



Submission to the Review of the Melbourne Declaration on Education Goals for Young Australians

Thank you for the opportunity to inform the Review of the Melbourne Declaration on Education Goals for Young Australians (the Melbourne Declaration).

The Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) is the independent national authority established under *the Education and Care Services National Law* to guide the implementation and administration of the National Quality Framework (NQF). We support all governments and the education and care sector to realise the benefits of the NQF.

The NQF was introduced from 1 January 2012, building on previous government commitments and reforms, including the Melbourne Declaration, to create a national system for regulating education and care services. It sets standards for safety and quality so that all children who attend long day care, preschool/kindergarten, outside school hours care and family day care are supported to have the best start in life. The NQF is jointly governed by the Australian Government and all state and territory governments as a means of driving continuous improvement, realising the efficiency benefits and cost effectiveness of a unified national system with shared accountability.

The NQF was created to support improved short, medium and long term outcomes for children in Australia and is based on strong evidence that the earliest stages of a child's development have a significant impact on their later education, health and development outcomes.

Early childhood is when children develop not just their cognitive skills, but the creativity, resilience and emotional intelligence that they will need throughout their lives¹. Government policy that recognises this maximises the benefits of public investment in education by achieving gains for individuals' development, as well as for the economy and society as a whole.

All education and care services approved to operate under the NQF are assessed and rated against the National Quality Standard, which incorporates seven quality areas, including educational program and practice, children's health and safety, staffing arrangements, relationships with children, and leadership and service management.

Changes since the Melbourne Declaration

While the Melbourne Declaration currently includes references to early childhood education and care, these are limited to a broad commitment to support its development and strengthening, with no clear actions as to how this should be achieved. This review offers an important opportunity to expand how we think about education and to recognise that early education and care is an essential component of a child's learning experience.

¹ OECD, *Starting Strong V: Transitions from Early Childhood Education and Care to Primary Education*, 2017

As the issues paper notes, there has been significant reform of early childhood education and care since the Melbourne Declaration was agreed in 2008.

Almost 16,000 services across Australia are within scope of the NQF, including more than 7,500 long day care services, around 4,500 outside school hours care services, more than 3,000 preschool/kindergartens and around 600 family day care services/schemes.

In recent years, there has been a significant increase in participation in education and care in the year before school and marked improvement in the quality of regulated services.

With the continual and increasing demand for quality early childhood education, the professional profile of early childhood teachers is growing.

Early childhood teachers are now required to be registered/accredited in four jurisdictions (South Australia, Western Australia, Victoria and New South Wales), aligning expectations for practice and ongoing professional development with the rest of the school based teaching profession.

Given that more than three quarters of long day care services and preschools/kindergartens operating under the NQF are located in New South Wales, Victoria, Western Australia and South Australia, most early childhood teachers nationally are required to be registered/accredited.

In addition, early childhood educators and teachers are increasingly subject to high expectations in terms of professional practice (e.g. intentional and responsive teaching, critical reflection, collaboration and professional development) and continuous improvement, concepts that are embedded within and across the National Quality Standard.

The increasing professionalisation, and changing nature and range of work, within the education and care sector is also reflected in higher employer expectations for diploma and certificate III qualified educators, who make up most of the workforce.

Areas for action

As a minimum, ACECQA recommends that the Melbourne Declaration should emphasise the importance of high quality early childhood education and care, and its positive impact on social, emotional and educational outcomes for children.

A clear and explicit commitment to lifetime learning, starting from birth, by all governments will improve educational outcomes across the education sector.

In line with the recommendations of the *Lifting Our Game*² report, the Melbourne Declaration should better describe and support the values and principles of learning from birth. ACECQA recommends that the goals of the Melbourne Declaration be recalibrated to be inclusive of early childhood education and care, as well as schools, including consideration of:

² Pascoe, S. & Brennan, D. Report of the review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools through Early Childhood Interventions, December 2017

- the ways governments can support and promote high quality early childhood education, including emphasising its value and importance to the nation as a whole
- embedding the importance of the early years as the foundation for learning
- the impact of high quality early childhood education and care on children's educational outcomes and school readiness
- the need for successful transitions into school from early childhood education and care as part of the continuum of education.

The focus of quality teaching and educational leadership should not be constrained to school settings.

A review should recognise and support the role of early childhood teachers as part of the broader teaching profession, including through:

- achieving national consistency in registration/accreditation of early childhood teachers, in line with the recommendations from the National Review of Teacher Registration undertaken by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL)
- reviewing the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers to better reflect the teaching practice of early childhood teachers in prior-to-school settings, particularly those working in long day care services with very young children
- reviewing the Standards for Initial Teacher Education to include early childhood initial teacher education, recognising early childhood settings as educational venues, early childhood as a teaching specialisation, as well as teaching practice with children from birth upwards
- considering whether there is the need for a new national workforce strategy (the previous National Early Years Workforce Strategy lapsed at the end of 2016).

In the 21st century, digital literacy has become much more important and technology is changing the nature of teaching and support for educators. This is reflected in the children's education and care context. For example, educators are increasingly using digital platforms to document and support children's learning, and engage with families.

ACECQA recommends that an area for action and increased emphasis is the need to help young children to develop a healthy and productive relationship with technology, and to balance screen time with other activities, particularly outdoor, exploration and risk-benefit activities.

The future teacher workforce

In light of the existing and increasing supply and demand issues impacting the children's education and care workforce, it is very important to consider and review the overall teacher workforce needs of the future to ensure Australia can attract and retain high quality teachers where they will have the greatest impact.

Any strategies aimed at supporting and developing the teaching profession should be inclusive of teachers in all settings, including early childhood teachers in prior to and non-school settings. This is

particularly relevant given a large proportion of initial teacher education students graduate with a birth to eight or birth to 12 qualification that allows them to work either as a primary school teacher or as an early childhood teacher.

Education does not begin at school – children are born ready to learn. When *both* early childhood and school education are recognised and acknowledged as essential elements of the Australian education system, continuity and engagement in learning, and ultimately learning outcomes, will be enhanced.

I trust that this information is of assistance in informing this important review.

Yours sincerely



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