

Submission: A path to universal ECEC Draft Report

Dear Commissioners

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the Draft Report. My submission provides a response to the findings and recommendations with suggested **Additions** relating to:

1. Supporting equitable access for children living in regional / remote and low-socio-economic areas, specifically:
 - Children experiencing disadvantage and vulnerability are less likely to attend than their more advantaged peers. [**Draft finding 2.2**] and related workforce barriers to accessing professional development [**Draft finding 3.7**]
AND
 - Government contributions to professional development for the ECEC workforce to deliver more inclusive ECEC, including for children with disability, developmental delay or additional needs, children who have experienced trauma and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, and work with families – including families in complex or challenging situations – to engage with and participate in ECEC. [**Draft recommendation 3.6**]
BY
 - **recognising the need for and providing operational funding for targeted professional learning and resource support** to identify and address localised issues and barriers related to community disadvantage, child vulnerability and equitable access [**Addition 1**]

2. A review of the National Quality Framework focussing on the way in which services are assessed against the National Quality Standard, in order for assessments to be made more accurate, consistent and efficient, specifically:
 - To improve the transparency of the ECEC regulatory system, including metrics on ... monitoring, compliance and enforcement activities [**Draft recommendation 8.1**]
AND
 - incorporate feedback from ECEC providers as well as new findings from research on ECEC quality [**Draft recommendation 8.2**]
BY
 - **including collection of information on staffing as part of the NQS Assessment and Rating process** in relation to legislated requirements for age group, qualification, ratios [**Addition 2**]

RESPONSE TO DRAFT REPORT: SUGGESTED ADDITIONS

1. **Provide operational funding for targeted professional learning and resource support** to identify and address localised issues and barriers related to community disadvantage, child vulnerability and equitable access

This suggested addition to the Draft Report is based on the findings of the Supporting Participation in Early Childhood Education (SPIECE) research (Harrison et al. 2023b; Harrison et al., 2022), which was initiated by the NSW Department of Education to “better understand and improve the participation of children from low SES backgrounds” and “build the evidence base and support future policy making on efficient and sustainable improvement” through gathering evidence on the

measurable impact of non-fee intervention(s) on participation rates (Request for Quotation and Statement of Requirements).

The aim of the SPiECE project was to encourage and support early childhood leaders and educators working in preschool and long day care centres in three low SES communities in metropolitan and regional NSW to build positive relationships with families, better understand ways of working with families living in complex situations, be proactive in promoting regular attendance and engaging families in their children's learning and provide practical assistance to address specific family concerns. The SPiECE professional learning and support intervention comprised three components:

- (i) support visits and professional mentoring by members of the research team that provided active, ongoing support to ECEC leaders and educators to assist them identify and address the needs of families and children;
- (ii) a 4-module Professional Learning Program delivered on-site by the research team in each community that sought to increase educators' knowledge about how best to support parents' efforts to enrol and maintain their children's participation in ECEC;
- (iii) up to \$15,000 in 'community incentives funding' (CIF) to enable centres/schools in each community to provide the practical resources that would address locally identified barriers.

Participants were supported to undertake a situational analysis to focus attention on and discuss the factors in their community/setting that inhibited children's enrolment/attendance and families' participation. Spending time to delve into the specific, contextual barriers and strengths of the community, families and children, and focusing participants' attention on the 'problem' and how they could address it, ensured their proposals for CIF initiatives were focused and relevant. The local initiatives designed by participants were illustrative of four broad themes:

- (i) developing trust and a sense of belonging between families and the ECE setting; e.g., by setting up a comfortable, separate space where educators and families could sit together to complete forms and documentation;
- (ii) addressing non-fee costs associated with enrolment in ECEC; e.g., by purchasing appropriate required clothing, drink bottles, insulated lunch boxes, or hats;
- (iii) supporting families experiencing challenges related to having children with disabilities and/or impacted by trauma; e.g., by provided training for staff and families; or 'backfill' to enable educators to observe, work with, and engage in professional conversations with allied health professionals 'in-situ' and support children in group ECEC contexts;
- (iv) increasing families' understanding of the value of ECEC; e.g., by developing and distributing a flyer on the importance of ECEC to a wide range of community services and businesses.

Evaluation of the SPiECE professional learning and support intervention demonstrated the benefits and positive impact of linking professional development in ECEC settings at a community level with initiatives for practical outcomes through the provision of financial support. The allocation of CIF resource funding directly to centres/schools empowered them to make local decisions and take actions to address local concerns and barriers to ECEC participation. Educators were able to address needs that specifically applied to their children and families, and through working with other local centres/schools to, potentially, collaborate on shared costs of providing specialist support for children such as occupational health or speech therapy on-site. Results showed that the design and

delivery of inclusive, locally relevant strategies and initiatives by centres/schools had positive outcomes for families' engagement with, and children's enrolment and attendance in, ECEC programs in the year before school.

FURTHER COMMENT: This suggested addition also relates to **Information request 7.1** regarding the appropriateness and responsiveness of the Community Child Care Fund (CCCF) to address practical barriers to ECEC access that families may face. The CCCF includes "sustainability support" for services that includes upskilling local staff of educators, as well as building relationships with families. This is encouraging; however, it is important to recognise the need for effectively designed professional learning, mentoring, and support over time, as illustrated by the SPiECE research, for funding support to be effective.

FURTHER COMMENT: The SPiECE methodology included the collection of child attendance records for the first year of the project (2019, pre-COVID). Findings reported in Harrison et al. (2023b) are relevant to **Draft Finding 5.1** that all children aged 0–5 years should be able to attend up to 30 hours or three days of quality ECEC a week for 48 weeks per year. The SPiECE study sample comprised 971 children aged 4 to 5-years who attended 19 ECEC centres/schools (15 long day care, 2 preschools, 2 school-based preschools) in low SES communities in regional and metropolitan areas of NSW. Children's participation across the year was calculated as the number and per cent of enrolled days attended. Results showed that:

- (i) the average number of enrolled days per 10-week term were significantly lower for children attending preschool (22.35) versus long day care (24.26), $F(1,3138) = 62.39, p < .001$,
- (ii) attendance rates were higher for children attending long day care centres (90%) than for children attending a preschool centre/school (84%) ($F(1,3138) = 112.57, p < .001$).
- (iii) attendance was more stable for children who attended a preschool than children who attended a long day care centre: 85% of children attended the same preschool centre/school for all four terms compared to only 51% of children enrolled in long day care centres. One-third (33%) of children enrolled in long day care centres attended for two or three terms, and one-sixth (16%) attended for only one term.

2. Collection of information on staffing as part of the NQS Assessment and Rating process in relation to legislated requirements (by age group, qualification, ratios)

The Draft Report *Priorities for research to support childhood development* raise questions about the relationship between National Quality Standard (NQS) ratings and child outcomes, suggesting that "if educator-to-child ratios and qualification requirements are set at too low a level, ECEC will not optimally support childhood development" (p. 121). The associations between NQS ratings, staff qualifications, staff-to-child ratios, and children's development are important areas to address in Australia. Requesting details of staff qualifications as part of the NQS Assessment and Rating system would make it possible for associations among NQS ratings and other contributors to quality.

The available national data on NQS ratings is an excellent resource for researchers, and has generated key findings on the associations among quality and structural features such as type of service (long day care vs preschool), type of ECEC provider (for-profit vs not-for-profit), size of provider organisation (multi-site vs stand-alone), community SES, location (urban / regional / remote) and stability of ownership (Char et al., 2023; Harrison et al., 2023a, 2023c). Extending the

NQS data to include staff qualifications would enhance this resource and provide further opportunities to understand and improve quality in Australian ECEC settings.

The Exemplary Early Childhood Educators at Work (EECE@W) research project has generated some evidence on associations between NQS ratings and staff qualifications (Gibson et al., 2023; Harrison et al., 2023d). In Stage 1, the EECE@W study recruited ECEC centres across Australia that had achieved ratings of Exceeding NQS in all seven Quality Areas. A total of 304 educators provided information on their qualifications. In Table 1, the distribution of qualifications for the EECE@W sample is contrasted with 2021 national workforce census data. Table 1 also summarises wider context differences for NQS ratings and qualifications by service type (preschool vs long day care).

All of the participating EECE@W preschools and long day care services had an overall NQS rating of Exceeding. 2023 NQS data for the wider Australian context showed that 55% of preschools, but only 21% of long day care centres, had achieved Exceeding NQS ratings. Our data suggest the disparity between preschool and long day care quality ratings may reflect staffing differences. Table 1 shows that the proportion of degree-qualified educators in the EECE@W sample was slightly higher than figures reported in the 2021 Australian Workforce Census for comparable (Exceeding NQS) preschool services: 52.2% vs. 41.3%, but almost three-times higher (34.3% vs. 12.4%) for long day care centres.

For diploma-qualified educators, the EECE@W sample was similar to the 2021 Workforce Census for long day care centres: 42.2% vs. 47.5%; but lower for preschools: 19.6% vs. 30.1%. For staff with certificate qualifications: the EECE@W sample was lower than the Workforce Census for long day care: 23.5% vs. 32.2%; but similar for preschool: 28.3% vs. 24.2%.

Table 1: *ECEC Settings and Participants: Type of Setting by Educator Qualifications and Positions*

		Preschool		Long Day Care	
	EECE@W Sample N = 304	EECE@W Sub-sample n=138	2021 Census ^a	EECE@W Sub-sample n = 166	2021 Census ^a
Qualifications					
Certificate	25.7%	28.3%	24.2%	23.5%	32.2%
Diploma	31.9%	19.6%	30.1%	42.2%	47.5%
Degree	42.4%	52.2%	41.3%	34.3%	12.4%
NQS Quality Rating			Q2, 2023 ^b		Q2, 2023 ^b
Exceeding NQS	100%	100%	55%	100%	21%
Meeting NQS			41%		67%
Working Toward NQS			1%		12%

Note:

^a source is <https://snapshots.acecqa.gov.au/workforcedata/wfglance.html>

^b source is <https://www.acecqa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-08/NQF%20Snapshot%20Q2%202023%20FINAL.PDF>

Findings from Stage 1 of the EECE@W study, reported in Harrison et al. (2023d), provide detailed information on the work activities completed by staff with different qualifications and in different ECEC settings, which sheds further light on possible links between qualification profiles in services achieving Exceeding NQS ratings.

Stage 3 of the EECE@W study recruited a further sample of 113 educators working in 10 ECEC services, that represented a mix of long day care and preschool settings. The proportion of qualifications was very similar to the Stage 1 sample: 37% were degree-qualified; 41% were diploma-qualified; and 22% held a certificate-level qualification (Gibson et al., 2023). This work shines a light

on the importance of staffing profiles and role complementarities in the ECEC workforce that warrant further investigation.

References

- Char, V., Harrison L. J., & Li, H. (2023). Macro-structural predictors of Australian family day care quality. *Frontiers in Public Health* <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2023.1114256>
- Gibson, M., Press, F., Harrison, L., Wong, S., Cumming, T., Ryan, S., Crisp, K., Richardson, S., Gibbs, L., Cooke, M., & Brown, J. (2023) *Shining a Light on Early Childhood Educators' Work: A report from the Australian study Exemplary Early Childhood Educators at Work: A Multi-Level Investigation*. Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, QLD. <https://eprints.qut.edu.au/241514/>
- Harrison L. J., Andrews, R., Hadley, F., Irvine, S., Waniganayake, M., Barblett, L., Davis, B., Hatzigianni, M., & Li, H. (2023a). Protocol for a mixed-methods investigation of the structures and processes that support quality improvement in early childhood education and care in Australia. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 155. 107278. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2023.107278>
- Harrison, L.J., Redman, T., Lavina, L., Brown J., Hadley, F., Waniganayake, M., Davis, B., Wong, S. (2023b) Unpacking and unpicking the challenge of 600 hours of preschool education. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood* <https://doi.org.10.1177/18369391231219829>
- Harrison L. J., Waniganayake, J., Brown, J., Andrews, R., Li, H. Hadley, F., Irvine, S., Barblett, L., Davis, B., Hatzigianni, M. (2023c). Structures and systems influencing quality improvement in Australian early childhood education and care services. *Australian Educational Researcher* 4, 1–23. doi: 10.1007/s13384-022-00602-8 <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-022-00602-8>
- Harrison, L. J., Wong, S., Brown, J., Gibson, M., Cumming, T., Bittman, M., & Press, F. (2023d). Taking a detailed look at early childhood educators' worktime. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/18369391231219820>
- Harrison, L. J., Wong, S., Degotardi, S., Waniganayake, M., Hadley, F., Davis, B., Jones, C., Fordham, L., Reade, S., Redman, T., Sadow, L., & Brown, J. (July, 2022). *Early Childhood Education (ECE) Participation of Children from Low Socio-Economic Status (SES) Backgrounds – A Research Project*. Final Report for the NSW Department of Education. <https://research-management.mq.edu.au/ws/portalfiles/portal/278063150/277412027.pdf>

Prepared and submitted by:

Professor Linda J. Harrison
Research Fellow in Early Childhood Education
Macquarie School of Education
Centre for Research in Early Childhood Education
Faculty of Arts
Macquarie University
Sydney, NSW

February 16, 2023