



Early Childhood Teacher Registration in the NT

Early Childhood Australia Submission

22 March 2024

About us

Early Childhood Australia (ECA) is a not-for-profit, membership-based organisation that was first incorporated in 1938. As the national peak body for young children, we work nationally and locally, with active State and Territory Committees in each Australian jurisdiction and a National Board of Directors. The NT Committee is a vibrant and active group of professionals, who have diverse backgrounds in early childhood from pre-service teachers to Directors of services to university academics to CEO's of RTOs.

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 is highly respected as a trusted voice and partners regularly with service providers, universities and training providers and we have the reach to engage all service and provider types.

ECA has a track record in the delivery of government funded programs and projects. ECA currently run two significant government funded programs in the Northern Territory (NT): (1) the NDIS Partner in the Community Early Childhood Approach in the Darwin Urban Region and the NT-wide Inclusion Support Program. This provides ECA with valuable practice insights across the Territory that helps influence our advocacy for children. We would like to be considered for future work in policy, sector development and professional learning in the NT.

ECA acknowledges the unique place of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in our society, the past and current injustices and realities for them across Australia, and the enduring strength of their cultures and identities. We commit to being at the forefront of achieving a reconciled nation that values, respects and celebrates Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing and being.

Find out more at: www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au

Or contact: Dr Amy Graham, National Advocacy and Strategic Projects Executive

Phone: 0497 400 244

Email: AGraham@earlychildhood.org.au

OR

Ms Liz Chick

Phone: 0428 899 923

Email: nt.chair@earlychildhood.org.au

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.

Introduction

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 workforce of the early childhood education and care (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 educators, teachers and leaders. The disparity extends beyond differences in pay and conditions. It includes inconsistencies in qualification requirements and registration processes, as well as career pathways and professional recognition for the work that they do. This has become even more evident through and post pandemic, with the early childhood sector operating under sustained pressure due to many converging issues.

The recent Review of Child Safety Arrangements under the *National Quality Framework* (NQF)¹ undertaken by the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) proposed a stronger registration regime for teachers and educators working in early childhood settings. This builds on previous recommendations from the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) to include early childhood teachers in teacher registration regimes with national consistency. It also aligns with the [National Children's Education and Care Workforce Strategy: Shaping Our Future](#). ECA supports a nationally consistent approach to registration for both teachers and educators, acknowledging that this requires collaboration across jurisdictions and investment to correctly resource registration mechanisms.

For the qualified teachers of the Northern Territory, consistency in early childhood qualifications and registration requirements will go some way in acknowledging and reflecting the professional status of early childhood teachers. Attracting and retaining a high-quality and diverse workforce matters, and if early childhood teachers are to be held in the same esteem as their primary and secondary colleagues, change and greater alignment is needed. Therefore, both Early Childhood Australia as the national peak early childhood advocacy organisation acting in the interests of young children, their families and those in the early childhood field, and the Northern Territory ECA Committee (ECA NT) commend the intent of the Department of Education's Discussion Paper on Early Childhood Teacher Registration in the Northern Territory. We also welcome the open consultation that has taken place to ensure the reforms are fit for purpose, locally contextualised and lead to greater consistency and improved recruitment, retention and recognition of early childhood teachers.

¹ Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA), *Review of Child Safety Arrangements Under the National Quality Framework Executive Summary – Findings and Recommendations for the NQF and Inter-Related Child Safety Mechanisms* (2023, December), <https://www.acecqa.gov.au/media/39911>

Stewardship of the new 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 the way forward. ECA NT and the ECA national body can be instrumental in the implementation of teacher registration reforms, both as a formal partner and a peak body that can assist in the communication about and practical application of the reform agenda across the sector.

1. ECA's preferred model for early childhood teacher registration in the NT

ECA's Model 1 (a single register with conditions) is preferred by ECA NT for Northern Territory (NT) early childhood teachers (ECTs). At a national level, ECA has long advocated for a teacher to be recognised as a teacher, irrespective of setting. Specifically, ECA have recommended that the following five principles should inform any reform going forward:

1. A teacher is a teacher—ECTs should be recognised, valued and treated as part of the broader teaching profession. A profession with distinct knowledge and practice requirements based on who, where and how they teach.
2. Requirements for teaching qualifications should be upheld to a high standard.
3. A broad range of qualification structures are currently recognised in early childhood education, however consistency in course length and child age range is needed.
4. Teacher registration should be inclusive of ECTs and applicable for all teaching settings.
5. Diversity in the teaching profession should be valued and prioritised— barriers to starting and completing qualifications need to be identified and addressed.

Model 1 sets a very clear standard of teacher registration in the NT and a consistent expectation of all teachers across sectors and settings. Ensuring that non-school settings have parity in educational status with schools would be a very welcome reform in ECEC. 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 and valuing the pathways to teaching that have been chartered through the ECEC profession.

While we support Model 1 in principle, there are some areas of contention. These are outlined below:

- Improved oversight cannot be assumed simply by way of registration of early childhood teachers. This implies there's no quality measures in place currently when in fact, the National Quality Standards (NQS) and National Quality Framework (NQF) are already measuring the quality of teaching practice in early childhood. ECA NT would argue that the oversight in place in the early childhood sector is even more rigorous than for primary and secondary educators. We would also ask for clarity on who or where this 'oversight' may come from. The over-regulation of the early childhood sector is a well-documented problem already.
- Many five-year-olds are already being taught and assessed using the Australian Curriculum as the mandated curriculum for school settings. Teachers of children in the Transition year will already be very familiar with the Foundation content of the Australian Curriculum and as such, this represents little change.
- Where it is stated that implementation of Model 1 would encourage the retention of ECEC specialisations, ECA and ECA NT argue that this is unlikely, unless the remuneration and conditions in long day care and community early learning settings are aligned to those afforded to teachers in primary and secondary classrooms. ECA and ECA NT suggest that there will still be a drift of the ECEC teaching workforce into preschool and Transition settings given the difference in remuneration and working conditions.
- The removal of a Principal's single authority to determine the suitability of staff for schools is noted, however on balance, this risk is outweighed by the advantages of a single register. Furthermore, staffing the early childhood and education sectors should be about the right people in the right jobs for their interests, abilities and circumstances. The proposed changes within Model 1 will not address significant disparities in pay and conditions (such as leave entitlements, working hours, levels of responsibility) and lack of professional recognition. In any case, there will still be the potential for principals and leaders to apply for waivers to gain greater flexibility in hard-to-staff sites even with the reformed registration process. This does not negate the need for Principal discernment, instead affirming the need for close engagement by the Principal in any recruitment processes.
- While this model will place an onus upon Principals to check conditions on teacher registration and qualifications, ECA expect that a good Principal should always exercise due diligence and professional responsibility when employing any staff member.

This model would likely address and find a place for the teaching students who are unable to pass LANTITE (Literacy and Numeracy Test for Initial Teacher Education) to graduate from Birth-8 and Birth-12 degrees, but would still make excellent practitioners in early childhood settings. It is arguable that the presence of LANTITE has had impacts on enrolments into early childhood degrees (those which are dual-accredited with AITSL i.e. Birth–8, Birth–12) and completions. LANTITE may act as a deterrent for upskilling and influence choice of course enrolment. Where teachers already have registration status, LANTITE is not a logical inclusion. This is also inconsistent when compared with other qualifications such as Graduate Certificates and Diplomas, and of course the Diploma and Certificate III ‘top-up’ combination which do not require LANTITE. There is limited data on the relationship between LANTITE and teacher efficacy and effectiveness, but its impacts on diversity are already becoming evident.²

2. Supporting teacher progression

ECA reinforces that the intent of this aspect should be alignment and collaboration between the school and non-school sector to support ECTs to progress to full registration. Furthermore, we support the recognition of worthy ECTs in non-school settings as Highly Accomplished and Lead Teachers (HALTs), with the additional pay and professional status which this brings.

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. Particularly within the NT, the ECEC sector is made up of a mixed and diverse array of providers including government, not-for-profit, private/for profit, community-based, parent-run services and Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations.

Currently, the system is framed in a very school-centric way, with school-based teachers and principals being required to mentor and supervise early childhood teachers even when they may lack expertise in early childhood. This is particularly problematic for teachers working in non-school settings who need to be assessed by a school-based principal and panel of fully registered teachers from school settings. This privileges school settings and has the potential to impact the career progression of early childhood teachers. There is now the timely opportunity to

² Alison L. Hilton and Rebecca Saunders, “LANTITE’s impact on teacher diversity: Unintended consequences of testing pre-service teachers” *Aust. Educ. Res.* (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-023-00628-6>

re-think how to create a broader, more equitable and inclusive system that provides all teachers opportunities to progress their professional goals, receive professional recognition and equitable pay and conditions.

It is imperative that early childhood professionals are engaged in the mentoring, supervision and endorsement of early childhood teachers and that these voices are amplified. If an early childhood service has a suitable leader or nominated supervisor with equivalent qualifications and experience to that of a school principal, this person should be given the authority to mentor and endorse the application for an ECTs full registration. For teachers in non-school settings in underserved communities, including regional, rural and remote areas, services with inexperienced leaders, out-of-scope services, where there is a lack of fully registered ECTs and so on, ECA could facilitate and coordinate regional hubs of mentoring and approval using local early childhood experts. ECA NT Committee Members could sit on a panel of approved mentors and supervisors, and this panel could include employees from the Department of Education (DoE) and Teachers Registration Board (TRB).

ECA recommendation: That ECTs working in non-school settings can be mentored, supervised and endorsed for full registration using suitable registered teachers within their current workplace. Where this isn't feasible, regional hubs or communities of practice be developed comprised of a panel of suitably qualified and experienced early childhood professionals that can fulfil this role. These positions require adequate resourcing in recognition of the professional responsibility and time commitment of early childhood peers.

It is reasonable to expect that ECEC leaders and teachers are compensated for the time they commit to this important mentoring role, given the current and increasing demands on the workforce. This could be resourced through grants available to incentivise mentors to support the emergent workforce. ECA National Office would be a suitable organisation, with others such as SNAICC (National Voice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children and Families), to auspice these grants.

Sustained government contribution to the professional learning of the ECEC workforce is supported by ECA. There are differences across systems (i.e. government and non-government), and in how early childhood teachers, and Diploma and Certificate III educators are able to access professional learning opportunities. With a focus on improving quality and inclusivity in ECEC settings, it is important that all ECEC staff can access quality and impactful professional learning opportunities alongside their colleagues.

Currently, many ECEC educators living and working in remote and very remote locations can only access and participate in mandatory training, and professional development (including practicum placements) by travelling to

Darwin or Alice Springs for extended periods and multiple times over the duration of their course. In addition, the need to travel for study can require small services to close during this time as it cannot maintain an adequate level of staffing.

An NT-specific strategy to alleviate the cost burden of delivering training in remote and very remote locations and promote remote Vocational Education and Training (VET) delivery, is to pay NT registered training organisations (RTOs) an additional 80% on top of the standard Annual Hours Curriculum (AHC) rate. While this funding goes some way to assist RTOs to deliver in remote and very remote locations, small enrolment numbers coupled with travel and accommodation expenses, and the additional support and course content adaptation requirements for delivering to culturally diverse participants, continue to make this provision financially challenging.

Lower rates of university enrolment, accompanied with increasing attrition rates, suggest that greater or more targeted wraparound supports for pre-service teachers would be worthy of further consideration. Similarly, flexible modes of delivery for teachers working in the ECEC sector is supported. This may look like part-time, online or flexible delivery, but with a focus also on building collegial professional connections across cohorts to promote professional identity and recognition and the relational skills so important in ECEC.

Mentorship not only for pre-service teachers, but mentorship of early career teachers and new leaders also is likely to strengthen the profession.³ Consideration of mentor qualifications, experience and attributes, their accessibility, particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD), regional and remote ECEC educators, is necessary. Robust and purposeful monitoring and evaluation is welcome, however should not pose undue burden to ECEC services and the sector more broadly.

Ensuring new ECTs are working within a mentally healthy workplace has demonstrated benefits in assisting them to develop and thrive and grow. Research by Monash University⁴ identified six interconnected elements that contribute to educator wellbeing.

Individual educator factors include:

- collegial relationships
- workplace culture

³ Jennifer M. Longley and Jennifer M. Gilken, "Mentoring in Early Childhood Settings: Elements of Effective Relationships," *Dimensions* 48, no. 1 (2020): 17-21. [EJ1292491.pdf \(ed.gov\)](#)

⁴ Be You, *Beyond self-care: An educator wellbeing guide* (Be You, 2023), 6, <https://beyou.edu.au/resources/educator-wellbeing-guide>

- leadership
- community
- governance and policy

ECA proposes that articulating, planning for and implementing three of these elements at service and provider level should underpin and support structured mentoring programs. That is, by fostering collegial relationships, a positive workplace culture, and strong leadership, early childhood teachers enter into an environment which recognises their knowledge, qualifications and professional experience, but also has a vested interest in developing their expertise.

ECA recommendation: That accessible and culturally appropriate systems of mentorship and support are established and formalised through a funded grant-based program to encourage the retention, growth of and support for the existing ECEC workforce, and for newly qualified teachers entering into the ECEC sector. Consideration be given to ECA auspicing these grants.

The contextualisation of the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (APSTs) has already been done for all Initial Teacher Education (ITE) courses in the NT. Further translation and changes to terminology would be redundant and duplicative and undermine the professionalism of the workforce who are adept at contextualising policy documents into early childhood practice. The work that does need to happen is mapping all degrees to the national standards and supporting the use of the APSTs for students on placements in non-school settings.

Accompanying evidence guides that reflect shared standards for all teachers no matter where they teach would support the transferability and consistent understandings of the APSTs. An example of where this has been done well is through the [Victorian Institute of Teaching](#), where mapping of professional knowledge descriptors to evidence examples has been completed and are applicable to early childhood settings.

There are alternate formats which would make the APSTs easy to understand and presented in digestible and interactive formats including short online modules, video presentations and fact sheets. ECA, as a recognised and trusted partner for quality assured professional learning for the early childhood sector across Australia, would be well-placed to support this work.

ECA's [Learning Hub](#) demonstrates the breadth and depth of professional learning developed to positively impact the professional knowledge, identity and practice of ECEC leaders, teachers and educators working with young children and their families in varied contexts. ECA are leaders in professional learning and strategic project delivery, and would welcome the opportunity to support the work of the Department. We engage with subject-

matter experts to develop professional learning that is directly relevant to educators; our content is peer reviewed, extensively tested and evaluated regularly. As much as possible, we would seek to engage and contract highly skilled local staff, sub-contractors, subject matter experts (SMEs) and ECA NT Committee Members who have local knowledge and can contextualise materials for the NT context.

3. Fees

ECA supports the proposed fees for registration of early childhood teachers, which are consistent with those in other jurisdictions.

4. Other matters to consider

National inconsistencies

ECA acknowledges the complexity of qualifications and teacher registration in the many state and territory jurisdictions. Proposed changes to qualifications need to consider current constraints and barriers to achieving consistency, to improve the enrolment and completion numbers of prospective early childhood teachers.

Where we see inconsistencies in different jurisdictions around teacher registration, we see these inconsistencies translated across ITE courses. These differences are also reflected in how articulation, Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and credit transfers are handled in alignment with the *Australian Qualifications Framework*⁵ by ACECQA and AITSL. Currently, the qualifications of primary school teachers are not recognised to work in early childhood settings. The opportunity for primary and secondary teachers to complete a Diploma or Certificate III top up to be 'taken as early childhood teachers' under regulation 242 ('Persons taken to be early childhood teachers') of the Education and Care Services National Regulations in most jurisdictions concludes at the end of 2024. Teachers completing the top up qualification prior to the end of this extended period (2024) will fulfil the requirement to be 'taken as an ECT'. Alternatively, an ACECQA-approved post-graduate qualification may be a pathway for primary

⁵ Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA). (n.d.). *Recognition as an 'equivalent early childhood teacher' - Qualifications for centre-based services with children preschool age or under - Qualification requirements - Qualifications*. <https://www.acecqa.gov.au/qualifications/requirements/children-preschool-age-or-under/recognition-as-an-equivalent-early-childhood-teacher>

and secondary qualified teachers to be qualify and be recognised as early childhood teachers under the same provision. However, the structure and cost to potential early childhood teachers of the current offering of top-up and post-graduate qualifications is prohibitive in many cases from even commencing study when already employed as a teacher in a primary or secondary context. Unless there is another extension, this opportunity will also be time-limited. Greater innovation is needed to recognise the current registration status, qualifications and experience of practising teachers and using these as building blocks into a more flexibly delivered early childhood teaching qualification which incentivises practising teachers to consider early childhood teaching as a viable and worthwhile career aspiration and pathway. While the robustness and integrity of the early childhood teaching qualification must be maintained, but that there is an opportunity to address upskilling barriers with intentionality and innovation.

Management support

ECA also sees a role for increased support for educational leadership in the early childhood sector. Developing and implementing a management support function for ECEC leaders, as has been undertaken by the [Queensland Government](#), would stabilise early childhood leadership across the Territory. This Framework or statutory body could provide leaders capability building opportunities and empowerment, as well as access to resources and advice on highly complex and contextualised matters they may not yet be equipped to manage. This could include HR, legal and governance matters. Finally, this initiative would provide a way for ECEC providers, especially those in rural, regional and remote locations, to be supported to grow their capacity and test ideas professionally. ECA (National Operations) is well placed to coordinate this function, in partnership with DoE, and would engage with SNAICC to ensure the Framework is grounded in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives and ways of knowing and being.

Early childhood expertise in leadership

ECA understand challenges in recruitment and retention of early childhood professionals, also into the DoE and Regulatory bodies, noting a concerning lack of early childhood expertise in this highly complex space. ECA see this as a significant barrier to strengthening the work of the ECEC sector and deepening knowledge through the work of those with the specific expertise and understanding of the unique importance and challenges of early childhood pedagogy. Going forward, ECA would like to see intentional and strategic recruitment of early childhood professionals into corporate leadership positions to better inform policy and practice for young children and their families.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early childhood teachers

Innovative approaches are needed to encourage and support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to engage with and complete ECEC qualifications in community. Curriculum in ECEC qualifications should be contextualised and relevant to preservice teachers and educators, while still maintaining robustness and rigour. These are not mutually exclusive. An intentional consultation process with key stakeholders would be welcome to address how preservice educators and teachers could undertake practicums within their own remote communities and understand the specific barriers they face. ECA NT could work as a partner to provide support to community in relation to governance, operations and compliance matters, to complement community knowledge and ways of knowing and being.

Working with and in support of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who choose to qualify and work in their community, offers considerable benefit to the children and families who they serve through ECEC. Having a skilled, qualified and local workforce ensures the community, and its histories, knowledge systems, cultures, values and language, are valued and underpin the ECEC service.

With regards to the recognition of prior learning and experience, some remote ECEC services have reported a lack of recognition within the current approved qualifications and from RTOs for the extensive cultural knowledge and experience that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander educators bring to the education and care of children. Better recognition of Aboriginal educators' cultural knowledge and experience in local child rearing practices can contribute to better outcomes in ECEC qualification completions.

Concluding thoughts

ECA national office and the NT Committee jointly welcome the overall intent of this reform to recognise and value Early Childhood Teachers, particularly those with degrees focused on children Birth-5 years of age. We support Model 1 with important clarifications on the rationale. We also advocate strongly for the pursuit of equity in the pay and conditions to support the most appropriately qualified teachers to educate and care for young children. We look forward to opportunities to contribute to and support the career progression and pathways for Early Childhood Teachers in recognition of their membership of the wider teaching profession.