECA, along with governments and sector stakeholders, will continue to advocate for the actions outlined in this strategy to support a sustainable, flourishing and professional workforce that helps every child thrive and learn.

According to 2024 NQF data, almost 10% of services hold a staffing waiver, with the proportion rising to 17% for long day care services. These waivers mostly relate to temporary issues in meeting early childhood teacher staffing requirements.

4. What factors are driving or deterring workforce attraction, retention, and career progression in the ECEC sector? What factors are driving attrition?

The workforce of the ECEC sector, made up of qualified educators and teachers, experiences lower pay and less favourable conditions both generally and when compared with the school sector. This influences not only recruitment to the profession, but also retention of high-quality staff. Pay and conditions are significant drivers of educator attrition particularly in relation to the high level of responsibility that is held in ECEC services.

The ECEC workforce faces significant challenges, including low staff retention, fewer enrolments and completions of qualifications, low morale and a stressed and tired workforce. This makes achieving our shared goal of high-quality early learning opportunities for every child a significant challenge.

The reasons for the workforce shortage are complex. Some of the known drivers of workforce shortages are changes in the qualification requirements, increased pressure throughout COVID, and lack of recognition or value (in pay and conditions, as well as the respect for the profession). ECEC staff also face high levels of work-related stress and heavy workloads, feeling unable to meet the expectations placed on them. Further, due to the workforce crisis, ECEC staff report feeling unable to take leave, even rostered day offs and sick leave when they need it for their own wellbeing. Other factors include:

- Largely casualised workforce, and a culture of administration that places additional burden on leadership and the continuing staff at sites
- A predominantly female workforce, of which a significant proportion are mothers, and the challenges associated with being a working mother
- Some training of a poor standard

Problems of supply of quality early learning are particularly acute in regional, rural and remote locations, with patchy and inconsistent provision. Any effort to increase access to early learning must ensure adequate supply, and take account of these spatial inequities.

The wages and employment conditions that do not remunerate educators for the complexity of the work they do and the cost and time taken to complete a four-year degree. Government-funded wage increases for ECEC educators will enable services to offer pay and conditions to attract and retain a quality workforce.

The reputation and poor view of the professionalism of early childhood educators impacts on the willingness of people to enter the sector and remain in it. Referring to it as 'child care', 'child minding' and even 'babysitting' diminishes the professionalism of the role as an educator, which should be respected. Career counsellors have been known to tell students that if they can't get into university, do child care instead. This is counterproductive to the push for quality.

The National Workforce Strategy and associated Implementation Plan ([National Workforce Strategy | ACECQA](#)) outline 21 actions spanning six focus areas: professional recognition, attraction and retention, leadership and capability, wellbeing, qualifications and career pathways, and data and evidence. This plan has been developed with significant contribution from the sector and is fit for its longer-term purpose. However, much remains to be seen as the plan will still require jurisdictions to implement the actions.

In 2022, ECA commissioned ORIMA to undertake a research project to understand the perspectives of educators who left the sector. The mixed methods research sought to find out the reasons for leaving, as well as what attracted them to the sector in the first place. A confidential draft summary of this research is included as an attachment for your consideration, in the hope it informs your inquiry. We would be pleased to elaborate on this work and the implications of what was found with policymakers.

The survey confirmed that for 76% of the early childhood education professionals, *'love of children'* was the leading reason why educators entered the workforce. This was supported in the qualitative research too, which reinforced the important role educators played in the early years of a child's development, setting the foundations for a child's future. This is the greatest policy lever we have in attracting the right people to work in the ECEC sector.

The survey identified the top four reasons why educators left the sector as poor rate of pay (41%), work stress (34%), developing new skills (26%), and high workload (25%). The supporting qualitative research further indicated that 'poor rate of pay' is the cumulative effect of many unpaid hours of work, constant demands and insufficient staff to deliver a good service. Educators described that feeling physically and emotionally burnt out from working in the sector, coupled with no ability to control their own working environment, left them feeling that leaving the sector was the only option. Supporting and sustaining our current workforce is a key strategy that must be capitalised upon.

Results from the survey showed that improved pay and higher staff-to-child ratios would entice most educators to return to the sector. 46% of respondents indicated that they would definitely or very likely return to the sector if the suggested improvements were made. These results can guide policy makers in relation to how to re-build the workforce.

In the university sector, it is unclear how many of the students completing the early childhood (birth-8) degree under scholarship programs go on to teach in the ECEC sector. It would be valuable for this

study to explore the retention of ECT's in ECEC services is, or if they are being lost to primary schools or even other sectors such as allied health.

5. How do current governance and regulatory settings impact the ECEC workforce?

Currently, and historically, there is disparity in the professional lives of teachers in school settings and those who choose to work in early childhood settings. The need to increase the supply of early childhood teachers is in tension with the imperative of ensuring that qualifications maintain a high standard and quality of teacher practice.

The disparity extends beyond differences in pay and conditions. It includes inconsistencies in qualification requirements and registration processes, as well as career pathways and respect or recognition for the work that they do.

As a sector, and indeed as a nation, we want to attract, and retain, the highest quality staff in the early childhood workforce to raise our brightest young minds. It can be done, but not without sustained funding commitment to wages, attention to the wellbeing of the workforce and a regulatory and governance system that supports an agile and dynamic workforce that wants to grow and improve.

ECA are advocating for the development of a National Register of ECEC Teachers and Educators to improve visibility and mobility in the sector. ECA also see the National Register addressing the issue of jurisdictional inconsistencies in registration by improving the capacity for mobility of teachers and educators across sectors and jurisdictions. Finally, a National Register would likely bring greater alignment and consistency with primary and secondary qualified educators.

There is no one size fits all for regulating what makes a 'good' early childhood educator. Recognition of existing experience, related qualifications (international qualifications, diplomas and three-year degrees) and alternate pathways in registration processes is needed in some cases; however, AITSL must reach consensus and provide clear guidance in minimum course length and child age range for accepted qualifications is essential to deliver quality and consistency across the sector.

ECA supports quality regulation for services outside the scope of the National Quality Framework. With growing numbers of out-of-scope services responding to the needs of communities which may not be serviced by other ECEC services, it is important that children enrolled in these services access safe, culturally responsive and high-quality settings which are monitored by the regulator. ECA supports a review of regulatory arrangements for out-of-scope services to close this loop and address inconsistencies.

6. Have we missed any occupations from the proposed list or should any occupations be omitted from the scope of the capacity study and why?

ECA has provided advice to the ABS on language changes for the occupations listed below, specifically that we refer to occupation roles as:

- Early Childhood Educators
- Family Day Care Educators

- Outside School Hours Educators
- Early Childhood Teachers
- Early Childhood Education Leaders
- Early Childhood Service Managers

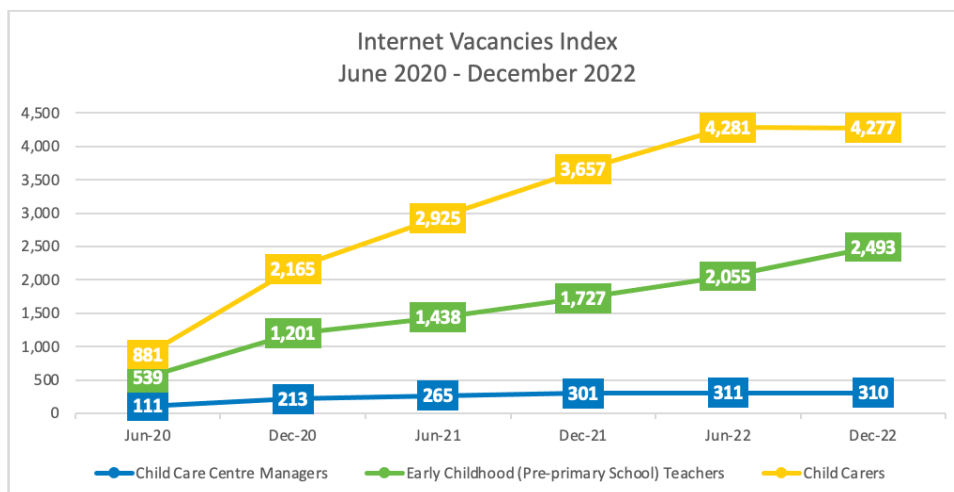
Language is important for the professionalism of the sector and we refer you to our publication '[how to talk about early childhood education and care](#)' to expand on this.

7. What are the emerging developments and trends in the ECEC sector and how will these impact the future workforce?

According to 2021 Australian Government data, the ECEC workforce is largely female, young and casualised⁴. These factors make it a challenge to make a career the central priority, when other life demands like cost of living and family interests overlap. This impacts not only the current workforce, but the future workforce. There are often inadequate resources to support student teachers and trainee educators to the extent they need to become successful, let alone early career educators to sustain their efforts. However, with the right supports and enablers, these attributes can be success components.

Turnover in the ECEC sector is estimated at 30% annually and between June 2020 and Dec 2022 there were:

- almost three times the vacancies for centre directors,
- more than four and a half times the vacancies early childhood teachers, and
- almost five times the vacancies for ECEC educators.



[Internet Vacancy Index | Labour Market Insights](#)

8. What are the future needs for the ECEC sector and workforce, and what might influence these requirements?

⁴ <https://www.education.gov.au/early-childhood/early-childhood-workforce>

The ECEC sector is growing in terms of demand from families, but supply of high-quality staff is dropping. Government funding mechanisms that improve the pay and conditions of the ECEC workforce and ensuring the professional status of the ECEC workforce is respected and valued will stem this tide. This starts with well-resourced implementation of the National Children's Education and Care Workforce Strategy (*Shaping our Future*).

Wraparound support for the ECEC workforce must also consider educator wellbeing. Be You commissioned Monash University (2021) to research their engagement with vulnerable children and families. This research confirmed entrenched issues in the Australian ECEC sector, which contributed to high stress levels. Educators who are working while taking on additional study may be impacted by stress at higher rates.

The Monash study found there is a growing body of evidence that links educator wellbeing with educational outcomes for children and young people and that existing educator wellbeing initiatives place too much focus on self-care and individual strategies.

All governments must commit to systemic change required to provide educators and providers with the necessary resources, work conditions and support essential to safeguard their well-being. Be You as a national government funded mental health in education initiative is well placed to support this goal, and ECA have the established relationship with the ECEC sector to support them in the years ahead.

9. Are there any specific novel skills and capability requirements emerging in the ECEC sector? How have workforce requirements in ECEC changed over time?

According to 2023 NQF data, skilled educators are the most important decision making factor in where their child attends early learning. So getting the right people in the workforce is critical.

Formal qualifications provide substantial early childhood theory and understanding of the job and sector. However, a good proportion of educators feel ill equipped to handle challenging issues that theory does not prepare them for. Instead, observation of professionals and in-the-moment coaching would be more effective. For example, conversations with parents, managing children's challenging behaviours, and balancing administrative, reporting and educator responsibilities. Educators need more developed skills when entering the workforce if they are to succeed, as they may have limited opportunities to learn from experienced and skilled professionals while training, due to a lack of people or time.

The interpersonal skills of the ECEC workforce are increasingly important. As we learn more about the importance of positive and stimulating relationships between educators and children, as well as the critical window of time and need for facilitating environments to support the development of children's social and emotional skills such as self-regulation and executive function, we are reminded how important it is to have caring, responsive and skilled ECEC educators.

The OECD (2012, p146) produced the following list of attributes of effective ECEC educators:

- good understanding of child development and learning

- ability to develop children’s perspectives
- ability to praise, comfort, question and be responsive to children
- leadership skills, problem solving and development of
- targeted lesson plans
- good vocabulary and an ability to elicit children’s ideas.

10. How does the ECEC sector provide career progression? Do qualification recognition arrangements support the development of the sector?

The ECEC profession is comprised of certificate, diploma and degree-qualified staff. This provides unique team structures that are often organised with high levels of collaboration and teamwork. Similarly, the variety of degree structures has created multiple pathways into the profession resulting in a diverse range of teaching qualifications existing in the sector.

While we advocate for consistency going forward, it is important that experience and demonstrated ongoing commitment to professional knowledge, practices and engagement in the discipline of early childhood teaching is adequately recognised by registration processes.

The teaching qualifications alone do not provide adequate training for the level of complexity that manager/director roles present. Consideration must be given to how the ECEC systems support new graduates (ECTs and service leaders/directors) in mentoring and ongoing professional learning to progress their career goals and progress into leadership roles. More leadership and management training is required to encourage this career pathways, as well as financial incentives.

To progress beyond provisional registration, new ECT’s need someone to mentor and support them, coach and sign off their provisional ECT status to reach proficiency. However, with the pressure on the existing workforce, there are too few experienced educators that have capacity to do this.

Some state curriculum boards, such as Victoria and Queensland, have guides for early career ECT’s to assist them in applying AITSL standards. These would be useful to educators in all jurisdictions, however they are not well known or nationally applied. For example:

[EvidenceGuideEarlyChildhood.pdf \(qct.edu.au\)](https://qct.edu.au/EvidenceGuideEarlyChildhood.pdf)

Maintaining registration/accreditation comes at a cost to ECTs, which is especially challenging for an increasingly casualised workforce. Access to professional learning for ECTs who are not placed in a permanent site can also be problematic. Professional learning courses are fee-based and some courses, though worthwhile for local and specific needs, are not widely recognised towards the necessary proof of PD for registration. For the ECEC workforce broadly, the process for having PD approved for accreditation has become increasingly difficult, particularly for online learning.

While it is understandable that PD is required to include collaboration and sustained engagement, this does not often align with the PD that ECTs can reasonably access with high workloads or pay for with cost of living/ECEC wages. Some providers do provide access to PD, but not the time to complete the learning. PD. This all adds to the pressures (time and cost) that the ECEC workforce face.

On the other hand, there are cases where a relatively inexperienced ECT is placed in a leadership role, perhaps by virtue of being the only ECT in a service. Put simply, it can be easier to progress as an ECT in ECEC. This can be equally problematic if ECTs are not supported to succeed or possess the corporate knowledge or understanding of management systems to fulfil the early childhood leadership role successfully.

11. Are the mechanisms for recognising prior learning and experience being used effectively to recognise workers' skills and knowledge?

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is not widely utilised in ECEC qualifications, such as the Certificate 3 and the Diploma. The RPL initiative also excludes some service types, such as Family Day Care. There is little incentive for Registered Training Organisations to recognise prior learning and experience, due to the structure of funding attached to courses and the specificity of student backgrounds and prior experiences requires a significant amount of time for RTOs to apply RPL.

Many staff progress from certificate and diploma qualifications into educator roles while they continue to work in the sector – bringing with them significant experience. Similarly, some university students are able to work as educators while still completing their degree. However, there are also cases where long-term ECTs or ECWs, who have extensive experience and interest in progressing to more senior roles, are unable to be paid as an educator because they do not have a degree. There are also people who might change career and can complete a short (18-24 months) Masters degree compared to a Diploma-trained educator who may have to study for longer, even though they have the experience in services.

The inconsistencies again pose confusion for those looking to enter the ECEC workforce.

ECA has produced NQS PLP video resources in collaboration with the ECEC sector, encouraging unqualified early childhood workers to engage in the recognition of prior learning to obtain qualifications. The video includes vignettes from educators who have gained a qualification through this process. Please see an [example here](#).

12. How is the education and training system responding to the need for a skilled ECEC workforce? Where are the opportunities and challenges? Are there enablers and barriers in providing ECEC training (e.g., jurisdictional differences)?

Qualified early childhood teachers are a key pillar in delivering high-quality early childhood education and care through the National Quality Framework and universal preschool through the Preschool Reform Agreement. However, significant barriers to attaining qualifications exist in areas where qualified teachers are needed most. There is a tension between proper training and assessment and the supply of qualified educators. There are often complex structural and access barriers that prevent the commencement or completion of qualifications that could be addressed by drawing on community resources and innovative program design. There are also issues with training courses being able to provide balanced and high-quality theory and practical experiences within the completion time.

There is little standardisation of content across degrees (both in Initial Teacher Education [ITE] training and specific ECEC degrees) around the country and as a result, they can be weak predictors

of effective practice. The registration of early childhood teachers by state and territory authorities also varies extensively. For instance, in Tasmania, TAFE admit students on a first served, first in basis – there is no requirement for people to actually want and are suitable to work in the sector. They may be enrolling to meet other requirements.

There is an inherent and urgent issue to address within the ITE qualifications. That is the requirement for professional placements and skills-based assessment on the job, without compensation and often foregoing income to complete for students. Even universities discourage placements at places of employment for students, even when it may lead to a better outcome for all and support completion. Then for services, this can be challenging to support if a service does not have sufficient resources. Some RTOs rely heavily on workplace assessments being conducted by workplace supervisors. This not only takes staff off the floor for working with children; it also means the assessment process may be diluted and of a variable standard.

Teacher registration is managed by each jurisdiction and has different requirements depending on the context. Some jurisdictions mandate registration of teachers in school and non-school settings, whereas others limit registration based on setting type and qualification. This means in effect, that early childhood ITE qualification courses need to go through two approval processes for graduates to be eligible for teacher registration.

One of the major issues to be addressed includes the need for mutual recognition of qualifications across jurisdictions. Presently, when ECT's move interstate, they are often unable to transfer registration. For instance, an ECT moving from NSW with a birth-5 accreditation to Queensland and their qualification is not recognised there. This is further complicated by the different curriculum links and policy frameworks that vary by jurisdiction, even though the overarching EYLF is national. This also impacts on ECTs who live and work in border towns. It is expensive and cumbersome to maintain two separate registrations, which limits their potential to work in both jurisdictions. They may choose to work in the jurisdiction with the easier or more affordable registration processes. For example, a NSW-based ECT living in a border town near ACT may choose to register and work in ACT due to simpler processes. These inconsistencies create and reinforce inequity between teachers within the early childhood profession (inter and intra-state) and between the early childhood and school sectors.

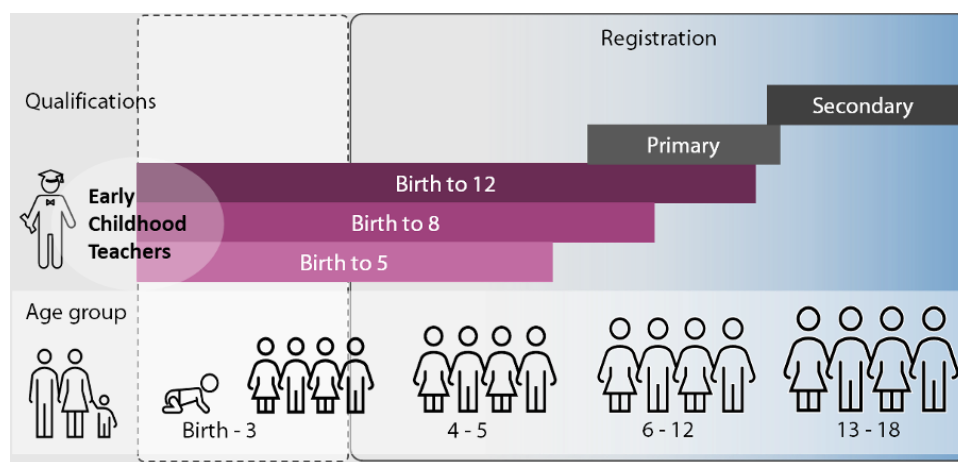
There are also challenges to access educator registration and Working With Children checks by state/territory, and addressing this would remove that as a barrier. A National Register would help to address these problems, ensuring that a teacher is seen as a teacher and can work anywhere there is need and interest and the processes are consistent across the country.

A 'school-centric' framing applies to registration that wedges early childhood teachers, practice and service settings out of scope. The process of registration for early childhood teachers is currently based solely on the Australian Practice Standards for Teachers as they apply in school settings. This means that references to practice and language (e.g. classroom, curriculum) often doesn't have meaning in early childhood settings. The structure of ECEC delivery means that an ECT may be the only person on the team with a teaching qualification. This presents a contextual challenge for registration that is distinct from school settings where registration requirements apply to a large

proportion of the staff onsite. There are also important differences in practice, teaching may occur through a team of educators, working with groups of children in play-based learning environments, delivering programs in which teaching is intentional but not prescribed by a curriculum. The Early Years Learning Framework and My Time, Our Place are not given the standing or recognition they deserve.

The national regulator, ACECQA, holds responsibility for accrediting and approving the qualifications that are recognised within early childhood education and care settings. ACECQA accredits both three- and four-year teaching qualifications, however jurisdictionally based teacher registration bodies regulate teacher qualifications within their jurisdiction and many will only register teachers with a four-year degree. Victoria is currently the only state that aligns registration of teachers with ACECQA-recognised qualifications.

Aligning qualifications and establishing a nationally consistent registration system is important to demonstrate respect and recognition of early childhood teachers. Elevating the profession and maintaining high standards for qualifications and registration are closely related. However, a single register should be intentionally inclusive – seeking to increase representation within the sector and reflecting the pathways to teaching that have been chartered through the ECEC profession. The National Workforce Strategy has committed to implementing early childhood teacher registration in every state and territory (within three years).



The duration of a degree is an area that has received much attention. A number of institutions offer three-year early childhood teaching degrees that enable graduates to teach in early childhood settings. These degrees often qualify graduates to teach in preschool settings the years prior to school (birth to five). The South Australian Royal Commission recently recommended that ECTs with three-year degrees should be eligible for registrations (on a list that is held separately to four-year qualified teachers).

Another trend is a move towards accelerated degrees through which a qualification can be completed within 18-24 months. These degrees are generally on offer to those with a diploma qualification and currently working in the sector and are currently offered by Deakin University, the University of Wollongong, Swinburne University and the Australian Catholic University, for example.

Finally, the child age range covered in early childhood teaching degrees offers additional complexity. Degrees that cover the education of children from birth to five years (preschool years) are not recognised by some teacher registration bodies. Degrees that cover the education of children from birth to eight years are more likely to be recognised and allow graduates to work across early years settings and the early years of school. There has been growth in degrees that cover the education of children from birth to the age of 12 (early years and primary school years) which provide flexibility to graduates but can be considered to have limited early years content and do not adequately prepare teachers to work in before school settings. There is concern that qualifications are either so broad that early childhood content is superficially covered, or that birth to five qualifications are conceived of as a lighter academic load for teacher training.

13. What attracts students to ECEC training courses and workers to ECEC roles? What influences job mobility across roles and sectors?

Working with young children to help them thrive and learn is no easy undertaking. However, historically it has been seen as the easier alternative to school teaching. Perhaps a little more fun, less rigorous or busy and certainly something to consider if someone 'failed' to be accepted into an Education (Primary or Secondary) degree. This messaging is counterproductive to our push for quality and the drive towards attracting, preparing and retaining the very best people to work in ECEC.

Mobility is a problematic issue that is somewhat unique to the ECEC sector both between and within the ECEC sector and their primary and secondary colleagues. For some ECEC educators, they choose their employer based on who will pay the most and this differs between providers, sectors and jurisdictions.

Furthermore, presently, when ECTs move interstate, they may experience difficulties in transferring registration when qualifications are not similarly recognised as in their home state (e.g. a birth to five qualification not recognised in a jurisdiction where only birth to eight ECEC qualifications are recognised and accepted on the teaching register).

To overcome these issues, aligning qualifications and establishing a nationally consistent registration system is important to demonstrate respect and recognition of ECTs. Elevating the profession and maintaining high standards for qualifications and registration are closely related. However, a single register should be intentionally inclusive, thus seeking to increase representation within the sector and reflecting the pathways to teaching that have been chartered through the ECEC profession.

Stewardship of the registration process will be needed to navigate the current, highly complex arrangements and reduce fragmentation and inconsistency in teacher qualifications and registration. ECA is well placed to support this stewardship, once Ministerial agreement is reached on one approach. Working collaboratively with the Australian Government, AITSL and ACECQA, state and territory regulators, peak bodies and unions to represent the interests of education professionals through this process will be important to navigate and address the complexity and ensure better outcomes for ECTs. ECA encourages government consideration of our role in this important work to

affect positive change for the ECEC workforce; and subsequently the children, families and communities engaging with the ECEC sector.

14. What influences patterns of work in the ECEC sector, e.g. performing multiple roles or working in different services?

Mobility is a problematic issue that is somewhat unique to the ECEC sector both between and within the ECEC sector and their primary and secondary colleagues. For some ECEC educators, they choose their employer based on who will pay the most and this differs between providers, sectors and jurisdictions.

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15. What factors influence workforce participation for priority cohorts including First Nations people? What are the enablers and barriers to support the development of a diverse workforce in the sector?

The communities that experience some of the most profound ECEC workforce shortages, often have more significant barriers for people seeking to work as early childhood teachers or seeking to obtain early childhood teaching qualifications.

Regional and remote communities often have higher costs of living due to limited or expensive housing, transport costs and higher costs associated with goods/services. Public sector employers are often able to provide sponsored or subsidised housing, relocation support and/or allowances that offset some of these costs. By contrast, early childhood providers are often small not-for-profit

organisations or small business operators who are not able to provide benefits to offset higher costs, they can therefore struggle to attract the workforce they need.

There are also a range of barriers for students in regional and remote communities who seek to complete teaching qualifications. Examples include:

- A lack of experienced and qualified early childhood teachers who can provide supervision, coaching and support.
- Costs associated with having to leave their community to attend classes and/or complete practicum placements;
- Difficulties accessing online content, including remote communities affected by seasonal weather events; and
- Community contexts that make it difficult to engage in study, including overcrowded housing, lack of equipment or space, poor community support.

There are additional barriers for specific cohorts including Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people living in remote communities, who may already be working with children in their community including in education settings but are prevented from entering or completing teaching qualifications. The additional barriers can include:

- Difficulty navigating entry or graduation requirements that demand a relatively high competency and confidence in written English and/or maths (e.g. LANTITE) as well as the costs involved and risk of failure;
- Lack of contextualisation in teaching programs – a failure to accommodate or value fluency in community languages and cultural knowledge as well as understand how teaching can draw on and adapt for the local environment, arts, culture and community values.
- Difficulties completing practicum requirements – specifically the need to leave the community, arrange alternative care for children or forgo wages.
- Lack of support including mentoring and tutoring, examples of practice.
- Financial constraints arising from the cost of study as well as travel to/from institutions.

One solution could be to employ community representatives, such as elders from local Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander communities, in liaison and cultural support roles. Unfortunately, current approaches make this difficult, because they assume staff will be qualified early educators. While many suitable members of cultural communities may be an excellent resource, they lack the necessary formal qualifications to fill these positions.

Some measures were intended to ensure the quality of educators, however they have been applied inappropriately and unfairly disadvantage particular cohorts. For example:

International English Language Testing System (IELTS)

The International English Language Test (IELTS) must be passed by teachers who have gained their teaching qualifications from a country other than Australia, Ireland, Canada, New Zealand, the United States of America or the United Kingdom. The IELTS test must be passed in order for

candidates to gain entry into an Australia teaching qualification. The test expires after 3 years and is a requirement of teacher registration/accreditation in all states and territories. The issue is some universities require a lower IELTS degree entry score than the registering authorities. The intent behind this is the skills will develop throughout the degree, however this does not always occur and people can have graduated the degree but are unable to be registered.

LANTITE

The Australian Government Department of Education (DET) is responsible for the implementation of the LANTITE and has contracted the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) to develop, administer and deliver the test. LANTITE is only applicable to early childhood teachers with birth to 8 years or birth to 12 years qualifications. LANTITE does not apply to birth to 5 years qualifications. The test is made up of two components, a literacy test, and a numeracy test. The purpose of the test is to assess teachers' personal literacy and numeracy skills.

Each LANTITE attempt costs the teacher \$395 per test in metropolitan areas and anywhere between \$419 - \$550 per test for regional areas. Testing dates are held throughout the year, with teachers having to wait for the next round before they can sit the test again.

Teachers must meet the LANTITE test requirements to gain registration with state-based teacher registration authorities. Current Australian Government policy states that all people may have an initial test attempt plus up to two additional attempts for each component of the test. The test fee for a single component is currently \$98. The test fee for both components is \$196.00.

LANTITE has also been raised as a barrier to teacher completion for migrants from non-English speaking backgrounds as well as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students for whom English is not their first language. The structure of the assessment – including the limits to how many attempts students must complete it coupled with its disconnection from other elements of the degree act as a barrier or deterrent for some considering a career. It also may reduce the diversity of the teaching workforce and the benefits of multilingual education.

16. How do wages and working conditions (including location) interact with workforce participation? What factors could be considered?

Remuneration and conditions in the sector are an ongoing and widespread concern. As part of the multi-employer bargaining process, ECA has been strongly advocating for the Federal Government to fully fund professional wages.

Resolving workforce issues will take time, and a combined effort by Federal, State and Territory Governments, peak bodies, service providers, universities and training organisations. It will not be solved by wage increases alone, however recognition through significantly improved pay and conditions with immediate benefit will likely stabilise departures from ECEC. A commitment to funding wage increases immediately will demonstrate to the workforce that they are valued, and retain professionals that the sector may otherwise lose.

Hence, improvements to pay and conditions need to provide both immediate and short-term remediation strategies that address historic and ongoing disparity (retention payments, wages subsidies or guarantees) **and** progressive longer-term action targeting structural changes that seek to remunerate ECEC professionals commensurate to the value that the profession contributes (e.g. A Fair Work gender equity case; changes to Awards; or harmonising Awards).

ECA is working with the United Workers Union to facilitate conversations between employers, peak bodies and other unions to agree to a shared approach to progressing pay and conditions for the ECEC workforce. The group has considered a range of options that could be implemented by employers, supported by peaks or progressed through bargaining processes – as well as strategies that require Government support. ECA are clear that improvements in pay and conditions for the ECEC sector are essential and support the process of multi-employer bargaining as a mechanism to achieve this.

Aligning pay and conditions for early childhood teachers in all ECEC settings, with their primary- and secondary-qualified colleagues would be a positive step, but this cannot be solely carried by providers who would be required to increase fees to families. Financial commitment by Government is imperative.

ECA calls on the Federal Government to urgently fund an immediate, and even backdated, pay increase to early childhood educators to address the widening pay gap. Other recommendations we would like to see explored to support the ECEC workforce in the short- and long-term include:

Pay and conditions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a ‘critical response strategy’ that responds to the immediate workforce crisis and support retention • Progress multi-employer bargaining agreements to support a salary increase of 25%
Staff wellbeing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensuring all ECEC staff have access to an Employee Assistance Program to support their wellbeing • Encourage rostering and staffing arrangements that provide flexibility such as a four-day work week or a nine-day fortnight to enable educators to better manage stress and workload • Ensure staff have certainty in relation to being able to access their entitlements – both rostered days off, leave and sick leave where absences have limited this.
Teachers and educators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify opportunities to address the main reasons that educators left the sector - poor rate of pay, work stress, high workload and to develop new skills • Address high workloads — providing predictable and adequate non-contact time during rostered hours to enable planning and documentation

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consider funding for additional staff to assist teachers and educators with administrative tasks and complete requirements associated with registration and other paperwork
Status and professionalism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify ongoing opportunities to increase recognition and appreciation of early childhood educators, the importance of their role and the value of their contribution

17. To what extent do employers/the sector invest in professional development to support workers' career progression, retain workers and improve services?

The need for quality professional development for early childhood educators cannot be overstated. Continued professional development, mentoring and support is critical to a skilled and supported workforce. Ongoing professional learning is essential to ensure the time, effort and cost spent in completing qualifications does not go to waste and the benefits do not fade away. Continuing PD fills the gaps in knowledge and skills that are often apparent in practice after initial training, and it keeps educators in touch with research into best practice. Barriers to completing professional learning include the costs and time to complete courses, as well as the variable quality of professional learning available to educators.

The need for quality professional development for early childhood educators cannot be overstated. Continued professional development, mentoring and support is critical to a skilled and supported workforce. Barriers to this include the cost and time to complete professional learning.

Some degree of support towards professional learning is in place in states and territories however this is inconsistently funded and delivered. There are differences also across systems (i.e. government and non-government), and in how Early Childhood Teachers, and Diploma and Certificate III Educators can access professional learning opportunities. With a focus on improving quality and inclusivity in ECEC settings, it is important that all ECEC staff can access high-quality professional learning opportunities alongside their colleagues. Professional learning in isolation is unlikely to shift practice and improve outcomes for children.

ECA is currently supporting professional development in the early childhood sector in several ways:

- Publications (Australian Journal of Early Childhood, Every Child magazine, Research in Practice Series, Everyday Learning Series, ECA Essentials Series, the Spoke blog)
- Book Sales (ECA Catalogue)
- Be You (national mental health in education initiative)

- ECA National Conference, Australasian Journal of Early Childhood (AJEC) Research Symposium, Reconciliation Symposium (all held annually)
- ECA Code of Ethics
- ECA Learning Hub (100+ self-paced online learning courses)
- The ECA Leadership Program (based on ECA's Leadership Capability Framework) and ECA Management Fundamentals Program
- Professional learning newsletters (WebWatch, Professional Learning Bulletin, Spend a Minute)

Ensuring new ECT's are working within a supportive workplace will assist them to thrive and grow as they start out in their career, as well as building their own capacity to support others. To succeed and be sustained, mentoring and coaching programs need greater recognition and remuneration, both for mentors as well as mentees to incentivise participation and ensure staff are available to commit to this. The optimal model would be intentionally matched one-to-one support to address barriers and issues as they emerge, however in regional and remote areas, these may be established in regional hubs or an online relationship.