



Quality Rating Terminology Initiative Research

Qualitative and Quantitative Research Report

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Acronyms

ECEC	Early Childhood Education and Care
NQF	National Quality Framework
NQS	National Quality Standards
ACECQA	The Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority
OOSH	Out of School Hours Care
CALD	Culturally and Linguistically Diverse
NSW	New South Wales
QLD	Queensland
NT	Northern Territory
VIC	Victoria

When we refer to:

Preschool	Preschool, Kindergarten (Victoria), Reception, Pre-primary, Transition
ECEC	Long day care, Preschool, Family day care, OOSH, Occasional Care
Low Literacy	Anyone who self-reported to have a literacy level of 6/10 or below
CALD	Born overseas and/or one of their parents are born overseas and/or English is not first their first language

1. Background and Objectives

1.1. Background

The National Quality Framework (NQF) is a nation-wide Government initiative aimed at improving educational and developmental outcomes for children. In 2012, a quality rating system was introduced to assist parents, families, and carers to make informed choices about potential Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services for their child/children.

During the assessment and rating process, regulatory authorities monitor and evaluate ECEC services against seven key criteria. Services receive ratings for each of the seven quality areas, in addition to an overall quality rating. The five levels of the current quality rating system are as follows; 'Significant improvement required', 'Working towards National Quality Standard', 'Meeting National Quality Standards', 'Exceeding National Quality Standard', and 'Excellent'.

Past research demonstrated low awareness, understanding and usage of the quality rating system by parents and families Australia-wide. Interestingly, a 2018 study by ACECQA found that the language and presentation of the National Quality Standards (NQS) rating scale led parents to conflate the NQS with the minimum standards required for services to legally operate, rather than depicting it as distinct quality rating, designed to help them differentiate between services. Families often assumed that services rated as 'Working Towards' the NQS were falling below minimum government standards. These findings indicate that the current quality ratings are missing an opportunity to help parents and families' make an informed choice about their child's ECEC service where choice is available.

Furthermore, in some cases, confusing terminology contributed to poor staff motivation. Those that felt the assessment of their workplace was unfair and inaccurate could experience low morale and a sense of defeat, rather than feeling motivated to improve.

The Government is seeking to enhance children's access to quality ECEC by:

- Improving parents and families' understanding of service quality
- Improving parents and families' understanding of the quality ratings system
- Supporting parents and families in making informed decisions when choosing a service (where choice is available) no matter their literacy levels or cultural heritage

Research was therefore commissioned to better understand perceptions of quality and identify the most appropriate descriptive terminology for each label within the quality rating system.

1.2. Overall Research Objectives

The overarching objective of this research was to identify preferred terminology of the ECEC quality rating system amongst a broad range of parent and family stakeholders that take into consideration cultural and literacy differences.

More specifically, this study;

- Identified ECEC services and parent/families perceptions of quality, and their interactions with the NQS quality rating system
- Provided an understanding on the preferred terminology for label descriptors to be used in the NQS quality rating system

The qualitative phase of the study was broadened from its initial scope to identify complementary methods to communicate the understanding of quality with parents and families, through the combined use of words, colours and shapes. This objective was not explored in the quantitative phase of the research.

2. Methodology and The Sample

2.1. Methodology

ChatHouse conducted a program of qualitative and quantitative research for this study. The preliminary qualitative phase included 12 online group discussions with the general population, and 12 face-to-face depth interviews with indigenous Australians in the Northern Territory. The total qualitative sample size was 85 participants.

The group discussions lasted 1 hour and 45 minutes, and each in-depth interview ran for approximately 30-45 minutes. All qualitative research was completed between 31st July and 18th August 2023.

ChatHouse identified the preferred terms from each participant across the sample to determine the weighting of preferred terms for the general population and indigenous audiences. Through the analysis process, ChatHouse developed potential word sequences using like-terms which were later sized and validated within the quantitative survey.

The quantitative stage was conducted by our quantitative partner, Nature Research. A national online survey was conducted between the 11th and 24th of October 2023. It took on average 15-minutes to complete.

2.2. The Qualitative Sample

The group discussions included 10 groups with the target audience of parents and 2 groups with educators and directors of ECEC services. All 'parent' participants had children aged 0-5 years that currently attend an ECEC service, have attended an ECEC service in the past 12 months or intend to attend within the next 12 months. Within each group 2-3 parents also had a child aged 6-12 years that currently, previously or intends to attend an ECEC service.

All parents and educators were recruited from metropolitan and regional areas across NSW, Victoria and Queensland, with experience across a range of service types. Each parent group included Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) representation, and participants that identified as having low literacy.

The in-depth interviews were conducted by our indigenous research partner Kookaburra Consulting. These included 10 depth interviews with the target audience (parents) split equally between Darwin and Katherine in the Northern Territory, and two in-depth interviews with indigenous ECEC educators (one each in Darwin and Katherine).

2.3. The Quantitative Sample

There was a total of 610 parents and carers aged between 18-69 with children aged 0-5-years across Australia. This included 107 CALD parents, 78 Indigenous Australian parents and 71 parents with low literacy levels. The sample of participants were sourced from Nature Research's partner PureSpectrum to reach the participant targets.

Phase 1: Qualitative Findings

3. Choosing an ECEC service

3.1. Reasons for using ECEC services

Reasons for enrolling a child into an ECEC service are driven by four key factors; work commitments, socialisation, and school readiness, and to a lesser degree, providing a break for the primary carer, and boosting immunity in the hope that children avoid constant sickness.

*“You can’t afford to have one income these days. Without [childcare] you’d be on struggle street.”
(Indigenous Parent, Katherine NT)*

*“I can only give so much socialisation. She is my only child, and it’s important for me that she is learning social skills and learning to play with other kids and understand social cues.”
(Parent, Regional NSW)*

In addition to using ECEC services, many parents within the general population sample lean on family support - usually in the form of grandparents - to provide additional care for their young children. This is both to reduce the financial burden, and to foster familial relationships.

Whilst using family for childcare is generally very common amongst Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory, this research engaged parents that had decided against family care for their young children. All except two Indigenous parents in the sample have their children enrolled at an ECEC service five days a week. Reasons for not approaching family to care for young children include elderly or sick grandparents, extended family with substance abuse issues or concerns about their ability to provide safe and quality care.

*“I wouldn’t have my family looking after my kids.”
(Indigenous Parent, Darwin NT)*

3.2. What defines a ‘quality’ service?

Parents’ definition of ‘quality’ and their need for quality changes as children grow. In younger years, quality is centred on the extent to which the child is happy and nurtured. Once they get closer to starting school, a quality education becomes important. The need for quality, however, is less crucial for after school care services, which are driven more by convenience than child development.

*“Afterschool care is very different; they muck around for a couple of hours and then you pick them up.”
(Parent, Regional VIC)*

What defines a ‘quality’ service differs for everyone, and is often a product of parents’ lifestyle, education and culture. At a basic level, the provision of a safe and clean environment is the foundation of any good service, and paramount for all parents.

Beyond these fundamentals, quality services (before school age) were identified by three key factors;

Warm, nurturing staff

Most parents identify educators as the key to any 'quality service'. Significant staffing changes have the potential to shift parents' perceptions of a service from being high-quality to mediocre.

"We had really good staff members, but those educators left, and I found that level of care that I was used to wasn't there, so we moved her onto another centre...that's the most important thing to me, that consistency in nurturing and really fostering that relationship with my child."
(Parent, Metro QLD)

Families often enquire about staffing arrangements prior to enrolling. Child-to-educator ratios and educator turnover gives an indication of the level (and continuity) of care and attention their child will receive, as well as an insight into workplace culture and staff satisfaction.

"Ratios are the key part as I want to know my kids are getting the right attention for their intellectual development."
(Parent, Metro NSW)

"Family day-care was the best option for us – our daughter gets lots of one-to-one care, there's only four children."
(Parent, Regional NSW)

However, parents agree that much of what makes a service 'quality' is the intangible feeling created by educators in their relationships with children, and families more broadly. Parents highlight the warm and nurturing qualities they seek out in educators, such as speaking to and engaging with children in a loving and respectful way, akin to family. Equally, educators understand the importance of building a trusting and open relationship with the families in their service.

"Teachers who treat them like they are their own children."
(Parent, Metro NSW)

"My son is very affectionate, and he like his hugs. So one of the things we always look for is that interaction, that physical interaction between the carers and the kids."
(Parent, Metro VIC)

"Families need to trust in us and feel that their children are supported and nurtured."
(Educator, Regional)

Parents acknowledge that feeling 'safe' within an ECEC environment extends beyond physical safety, to feeling emotionally and socially supported. In some cases, a child's connection with a carer can be the factor preventing them from leaving an otherwise poor service.

"It feels homely, like there's a grandparent looking after your child. They actually care. It's not just a holding pattern, they're actually trying to build your child. I don't want just a childminder."
(Parent, Regional NSW)

"Quality is delivering family needs, and being responsive to the whole child, catering for their mental health, physical health, cognitive needs, social & emotional wellbeing, generally needs to be holistic."
(Indigenous Educator, Darwin NT)

Good communication with families

Good communication between educators and families is another marker of a quality service. Routine updates about what children are doing provides parents reassurance that their child is receiving quality care and being stimulated throughout the day. Further, individualised reports indicate that educators are in-tune with the needs and goals of each child and helping them develop holistically.

“We are kept notified and informed as to how the child’s journey is going, showing they are actually working on stuff with my kid.”
(Parent, Regional VIC)

“The reports to me really jump out as a sign of a good quality service. It shows where they’re meeting their marks.”
(Parent, Metro QLD)

“Communication, trust. Knowing that they will communicate with me well and that I can trust them to care for my daughter.”
(Indigenous Parent, Darwin NT)

Beyond formalised reporting and updates, parents and educators recognise that a quality service understands children’s needs and challenges, and openly communicates with parents about the best ways they can work together to support a child. This is particularly relevant for any behavioural challenges or skills such as toilet training, where the child would benefit from a consistent approach.

“They will tell us what’s missing in our child’s development, if there is anything, and that’s what we can work on at home.”
(Parent, Metro NSW)

Complimentary culture and ethos

Without first hand experience of a particular ECEC service, it can be difficult to define the culture, and yet for some parents this is an integral part of a ‘quality service’. Families are typically drawn to a service that reflects and compliments their own parenting style. Established ways of teaching, such as Montessori, may be easy to identify and seek out (or avoid), however, underpinning principles of these bespoke services are less explicit, and can require a degree of trial and error.

“We found more structure worked better for my youngest. We thought he preferred the open play, but he didn’t know what to do with himself... when we put him back into a structured environment, he was a lot better. He was taking instructions, and that translates to the home environment as well.”
(Parent, Metro VIC)

When discussing the culture, style, and principles of an ECEC service, parents tended to focus on the level of structured versus independent play and learning, inclusion of culture, and other values such as healthy eating.

“It didn’t really fit our mould of parenting, they had a chicken coop, inside which - love nature - but chicken coop inside? Supervision didn’t seem fantastic.”
(Parent, Regional NSW)

For CALD and indigenous families, inclusion of culture and a sense of belonging was often fundamental to their definition of a quality service. For one parent living in Sydney NSW, this meant a service that could provide her indigenous daughter with cultural experiences and build her cultural identity. Whereas for others, it was more about familiarity and comfort, knowing their children will be surrounded by educators and children that can speak their language, eat familiar foods, and engage in familiar cultural activities.

*“I’m looking for a multilingual day-care because at home we speak another language, so for the easy transition I’d look into one of those schools.”
(Parent, Metro QLD)*

*“My daughter’s indigenous and they have indigenous teachings and lessons every week where indigenous elders come into the school.”
(Parent, Metro NSW)*

Services that understand cultural nuance can develop stronger relationships not just with children, but with the parents and families that support them. One Indigenous Educator in Darwin spoke of her experience within the ‘Families as First Teachers Program’, in which she supports families to provide the best learning environments for their young children.

*“Quality is being culturally responsive to clientele, embracing differences, programs that are place based.”
(Indigenous Educator, Darwin NT)*

3.3. Decision-making process

Whilst reasons for choosing a particular ECEC service is highly dependent on the families’ individual needs and values, there were several consistent factors across the research regardless of socio-economic group, location or age of child.

With the exception of availability, there was no single factor that determined the choice of service, but rather a combination of factors.

Availability

Availability is a key driver of choice in ECEC services. With extensive waitlists, and pressure to enrol before birth, parents discussed being relieved to simply get a space for their child regardless of whether they felt it is the ‘perfect fit’.

*“The other service we considered couldn’t take our baby so we went for the one who covered both.”
(Indigenous Parent, Katherine NT)*

*“The wait list is huge, if you don’t get on during pregnancy, you’ve got no chance. You’d have to take what you get. We had to use a centre first that we knew we hated. We had no choice, otherwise one of us would have to take leave without pay.”
(Parent, Regional NSW)*

Options were often more limited for families in rural locations. According to parents and staff in Katherine (Northern Territory) there are only two Out of School Hours Care services available, which some suspect is due to insufficient staffing.

Location

The location and convenience of the ECEC service played a significant role in the decision-making process. Parents were often looking for a service which was either near home, near the school of older siblings, or on the way to work.

Alternatively, a child's future primary school became an influential factor for ECEC choice for children in their final year before school. Parents identified the benefit of enrolling their child at a service near their chosen primary school to assist with friendship development.

*"It's within walking distance from home, it had a place open and I knew this creche. It's also right next to the school where my daughter goes too."
(Indigenous Parent, Katherine NT)*

Personal observations of the ECEC

A key element of the decision-making process centred on observations of an ECEC service. Parents highlighted the importance of service visits to gain an overall 'feel' of the place and the staff, however this was often a process of trial and error. Despite all efforts to research, observe and find the most suitable service for their child, it's not until they experienced the service firsthand that they could determine whether it was a true fit.

*"We didn't know what a good or bad day-care would be like. The first one we managed get him into we didn't feel he was happy there. So we tried another one, and it was great."
(Parent, Regional NSW)*

Observations were based around how staff interacted with the children, parents, and each other as well as how organised the centre felt. Some would visit on multiple occasions at different times of the day to gain a true sense of how the centre was run.

*"I like to go and look at the different places and speak to the staff and watch how they interact with the kids and with me, and you just get a feeling."
(Parent, Regional VIC)*

*"Some were messy and all over the shop so I didn't have a good feel about it"
(Parent, Metro NSW)*

Reviews and recommendations

Reviews and recommendations from trusted friends and families were highly valuable. These provided a good understanding of the day to day running of ECEC services on everything from communication with parents to staff turnover.

Google reviews and community Facebook pages were also used, particularly by those without friends that could provide recommendations. Some parents did acknowledge however, the risk of relying on reviews, as parents' priorities for ECEC services may differ.

*"Listening to others - family and friends. If there's one I've heard good stuff about, one close, I'd go to that one."
(Indigenous Parent, Darwin NT)*

"I had no friends in my area, so I went to a Facebook group, I wanted word-of-mouth, I believe word-of-mouth more because I know how

*subjective my opinions are as well.”
(Parent, Regional NSW)*

*“Reviews are subjective, what is important to me might not be for someone else.”
(Parent, Regional VIC)*

For some indigenous parents in Katherine, however, there was no need to rely upon word of mouth. Decisions about where to enrol their child, came down to knowing the educators personally, and the educators already having relationships with their children.

*“It’s a familiar environment. You know the people working there. They know your children too.”
(Indigenous Parent, Katherine NT)*

Ratings

For approximately a third of the sample the quality ratings played a role with parents who were ideally looking for services with an ‘exceeding’ rating and at the very least ‘meeting’. Whilst ratings were never the sole factor for selecting an ECEC service, they help parents create a short list of services to visit and investigate in more detail.

*“I didn’t want a service that wasn’t meeting the recommendation.”
(Parent, Regional NSW)*

*“I have to do a longer commute in peak hour traffic but its ‘exceeding’ so that’s why I go there.”
(Parent, Metro NSW)*

*“I did look at the Government ratings but I didn’t put too much weight on that. It was more about finding what was the right fit for us, and very quickly visiting the centres you get a feel for the staff working there.”
(Parent, Regional NSW)*

Facilities and program offering

For some, ECEC services are an opportunity to expose their child to experiences, opportunities and skills they cannot access at home. This may include large outdoor spaces, and open free-play areas for families living in apartments, or a quality school-readiness program for those in the final year of pre-school.

A mother with a CALD background also emphasised the importance of food provisions in her decision-making process, explaining that her newborn’s future childcare would provide the opportunity for her daughter to experience a wide range of foods beyond their home style of cooking.

*“We would like a bub to be exposed to different cuisines, not restricted to what we eat...because sometimes, due to restrictions, religion, there are certain food that we don’t eat, but we wouldn’t want to impose that on our baby.”
(Parent, Metro QLD)*

Other families are driven by the desire for familiarity and consistency with their child’s home life. This may include multilingual educators to support the child’s transition, a service that

incorporates cultural teachings into the curriculum, or simply an environment that evokes the warmth of home.

*“I always want her to be in a space that’s very safe and like home, but there’s no sterile lights, there’s all lamps and warm lights.”
(Parent, Metro NSW)*

4. Parents' understanding & engagement with ratings

4.1. Awareness, understanding and experience of NQS

Parents had mixed awareness of any form of rating system for ECEC services. Even when shown examples of two NQS certificates that would be displayed in the front door of ECEC services, several participants reported not having seen anything similar in the entrance of their service.

Those that were aware of the NQS had typically encountered it during the process of choosing a service for their child, or in some cases, were introduced to it by a friend or family member that worked in the industry.

Amongst this 'aware' audience, engagement with the NQS was mixed. A proportion claimed that the ratings had little impact on their decision-making, typically citing logistical factors such as location and availability and the less tangible 'feeling' of the service as the driving factors in their decision-making. Others however, noted that service ratings did provide confidence and inform their choice, albeit choice from a shortlist of options that met their logistical requirements.

*"I know it exists but I would have no clue as to what my kindy is rated."
(Parent, Regional QLD)*

*"I wanted to try and get as much information as possible. So I loved that there was a rating system on the government website...I love it as a baseline, it's great to know that they're doing all the cleaning and stuff"
(Parent, Regional NSW)*

As well as helping to inform the decision about where to enrol, ratings occasionally have the potential to influence decisions about whether to remain at a service. Indeed, one dissatisfied parent reported having stayed at a service that was not a good cultural fit for her family, purely based on the 'Exceeding' rating, which made her feel they must be doing something right.

*"As an inexperienced person with a kid at day-care, I definitely kept sending my child there because of the ratings. I was like, surely there's something good going on. It made me trust them."
(Parent, Regional NSW)*

Some highlighted vastly different experiences at services with the same ratings, which reinforced the limitations of ratings in their view, and the importance of intangible factors such as 'the feeling they felt when visiting a service' and connection with educators.

*"The two centres were rated the highest that I've sent my daughter to, and I just couldn't believe the difference in the centres... it was fully passing everything with flying colours. But it was not good."
(Parent, Regional NSW)*

4.2. Expectations of a rating system

When the idea of an ECEC rating system was raised with 'unaware' parents, most agreed it would be good in principle, but had limited use.

*"I think it's important but whether it's true is another thing."
(Indigenous Parent, Darwin NT)*

Parents acknowledge that ratings are widely used across categories, from hotels and restaurants, to health-care practitioners and white goods. The majority of participants recognised the benefit of ratings in helping to narrow choices and feed into decision-making. That said, parents stressed that the factors that define a 'quality service' and priorities that guide decision-making are highly subjective and may not be fairly reflected in a rating.

*"Having a rating could help you create a short list."
(Parent, Regional VIC)*

*"I like it depending on what they use to come up with the ratings. I've got no idea what the factors are at the moment, but if I agree with the factors they are assessing them on, the I think it is a good idea."
(Parent, Metro NSW)*

Initially, most 'unaware' parents expected ECEC service ratings would be based on parent reviews (similar to Google reviews). Whilst this has the advantage of capturing the less quantifiable, 'essence' that defines a quality service ('the feeling' and the connections with staff), some parents recognised that there may also be scope for misuse of the system by disgruntled parents.

For the rating system to be useful and potentially impact decision-making, parents agreed it must be easy to interpret within a short timeframe. There is also an expectation that a national rating system would be communicated consistently across all states through use of certificates that were the same visually. This was felt to be particularly important for those that move interstate, or who live in border towns, and potentially access services in two different states.

4.3. Acceptable level of care

What is considered an acceptable rating for an ECEC service depends upon how families interpret the different ratings. Parents that were aware of the ratings when seeking out a new service focused on those that were either 'meeting' or 'exceeding' the standards.

Parents that were satisfied to send their child to a service that was 'meeting' the standards didn't necessarily have lower benchmarks for their child, rather they had a more positive view of services at this level, compared to those that claimed to only consider 'exceeding' services. These parents often assumed there was a thorough evaluation process for services to even meet the standards, and therefore anything above 'meeting' was a bonus.

Others were more critical of the 'meeting' rating and perceived these services to be 'average' or 'doing the bare minimum'. Whilst these parents often claimed a service that was only 'meeting' was unsuitable for their child, the reality is that not all families have access to an 'exceeding' service due to geographic location and availability.

Not surprisingly these different interpretations of the 'meeting' rating level impacted terminology and symbology preferences.

4.4. The importance of a scale

To understand the quality of an ECEC service, parents need to understand the rating in context. Most parents do not have the time nor inclination to read detail about how their service has been assessed. Rather they are interested in an information short-cut that identifies where their service sits along a scale.

It would be meaningless for a parent to learn that their service is 'Meeting the NQS' without knowing whether this is the lowest possible rating, top possible rating, or somewhere in the middle.

*"If you don't have a scale but see 'working towards', then that could be the lowest level, you just don't know. It (The Queensland Certificate) doesn't really tell you what other options there are with levels."
(Parent, Regional NSW)*

4.5. Reactions to current logos



Whilst for the most part the current logos are considered acceptable, they aren't felt to add anything to the overall rating system.

Given the limited understanding of the current quality rating levels, displaying a logo in isolation is unlikely to provide families with a clear understanding of how their service is rated in the broader context. Further, many felt that services were unlikely to display anything less than a 'meeting' and therefore questioned the need.

Colour choice within the logos also adds to confusion. There is a natural assumption that a green logo is 'good' and 'yellow' is lower, however in this case the 'working towards' logo is green, and the 'exceeding' logo is yellow.

Whilst using a different logo for 'excellent' to represent a variation from the broader rating system, the use of a tick risked being confusing for those in Victoria where the 'kinder tick' is already in use. What's more the use of red, which is often associated with a warning or danger, did not feel appropriate for the 'excellent' rating level.

5. Terminology

5.1. Overview

For each of the five rating levels, research participants were shown the rating description, alongside a list of potential labels. This included the original label (e.g. 'Significant Improvement Required') and a range of alternatives. Participants were asked to consider which option best reflected the definition.

Whilst recognising the benefit of the quality ratings for parents, educators were typically more defensive about, and forgiving of weaker ratings than parents. Educators were quick to highlight that ratings reflect a point in time, and a bad rating could be the result of 'a bad day'. In addition, whilst aiming and hoping for an 'exceeding' rating, educators recognised how hard it is to achieve 'meeting' or above.

Parents with low literacy levels, and Indigenous parents from regional Northern Territory, struggled to understand the definitions of each rating level, and had difficulty attributing appropriate labels. As a result, there was a preference amongst these audiences, for terms that use fewer and simpler words.

*"The words are too big, it needs to be simplified... These are big words for people with low language. I'd say, 'not good', simple language."
(Indigenous Educator, Katherine NT)*

5.2. Significant Improvement Required

Stimulus shown

<p>There is an identified significant risk to the safety, health and wellbeing of children. Immediate action will be taken to address issues.</p>	<p>1 star Unsatisfactory Limited Needs developing Fully not compliant with NQS Not met Does not meet NQS Poor quality Red Significant improvement needed Significant risk identified *</p>
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* Not explored in first 3 groups

Context to the response

Across the group parent sample, there was perceived to be a mismatch between the severity of the 'Significant Improvement Required' definition and the action taken. At the core of this definition is a 'significant risk to [children's] safety', which led many parents to incorrectly assume that any service with this rating would be shut down immediately.

*"I'm surprised they stay open, and if I saw that in the window I wouldn't send my son there at all!"
(Parent, Metro QLD)*

As a result, when identifying the most appropriate labels for this rating level, many parents believed the current term 'Significant Improvement Required' was too soft, and opted for more direct, harsh language that highlighted the severity of the risk.

*"I don't feel it's harsh enough, it's not part of this description that we read before. I don't know if that expresses the gravity of the situation."
(Parent, Metro VIC)*

Note, indigenous parents in Northern Territory did not assume these services would close, and stated they would not send their children there. Educators agreed that this rating level highlighted the need for significant improvements but were typically more open-minded and recognised that if a service was truly unsuitable to be operating it would be closed.

Adopting stronger language that reflects the definition will reinforce parents' expectations of a service closure, which may cause outrage from families when they learn this is not the case. Added to this, services that receive this rating may struggle to survive. The question is therefore whether there is scope to change the rating definition to reflect the fact that these services remain open, and authorities work closely alongside them to remedy the issues.

Detailed response to key terms

Significant Improvement Required (Current)

The existing term was not entirely rejected, albeit stronger alternatives were identified on the basis that the current label does not highlight the safety risk to children. That said, if the definition was to be toned down 'Significant Improvement Required' would be more appropriate.

Significant Risk Identified

This term, which comes directly from the definition, was proposed by a group participant and subsequently added to the stimulus to explore in remaining group and depths. Proponents of this term appreciated the explicit word choice, that directly reflects the rating definition and communicates the seriousness of the situation.

*"I like it, cause it says that they there is a risk, whereas 'does not meet NQS', that's so vague, like what is NQS? Whereas saying that there is a risk to safety, that's specific."
(Parent, Metro QLD)*

*"This sounds worse that 'Significant improvements needed'... and that's good, I want it to sound harsh."
(Parent, Regional QLD)*

Whilst agreeing they would never send their child to a service of this level, others believe this term went too far, and acknowledged the potentially devastating impact on services. This term was thought to be particularly punitive for services that performed well on all except one quality area.

*"Significant Risk implies harm or danger, but it depends which one of the 7 areas they got that mark in."
(Parent, Metro QLD)*

*"That is a death sentence for a centre to receive that."
(Educator, Regional)*

Does not meet NQS

This clear and objective label communicates that a service does not meet the standards. Liked for being more direct than the original 'Significant Improvement Required', which is open to interpretation, and does not explicitly state than standards have not been met.

*“It’s clearly stating that they’re not meeting the requirements.”
(Parent, Metro QLD)*

*“It’s more to the point without showing any kind of bias. It’s not open to interpretation, there are standards, and they didn’t meet them.”
(Parent, Regional QLD)*

*“Significant Improvement Required’ still implies that it meets some sort of standard. Whereas ‘Does not meet’ means it has a lot of work to do. It’s not a sliding scale, it just hasn’t made it.”
(Parent, Metro VIC)*

During the discussions the abbreviation of ‘NQS’ was not raised by participants and most spontaneously interchanged ‘NQS’ with ‘the standards’ during conversation. Outside the research setting, when the National Quality Standards have not been discussed in detail, however, there may be confusion about what ‘NQS’ represents. The Department should therefore consider replacing the abbreviation with complete words.

Unsatisfactory

The simple and direct term, ‘unsatisfactory’ was broadly understood to communicate a service that has not met the criteria, a minority argued the generic term was too ‘open to interpretation’. This single-word option appealed to some low-literacy and CALD participants who appreciated the simplicity.

*“It’s just one word so easy to understand.”
(Parent, Metro VIC)*

*“This feels more assertive than the original. There’s no room for fluffy language, it just doesn’t meet the standards.”
(Parent, Metro QLD)*

*“It’s a bit open to interpretation, it’s not very precise”
(Parent, Metro QLD)*

Poor Quality

Poor quality was the preferred term amongst Indigenous parents in Northern Territory, who described it as short and easy to understand. This term did not rate highly amongst the general population parents.

*“Simpler, straight up and honest. It tells you it’s not good quality.”
(Indigenous Parent, Darwin NT)*

*“I understand it better.”
(Indigenous Parent, Darwin NT)*

5.3. Working Towards the National Quality Standard

Stimulus shown

<p>Service provides a safe education and care program, but there are one or more areas identified for improvement.</p>	<p>Developing 2 Star Emerging Met with recommendations Improvement needed Highly commendable Inconsistent quality Sometimes meets NQS Basic Fair Poor Quality Bronze Not complaint with NQS Occasionally meets the National Quality Standard Approaching minimum quality standards</p>
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Context to the response

Parents agreed, that 'Working Towards the National Quality Standard', was not an aspirational level of service. Where choice is available, all parents agreed they would avoid sending their child to a service at this level, with 'Meeting' being the minimum level of service they would accept.

*"You aren't hitting the mark"
(Parent, Regional QLD)*

*"I would cry if we got this, I would feel like I had not been doing my job."
(Educator, Regional)*

That said, once in a service, parents appear to be less influenced by negative ratings. If parents discovered their child's service was rated at this level, most claim they would speak to the director to understand which quality areas received this rating, specifically why they under-performed, and what actions were being undertaken to address the issues. Depending on the parents' values and perceived severity of the services shortcomings, they would then decide on their course of action, however, none indicated they would remove their child from the service immediately.

*"While they aren't meeting the standards, I assume there is a plan in place to get there."
(Parent, Metro NSW)*

Parents recognise the range of service quality that must exist within the Working Towards level. Sandwiched between 'Significant Improvement Required', which they believe is entirely unacceptable for their child, and 'Meeting the National Quality Standard', which is acceptable for most. For this reason, parents and educators alike struggled to find a term that is appropriate for the full spectrum of 'Working Towards' services.

Detailed response to key terms

Working towards National Quality Standard (Current)

Despite the challenge of labelling such a broad rating level, the current label was generally well received and matched the definition provided. Use of the verb 'working' had a positive impact and gave the impression that the service is actively working on meeting the NQS.

“That’s good. Let’s say this rating was against ‘staffing arrangements’ – they’re not far off - it gives me some hope.”

(Indigenous Parent, Katherine NT)

Approaching Minimum Quality Standard

Well-liked by many, this label clearly matched the definition provided, albeit, too wordy for some.

‘Approaching’ was an encouraging term that felt appropriate for services that were close to ‘meeting’ the standards. Emphasis on ‘minimum standards’ however, made it slightly too negative for some educators.

“It doesn’t sound very promising, feels like a bit of a red flag.”

(Educator, Regional)

Improvement needed

‘Improvement needed’ was a term that is clearly understood and doesn’t rely on any knowledge of the Quality Standards. However, for those that do understand the Quality Standards it fails to highlight the fact that these standards are not currently being met.

As with the above options, ‘improvement needed’ effectively covers the broad range of service levels that come under this rating.

“A bit more simplified, you don’t know what minimum standards are when you first go.”

(Parent, Regional QLD)

“It tells me that it’s there but it needs more things to get up to standard. Less words, easy to read and understand.”

(Indigenous Parent, Darwin NT)

Basic

‘Basic’ was preferred by some indigenous participants with low-literacy, for its simplicity.

“Basic is really the only one, because it’s not too hard to read.”

(Indigenous Educator, Katherine NT)

“It’s easy to understand.”

(Indigenous Educator, Katherine NT)

5.4. Meeting the National Quality Standard

Stimulus shown

<p>Service meets the National Quality Standards. Service provides quality education and care in all seven quality areas.</p>	<p>Proficient Sufficient Acceptable quality Satisfactory Accomplished Met Highly commendable Quality Meets Meets the National Quality Standard Respectable Advanced 3 star Sound Good Good quality Silver Compliant with NQS NQS Well embedded Adept Achieving</p>
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Context to the response

There are two elements to the 'Meeting' rating definition, which can produce quite different impressions of a service at this level.

Most parent participants focused on the first sentence ('Service meets the National Quality Standards') as the basis for choosing their preferred terms. A minority, however, were struck by the second sentence that refers to 'quality education and care', which was more appealing and aspirational.

For these parents, it was important that the label reflects the level of quality and does not suggest that a service has simply done the bare minimum to 'pass'. As such, they favoured positive, and more aspirational language such as 'achieving' and 'proficient'. Perhaps not surprisingly, Educators – aware of the work and effort that goes into achieving this level of rating – also favoured these positive terms.

*"Meeting makes it sound like you have only just got there."
(Educator, Metro)*

*"[The definition] says the service provides quality, education, and care in all 7 quality areas. So I feel like that really needs to be reworded if we are going to grade that 'Satisfactory'."
(Parent, Metro NSW)*

Detailed response to key terms

Meeting National Quality Standard (Current)

Many parents were satisfied with the current terminology, which plainly communicates that the standards are being met. The subtle nuance between 'meeting' and 'meets' was identified by a handful of parents who described 'meeting' as an active term which suggests the service is continually meeting, rather than only having met during the assessment.

*"I'd probably go with the 'meeting' (instead of 'meets') cause, it's like they trying to keep working towards with getting better."
(Parent, Regional QLD)*

*“It tells you they’re on the right level, where they need to be.”
(Indigenous Parent, Katherine NT)*

However, ‘Meeting National Quality Standard’ falls short of capturing the full definition. Likened to terms such as ‘satisfactory’ or ‘average’, this label does not reflect the *quality* education and care delivered by these services.

*“It’s a synonym with ‘average’, it’s not above or below.”
(Parent, Metro NSW)*

Given previous research highlighted that parents often conflate the National Quality Standards with minimum requirements to remain operational, we must be cautious of language that suggests doing the bare minimum, for a rating level that is actually defined by quality.

Meets the National Quality Standard

This small change to the original term was preferred by a small number of parents, who largely believed the meaning was consistent with the original terminology. Overall, the preference for ‘meets’ was rooted in the simplicity of a shorter word.

A minority believe ‘meets’ was more conclusive, suggesting the service has arrived at a level of compliance.

*“Change to meets. Tells me its already there, not getting there, you’ve got there. Confirms to me that they’re on par.”
(Indigenous Parent, Katherine NT)*

Satisfactory

A concise term to communicate a service that has ‘passed’. Overall, the meaning of ‘Satisfactory’ was comparable with ‘Meeting the National Quality Standard’ and felt appropriate for the middle rating level. However, it falls short of communicating ‘quality’ education and care.

*“Satisfactory is a synonym with ‘average’ which is the same as ‘meets the NQS’.”
(Parent, Metro NSW)*

*“It’s the middle ground.”
(Parent, Regional NSW)*

Compliant with NQS

‘Compliant with NQS’ was generally viewed as a greater achievement than simply ‘meeting’ National Quality Standards, with the term ‘compliant’ indicating a rigorous assessment process.

*“The word ‘compliance’ is a lot stronger, because when I hear the word ‘meeting’ I can’t help but to think ‘just satisfactory’. It’s just okay. Whereas comply means, you know, it’s gone through this framework to get there. So I do feel safe to have my child there.”
(Parent, Metro VIC)*

*“It’s just saying that it’s meeting the benchmark.”
(Parent, Metro NSW)*

*“Tells me they’re doing what’s necessary to be a good service.”
(Indigenous Parent, Darwin NT)*

Achieving / Proficient

Whilst not selected in high numbers individually, many were drawn to positive terms such as ‘achieving’ and ‘proficient’, which acknowledged the good quality of service achieved.

For those with lower literacy ‘Achieving’ is more likely to be understood than ‘Proficient’.

*‘Meeting’ sounds half hearted, but ‘achieving’ is more successful”
(Parent, NSW, Regional)*

*“Achieving is more positive than ‘meeting’ it implies there has been effort put in, they have worked for it.”
(Parent, Metro NSW)*

*“I like proficient, it sounds more professional and doesn’t have the negative connotation of ‘meeting’.”
(Educator, Regional)*

Good / Good Quality / Silver / 3 Star

Response to the terms amongst the indigenous audience was mixed, with no clear ‘winner’ emerging. Broadly, there was a preference for simple language including ‘good’, ‘good quality’, ‘silver’ and ‘3 star’.

*“I would understand [3 star] better.”
(Indigenous Parent, Katherine NT)*

*“‘Good’ or ‘good quality’ is simple and clear. Being the middle one [middle level] is telling me what it’s doing. If I read the words, I’d accept what I’m reading.”
(Indigenous Parent, Darwin NT)*

5.5. Exceeding the National Quality Standard

Stimulus shown

<p>Service goes beyond the requirement of the National Quality Standard in at least four of the seven quality areas.</p>	<p>Highly commendable Exceptional Highly accomplished Exceeds Outstanding High quality Exceeds the National Quality Standard 4 Star High Very good Great quality Gold Exceeds NQS Far exceeds the National Quality Standard</p>
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Detailed response to key terms

Exceeding National Quality Standard (Current)

The response to the current terminology was overwhelmingly positive, with most parents and educators in the general population opting to retain this label.

The subtle nuance between ‘exceeding’ and ‘exceeds’ was identified by a handful of parents, who described ‘exceeding’ as an active term, which suggests the service is continually exceeding, rather than having only exceeded at the point of assessment.

“I think exceeding means that they want to do more... they might have exceeded, gone above and beyond, but they’re still trying to improve even though, they’re really at the high-

*quality standards.”
(Parent, Regional QLD)*

*“‘Exceeding’ means they’re currently doing it and will continue to do it, whereas ‘exceeds’ feels less permanent... like I occasionally exceeded doing this.”
(Educator, Metro)*

Exceeds the National Quality Standard

This small change to the original term was preferred by some parents, particularly indigenous parents in Northern Territory, who believed the meaning was consistent with the original terminology. Overall, the preference for ‘exceeds’ was rooted in the simplicity of a shorter word.

High Quality

Whilst not as strong as labels that include the term ‘exceeding’, ‘high quality’ was recommended by those who preferred simpler terminology including some low-literacy and indigenous participants.

Furthermore, if the term ‘Excellent’ remains in the final rating level, ‘High Quality’ is likely to be a more appropriate term for the level that precedes it. Unlike ‘exceeding’, ‘high quality’ is widely considered to be inferior to ‘excellent’. (See concerns on ‘excellent’ in the section below.)

*“It’s clearer. People may not understand the word ‘exceeding’. High quality is more universal.”
(Parent, Metro VIC)*

*“It sounds better, and I would understand it.”
(Indigenous Parent, Darwin NT)*

5.6. Rated Excellent by ACECQA

Stimulus shown

<p>Service promotes exceptional education and care, demonstrates sector leadership, and is committed to continually improving.</p>	<p>Outstanding Exceptional Exceptional Best Practice Industry leaders 5 star Excellent Excellent quality Platinum / Diamond Exceptional Quality</p>
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Context to the response

Parents and educators spontaneously discussed the relevance of the top rating level. No one indicated they would specifically seek out an ‘Excellent’ service, with even the most discerning parents stating they would happily send their child to an ‘exceeding’ service.

*“In Aboriginal world this level doesn’t matter. Why would you want to be super deadly?
You’re already deadly.”*

(Indigenous Educator, Katherine NT)

“Not required. Get rid of it. If you’ve already met the standard or exceeded the standard requirements, then it’s bullshit. Not needed at all. You can’t go better. Like the 6-star hotel stuff.”

(Indigenous Parent, Katherine NT)

Some educators also questioned the value and fairness of this rating level, noting the arduous application process that requires significant investment of time and resources. They argued the system favoured large, services with the capacity to dedicate staff to the application, and questioned how this benefited families and children.

Overall, educators favoured single-word options, such as ‘Excellent’ or ‘Outstanding’ for consistency and questioned whether parents would understand that this final rating level was awarded through a separate process. This concern was not voiced by parents.

Indeed, most parents agreed that adopting consistent terminology for the first four rating levels, and differentiating the final level would be important to their comprehension of the rating system. Differentiated terms signify that the final level sits outside the standard rating system it is a rare ‘award’ or ‘badge’. Furthermore, differentiating it from the other four levels, helps reinforce perceptions that ‘Exceeding’ is the top possible rating for the 7 quality areas.

“To me it shows it’s not something that they just tick a box and they get. It’s something more substantive”

(Parent, Metro QLD)

“The words ‘excellent’, ‘exceptional’, and even ‘exceeding’ can be hard to differentiate... But something like ‘Platinum’ or ‘Industry Leaders’, that really stands out.”

(Parent, Metro VIC)

Detailed response to key terms

Rated Excellent by ACECQA (Current)

Most parents agreed the original term is appropriate for the final level. ‘Rated ...by ACECQA’ helps differentiate this level from other rating levels and communicates that this award is bestowed by a separate authority. A small minority of parents questioned the benefit of naming an unfamiliar organisation, however, this was not a widespread issue.

“They use ‘Rated by...’ because it’s a special stamp you get, you have to apply to get that because you’ve hit a certain point.”

(Educator, Metro)

“This one tells who is deciding that they get this rating. 5 Star sounds like a hotel, Platinum/Diamond sounds like they’re talking about a car or something to do with cars. All the others are too broad. Could be from anything.”

(Indigenous Parent, Katherine NT)

The term ‘excellent’ received a mixed response, with many claiming the term ‘exceeding’ sounded more impressive.

Exceptional Best Practice

‘Exceptional Best Practice’ effectively communicates a service that is at the top of their game and was well received by parents.

“That’s full marks. Best practice, is the best it can be.”

(Parent, Regional QLD)

All agreed the term 'exceptional' is significantly more impressive than 'exceeding', which helps address concerns about incorrect order, or the final level not carrying significant weight for something that is so hard to achieve.

Whilst some parents favoured 'Exceptional' for reasons of consistency, some felt that the final level should be differentiated through terminology such as 'rated by...', 'awarded by...' or in this case 'best practice'.

"If was 'awarded' Exceptional Best practice it adds more weight and speaks to the process they have to go through to actually be rated"
(Parent, Metro QLD)

Industry Leaders

Similar to 'Exceptional Best Practice', 'Industry Leaders' denotes a service that is consistently achieving far above all others. Parents and educators agreed this level could be very motivating for services, driven to achieve 'industry leader' status. By definition, industry leaders are few and far between, which helps communicate the rarity of this award. A minority didn't like 'industry leaders' feeling it was too corporate and potentially a label which could be bought.

"It kind of conveys a high level of recognition or accomplishment, and it's kind of like at its pinnacle...you can give other centres something to strive towards."
(Parent, Metro VIC)

"It's saying your service is good at all aspects of the service. You're setting an example to help others achieve that as well."
(Educator, Metro)

"I don't like it; it comes across a bit self-proclaimed."
(Parent, Metro NSW)

5 Star

The preferred option amongst indigenous parents in Northern Territory, '5 Star' is familiar, easy to understand and signifies high quality. This term was not preferred by any parents or educators in the general population sample.

"I can understand this."
(Indigenous Parent, Darwin NT)

"It's easier to understand and easier to explain."
(Indigenous Parent, Darwin NT)

6. Colours and Symbols

6.1. Overall

Four symbological styles were shown as stimulus to all research participants. These included; traffic lights systems, icons and emojis, star and tick ratings and numerical ratings. The groups and depths then explored whether any of these techniques may be appropriate and effective in communicate the National Quality Standards ratings.



The examples above are a proportion of the examples shown during the research

Regardless of the style chosen it was felt that 'excellent' needed to be outside the rating symbology. It must be possible to achieve the 'top rating' within the 7 quality areas and given it is not possible to be rated 'excellent' in these ratings it is important to ensure that 'exceeding' becomes the highest rating.

6.1. Traffic Lights

When used correctly, colour can simplify communications and improve the communication of the message.

People naturally seek out meaning in colour, particularly when used in graphs, tables and symbols that have been designed to convey complex information. As such, when colour is used for purely decorative purposes, it can be misleading and distract from the intended message.

This was highlighted by reactions to 'Certificate A' in the stimulus (see below), in which each of the 7 quality areas and their associated ratings are shaded a different colour (or different shade of the same colour). Parents and educators searched for meaning behind the colours and questioned how two green quality areas had received different ratings, for example.

*"I feel like the colours should mean something, but they mean nothing."
(Parent, Metro NSW)*



'Certificate A'

Whilst traffic-light colours lacked appeal on their own, incorporating traffic-lights into star ratings, numerical ratings or emojis could be beneficial.

The research raised questions about how a traffic light system would be used with a 5-level rating, and if blue could be incorporated. Whilst some like the option of bronze, silver and gold there were questions about how well differentiated bronze and gold would be when printed. Furthermore, interpretation of colour amongst indigenous people must also be considered in the design process. Whilst all participants in this study interpreted traffic-light colours as intended, an indigenous educator warned that red is a positive colour amongst some Aboriginal communities, highlighting the potential for miscommunication.

“Colours are important in Aboriginal culture. For some, red could be a good colour, for others that could be a different meaning.”
(Indigenous Educator, Katherine NT)

6.2. Icons and Emojis

Using icons or emojis to communicate ratings lacked appeal across the general population. Overall, emojis were considered too colloquial and child-like, and therefore unsuitable for the official government ratings it was communicating. Indeed, it potentially trivialises a serious topic.

“It is not serious enough for what it is actually trying to communicate.”
(Parent, Regional QLD)

However, emoji faces in traffic-light colours were the preferred option amongst indigenous participants from the Northern Territory, and other parents with low literacy, on the basis they were quick and easy to understand.

“You can see what it’s saying, the colours and faces tell you a lot. Red is angry/bad, yellow is ok and green is good/happy.”
(Indigenous Parent, Darwin NT)

Indigenous parents and educators agreed the faces were far less clear and effective when traffic light colours were not incorporated into the design. One example shown to participants showed faces in various shades of green, which confused the message and, if applied to ratings, could suggest that all services were fine. Care should also be taken to choose

appropriate expressions, with some parents commenting that the 'angry' face felt inappropriately 'scary'.

The non-face icons received very little attention from participants across the research and are unlikely to communicate rating levels in a clear and simple way. Beyond smiley/sad faces, there is no universally understood icons of quality. Furthermore, without explicitly showing the full scale of icons that align to each rating level, the rating scale would be unclear.

"With faces there is room for interpretation... room for error"
(Parent, Regional VIC)

ChatHouse does not recommend proceeding with icons and emojis to communicate the NQS amongst the broad population, however these symbols may be effective when communicating with low-literacy and indigenous populations.

6.3. Star and Tick Ratings

Star and tick ratings are universally understood and offered a simple, direct visual to quickly communicate the intended message. Although there was limited appeal for star ratings amongst indigenous participants, many confirmed they and everyone they knew, were familiar with the star rating system. Due to a tick system already being used in Victoria via the 'Kinder Tick', stars are a more suitable option.

"Five stars are really easy for people to interpret or understand. It's familiar, what we're used to seeing."
(Parent, Metro QLD)

"It tells me a lot of information without a lot of wording. Five stars is good and one star is not."
(Indigenous Parent, Darwin NT)

Whilst well liked, the exact way in which the stars could be used needs to be considered:

- A 5-star rating is required
- 5-stars must be achievable within the 7 qualities areas and therefore 'excellent' should not be included within the rating
- Some questioned if 'Significant improvement required' under its current definition even warrants one star
- For many, 3 stars is considered too low to consider, and therefore 'meeting' needs to be 4 stars.

"I'm happy with 4-5 stars, absolutely lowest is 3 that I would accept, I'd prefer 4 or 5."
(Parent, Regional NSW)

6.4. Numerical

Within the general population sample, a numerical rating was equally appealing. This familiar and easy to interpret rating style was expected to provide families a more comprehensive breakdown of service quality, allowing for deeper analysis and comparison.

*“It’s clear and concise, there’s no ambiguous side to it. More direct, not too much information to read.”
(Parent, Regional NSW)*

*“When comparing two childcare centres it is easier comparing numbers rather than comparing stars.”
(Parent, Metro NSW)*

Parents had mixed reviews about the importance of decimal points. Some appreciated the extra level of detail, and the ability to distinguish between services that had ‘just scrapped by’ versus those that were close to ‘promotion’, whilst others felt it was unnecessary.

Whilst not explored in detail within the qualitative research, it is likely that the expectation would be that the overall rating would be decided by the average score of the 7 quality ratings rather than aligning with the lowest score.

Interestingly, numerical ratings were the least appealing style amongst indigenous parents who favoured more visual symbols.

7. Recommendations to be taken into Quantitative phase

7.1. Terminology

ChatHouse identified two potential flights of terminology to be tested within the Quantitative phase.

- One option anchored the rating levels to the National Quality Standards
- The alternative adopted simpler language and does not refer to the NQS

For some rating levels, there were more than one potential label to be discussed and agreed with the Department prior to finalising the quantitative survey.

Alternative A

Current Label	Proposed labels to test	Considerations
Significant Improvement Required	Does not meet NQS OR Significant Risk Identified	Consider whether the definition can be revised to reflect the fact that services remain open. If revised, consider 'Does Not Meet NQS' If not revised, consider 'Significant Risk Identified' to reflect current definition
Working Towards National Quality Standard	Approaching NQS	
Meeting National Quality Standard	Compliant with NQS OR Achieving NQS	Consider whether the priority is to give parents confidence to choose a service that is 'meeting'. If so, consider the more positive 'Achieving NQS'. If the priority is motivating services to improve, consider 'compliant with NQS'
Exceeding National Quality Standard	Exceeding NQS	
Rated 'Excellent' by ACECQA	Industry Leaders OR	

	Exceptional Best Practice	
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Alternative B

Current Label	Proposed labels to test	Considerations
Significant Improvement Required	Unsatisfactory	
Working Towards National Quality Standard	Improvement required	
Meeting National Quality Standard	Satisfactory OR Achieving	Consider whether the priority is to give parents confidence to choose a service that is 'meeting'. If so, consider the more positive 'Achieving NQS'. If the priority is motivating services to improve, consider 'Satisfactory'.
Exceeding National Quality Standard	High Quality	
Rated 'Excellent' by ACECQA	Rated Excellent by ACECQA OR Industry Leaders OR Exceptional Best Practice	

7.2. Colours and Symbols

The Department decided to exclude colours and symbology from the quantitative component of the research, focusing second phase of the study on terminology alone.

However, the qualitative recommendations pertaining to colours and symbology may be relevant to future studies by the Department, and have therefore been outlined below.

The focus groups identified two potential symbol options that would be equally effective in communicating the rating system:

- Numerical rating system out of 10
- A five-star system

A traffic-light system also had some appeal, and therefore consideration should be given as to whether traffic-light colours could be effectively incorporated into a star or numerical rating system.

There was a preference for emojis and traffic-light colours amongst the indigenous sample. Therefore, consideration must be given as to whether indigenous ECEC services utilise alternative symbology to assist with comprehension.

Phase 2: Quantitative Findings

8. Quantitative Objectives and Detailed Methodology

8.1. Objectives

The overall objective of the quantitative phase was to validate the findings from the qualitative phase and build upon the findings in terms of the attitudes towards, perceptions of ECEC in general, and more broadly, the current and proposed NQS rating system.

The key research objectives for this phase were:

- Quantification of how parents perceive the current ratings system;
- A robust understanding of specific strengths and weakness of the ratings system;
- Identification of ways in which the ratings approach could be enhanced to deliver better outcomes for parents;
- An understanding of any differences between the overall population of parents with young children and specific target groups (i.e. CALD, Indigenous Australians, and lower literacy groups), with a view to determining if any specific changes are required to deliver better outcomes for these groups.

8.2. Quantitative Approach

The quantitative phase supported the initial qualitative phase by providing a robust and representative measure of Australian parents and carers to children aged 0 to 5 years, and who are involved in the decision making around investigating and choosing an ECEC service.

Three target groups were included within the sample:

- CALD respondents
- Indigenous Australians
- Low literacy respondents

This phase allowed us to understand the attitudes and perceptions around ECEC services and the NQS rating systems. It also provided an understanding of how Australian parents and families use the ratings in their decision-making processes, how impactful the ratings are on these decisions, and the impact of the ratings on perceptions of quality.

In addition, the survey explored perceptions of the current rating system, its labels, and definitions, as well as testing possible updates to the labels and terminology preferences. This information would assist in guiding the design of a communications strategy and suggesting the most appropriate terminology for the NQS rating system going forward.

A 15-minute online survey was completed with a sample of Australians aged between 18 and 69 years (n=610) who were parents and/or carers of children aged 0-5 years. The sample size was further broken down into key target audiences, which included parents and carers from the following groups; CALD people (n=107), Indigenous Australians (n=78), and people with self-reported low-literacy (n=71).

Low literacy is defined as a self-reported score of 6 or less on a 10-point scale to the question 'Using the scale below, how capable and confident are you in reading and understand written information'. 0='I struggle to read and understand written information'. 10='I am highly confident and competent reading and interpreting complex text'.

8.3. Quantitative Questionnaire

Most survey questions were closed response or scaled questions. There were, however, a select few open-ended questions to allow us to delve deeper into certain topics of interest. Where applicable, verbatim responses were coded to provide richer insight. All open-ended verbatim responses can be provided upon request.

The questionnaire was designed in collaboration with the NSW Education Department representatives and National Advisory Group to ensure research objectives were met, and a detailed understanding of the target audience was generated. The full survey can be found in Appendix B.

8.4. Statistical significance

Statistically significant differences have been noted throughout this report. These identify where, with 95% confidence, it can be assessed that the responses from one target group are different from those of another. This is used to identify real differences in results rather than those associated with sampling error or random statistical variation, which is inherent when only a sample of the entire target population is interviewed in a survey. The chance for sampling error varies depending on the sample size of the target group being analysed, with a greater possibility for error present for a smaller size group.

For example, if 50% of the n=178 respondents aged 25-34 years old in the study had responded 'yes' to a question, using a 95% confidence interval, the sampling error would be 7.3 percentage points. This means that we can be 95% confident that if the entire population of 25-34 year-old Australians was surveyed, the result to this same question would be between 57.3% and 42.7%. The sample error does, however, decrease with a response closer to 0% or 100%; if 90% of this same group had responded 'yes' to this question, the sampling error would only be plus or minus 4.4%.

Depending on the format of the data, the following tests of significance were used: Pearson's Chi-Square Test of Independence (for multiple response categorical questions) and t-tests (for numerical variables). Statistically significant differences have been generally noted with the use of a **red font or arrow** to indicate the result is significantly lower, or a **green font or arrow** to indicate a significantly higher result. Any other indicators of a significant difference are described below the relevant figure / table.

9. Quantitative sample background

9.1. Overview

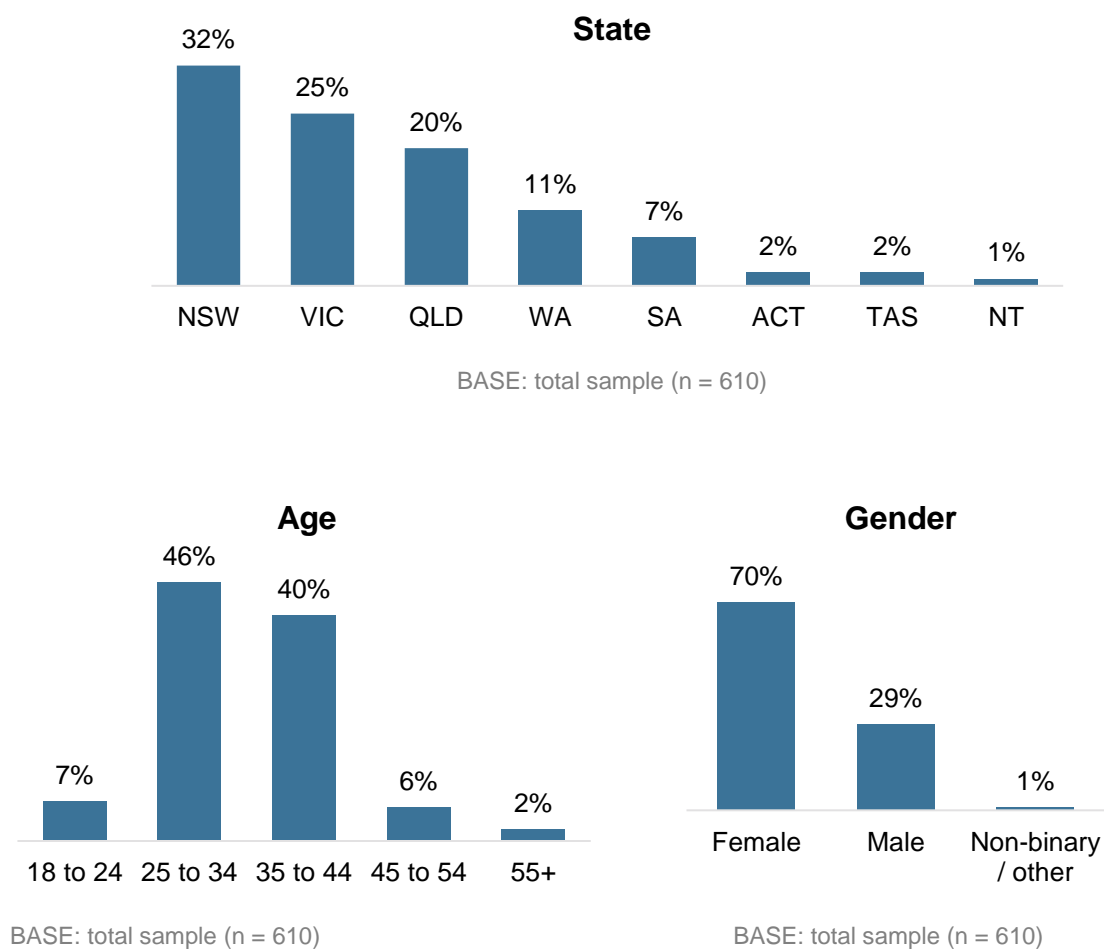
The quantitative phase required a sample of the parents or guardians. The criteria meant that these parents or guardians must:

- Be aged 18 to 65
- Have at least one child aged 0-5
- Be involved in the decisions associated with childcare, Out of School Hours (OOSH) care and/or preschool
- Be located in Australia

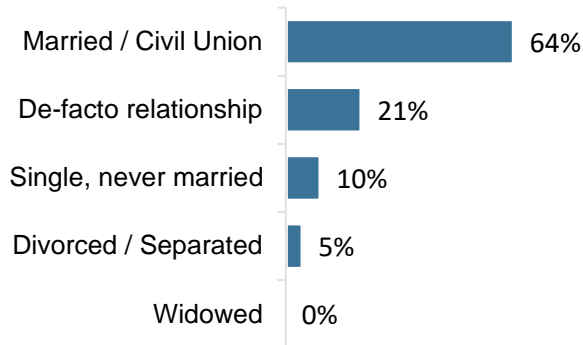
The sample was representative of the Australian population by age, gender, location, marital status and household composition, including number of children, cultural heritage, employment and literacy level. Extra sample was introduced to specifically target CALD, Low Literacy, and Indigenous Australians. Weighting was applied to ensure sample profile was representative of the Australian population despite the sample over-indexing for these target groups.

9.2. Sample Demographics

Figure 1: Quantitative Sample Demographics

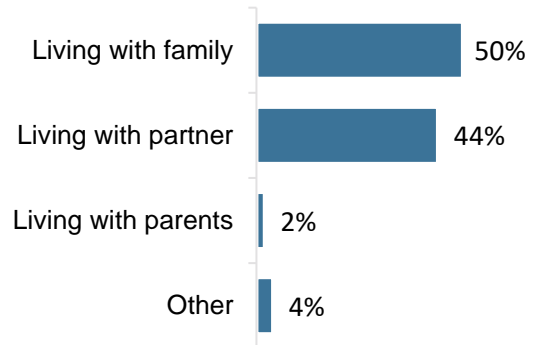


Marital Status



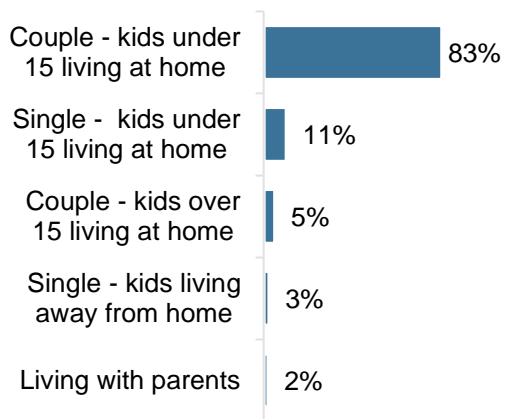
BASE: total sample (n = 610)

Household Composition



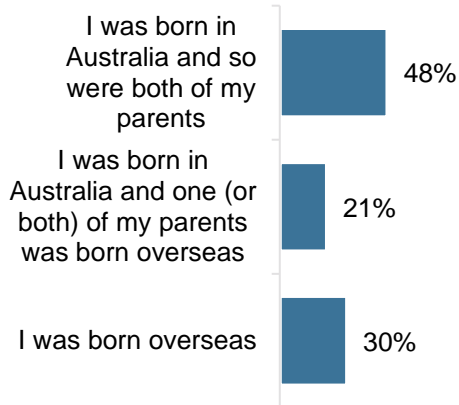
BASE: total sample (n = 610)

Household composition 2



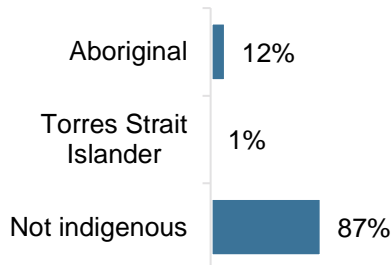
BASE: Total Sample (n=610)

Place of birth



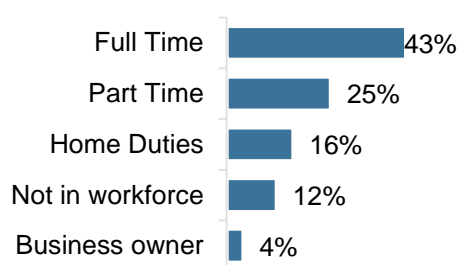
BASE: Total Sample (n=610)

Indigenous Australians

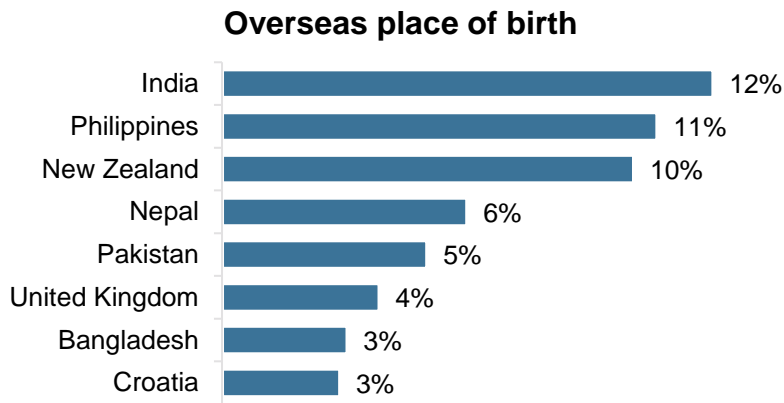


BASE: Total Sample (n=610)

Employment status



BASE: Total Sample (n=610)

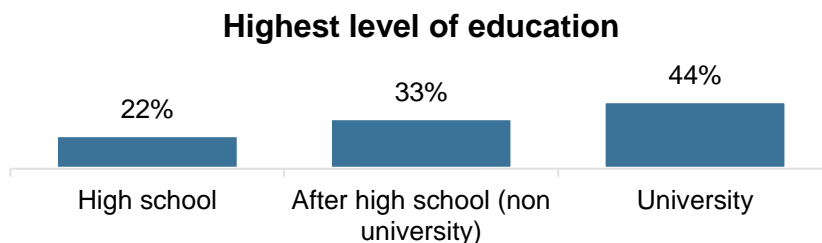


BASE: Those who were born overseas (n=142)

n=2 for: China, Russia, Germany, Zimbabwe, South Korea, Brazil, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Nigeria, Netherlands, Mexico, South Africa, Indonesia, Japan, Egypt, Bhutan, Saudi Arabia, Kenya; n=1 for: Ghana, Ireland, Kuwait, Brunei, Cambodia, Poland, Sweden, Mauritius, Albania, United States, Cook Islands, Greece, Turkey, Papua New Guinea, Macedonia, Ukraine, Canada, Colombia, Hong Kong, Thailand, France, Chile, Iran.

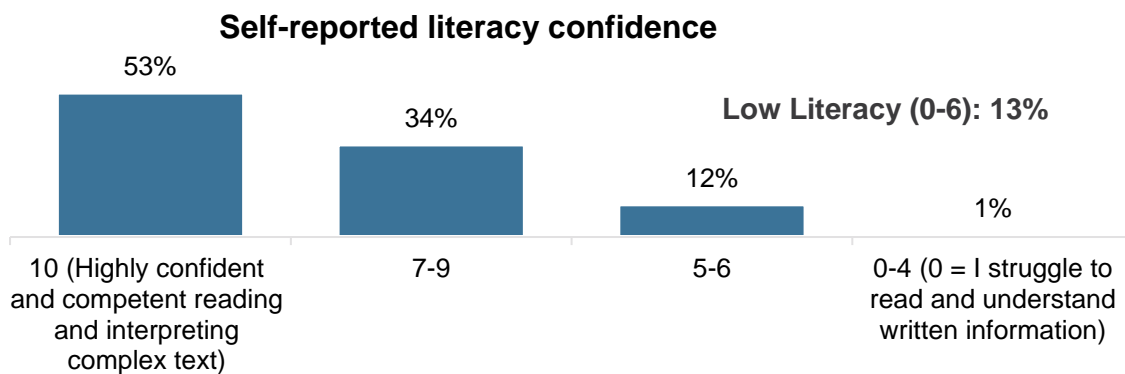
9.3. Literacy

Figure 2: Quantitative Sample Demographics - Literacy



QE2. What is the highest level of education that you have completed?

BASE: Total Sample (n=610).



QE6. Using the scale below, how capable and confident are you in reading and understanding written information?

BASE: Total Sample (n=610).

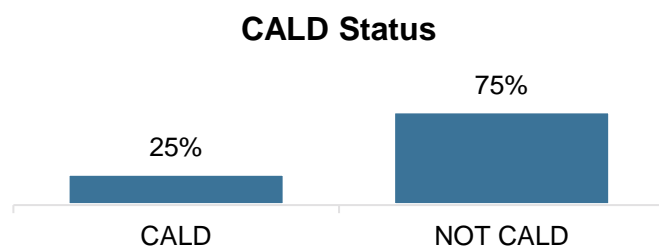
9.4. Target Groups

Table 1: Demographic differences amongst respondent subgroups

	Total (n=610)	CALD (n=107)	Indigenous Australians (n=78)	Low Literacy (n=71)
Gender	70% Female	60% Female	78% Female	60% Female
Metro vs Regional	71% Metro	91% Metro	61% Metro	68% Metro
Marital status	64% Married / Civil Union	88% Married / Civil Union	57% Married / Civil Union	58% Married / Civil Union
Country of birth	India 12%	India 17%	Australia 100%	New Zealand 20%
Have a university degree	44%	75%	30%	37%
Undergraduate Degree	23% Undergraduate Degree	37% Undergraduate Degree	23% Undergraduate Degree	22% Undergraduate Degree
Postgraduate Degree/PhD	14% Postgraduate Degree/PhD	30% Postgraduate Degree/PhD	3% Postgraduate Degree/PhD	11% Postgraduate Degree/PhD
Employment status	43% Working full time	45% Working full time	62% Working full time	49% Working full time
Occupation	31% Professional	37% Professional	50% Manager	34% Professional
Self-rated literacy level (average rating 0-10)	8.8	8.6	7.9	5.3
Main childcare type	30% Long day care	31% Long day care	24% Long day care	35% Preschool
2 nd most common childcare type used	26% Grandparent / family member	30% Preschool	22% Grandparent / family member	28% Grandparent / family member

BASE: Total sample (n = 610)

Figure 4: CALD Status



Base: Total Sample (n=610).

10. Behaviours and perceptions of childcare providers

10.1. Current childcare usage

Most parents/carers of children aged 0-5 years reported they were currently using a form of care (83%), with current ECEC service use reported by two in three participants (67%).

Amongst those either *currently* using care or *intending* to in future, this proportion increases to 97%, with ECEC usage reaching 95%. This is consistent across all target groups.

Table 2 – Current usage of care used by target groups

Current usage	Total (n=610)	CALD (n=107)	Indigenous Australians (n=78)	Low Literacy (n=71)
ECEC	67%	64%	64%	62%
Long day care	35%	37%	30%	26%
Preschool	32%	29%	33%	39%
Family Day Care	15%	12%	24%	13%
OOSH	17%	21%	25%	11%
Occasional Care	12%	15%	23%	6%
Mobile Services	7%	7%	23%	6%
Grandparent / family member care	48%	27%	42%	40%
A nanny / babysitter	9%	7%	22%	5%
Multifunctional Aboriginal Community Service	2%	1%	31%	3%

A11. For each of the following services, outline whether you... (Day care type by usage)

BASE: Total sample (n = 610)

Table 3 – Current or future use of care by target groups

Current care used or intended in future	Total (n=610)	CALD (n=107)	Indigenous Australians (n=78)	Low Literacy (n=71)
ECEC	95%	95%	94%	95%
Long day care	59%	68%	66%	57%
Preschool	80%	71%	73%	85%
Family Day Care	40%	43%	61%	34%
OOSH	64%	66%	73%	49%
Occasional Care	39%	47%	55%	37%
Mobile Services	26%	27%	57%	29%
Grandparent / family member care	62%	44%	74%	55%
A nanny / babysitter	38%	39%	58%	40%
Multifunctional Aboriginal Community Service	10%	12%	70%	11%

A11. For each of the following services, outline whether you? (Day care type by usage)
BASE: Total sample (n = 610)

Table 4 – Current main type of care used by target groups using a form of care

Main current care used	Total (n=511)	CALD (n=107)	Indigenous Australians (n=63)	Low Literacy (n=50)
ECEC	70%	75%	62%	66%
Long day care	30%	31%	24%	18%
Preschool	22%	30%	14%	35%
Family Day Care	9%	4%	15%	11%
OOSH	7%	8%	9%	3%
Occasional Care	2%	1%	0%	0%
Mobile Services	2%	5%	4%	0%
Grandparent / family member care	26%	17%	22%	28%
A nanny / babysitter	2%	3%	5%	6%
Multifunctional Aboriginal Community Service	0%	0%	7%	1%

A12. And which would you say is the main service currently used by your children?
If you use more than one service, pick the one you would consider to be one used the most.
BASE: Those currently using any type of care (n = 511)

Table 5 – Current main type of care used, amongst those using care types

Although parents and carers use numerous services for the care of their child, the predominant service type used is Long Day care. Preschool is also frequently used as the main care type, with over half (57%) of those using preschool stating it's the main care type.

Grandparent / family care is also very commonly used, with almost half (45%) of parents/carers using grandparent/family care stating this is the primary care used.

Main care type										
Care types currently used	Long day care	Preschool	Family Day Care	OOSH	Occasional Care	Mobile Services	Grandparent / family care	A nanny / babysitter	Multifunctional Aboriginal CS	Base Size (n=)
ECEC	38%	27%	11%	9%	3%	0%	11%	1%	0%	407
Long day care	73%	15%	6%	3%	1%	0%	3%	0%	0%	211
Preschool	16%	57%	5%	10%	0%	0%	11%	1%	0%	197
Family Day Care	11%	11%	46%	11%	3%	0%	14%	3%	0%	99
OOSH	31%	17%	4%	36%	2%	0%	9%	2%	0%	110
Occasional Care	31%	12%	10%	13%	14%	0%	17%	3%	0%	84
Mobile Services	20%	13%	8%	11%	3%	21%	15%	9%	0%	52
Grandparent / family care	27%	14%	7%	4%	1%	0%	45%	1%	0%	301
A nanny / babysitter	24%	10%	9%	17%	3%	0%	20%	16%	0%	63
Multifunctional Aboriginal Community Service	11%	5%	18%	16%	0%	2%	29%	0%	19%	29

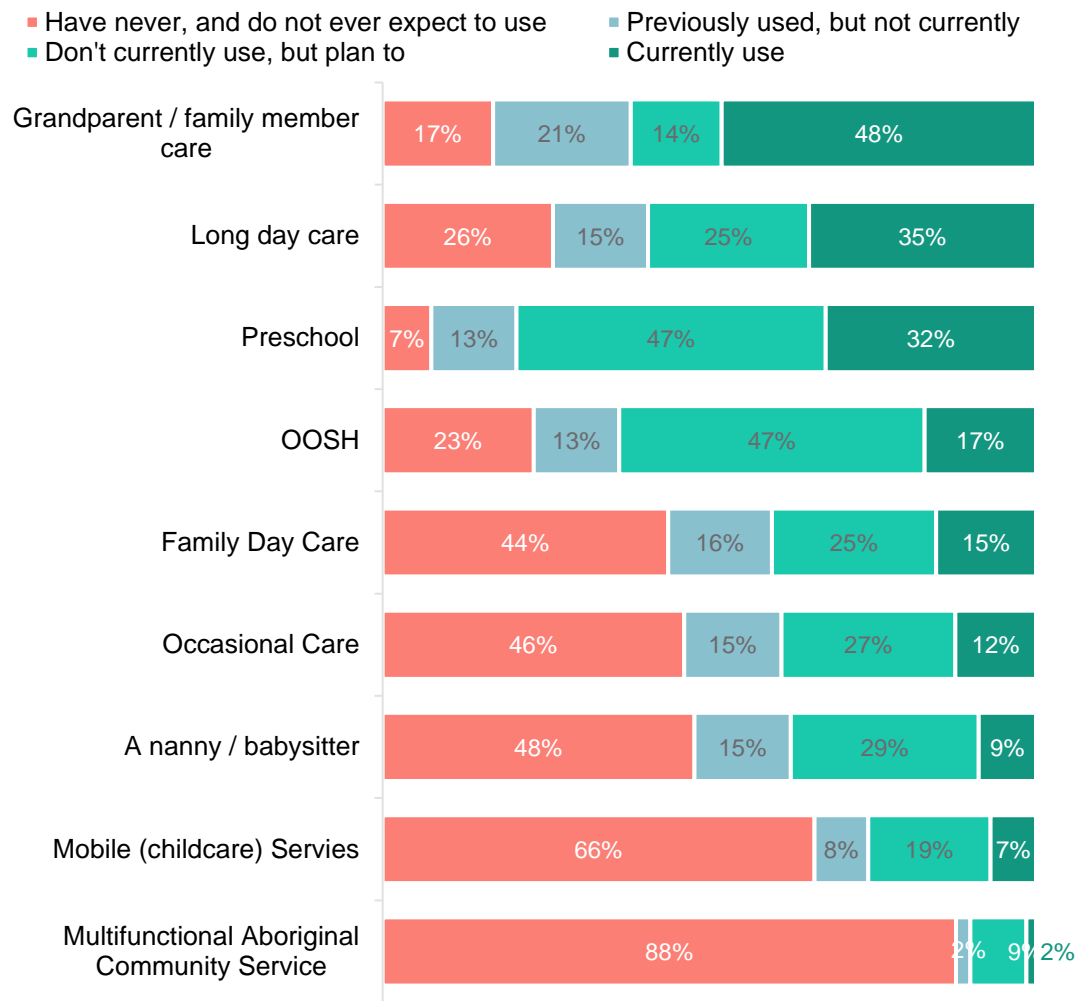
A11. For each of the following services, outline whether you:

A12. And which would you say is the main service currently used by your children?

If you use more than one service, pick the one you would consider to be one used the most.

BASE: Those currently using any type of care (various as shown, total n = 511)

Figure 5 – Childcare Usage, Intentions and History



A11. For each of the following services, outline whether you? (Day care type by usage)

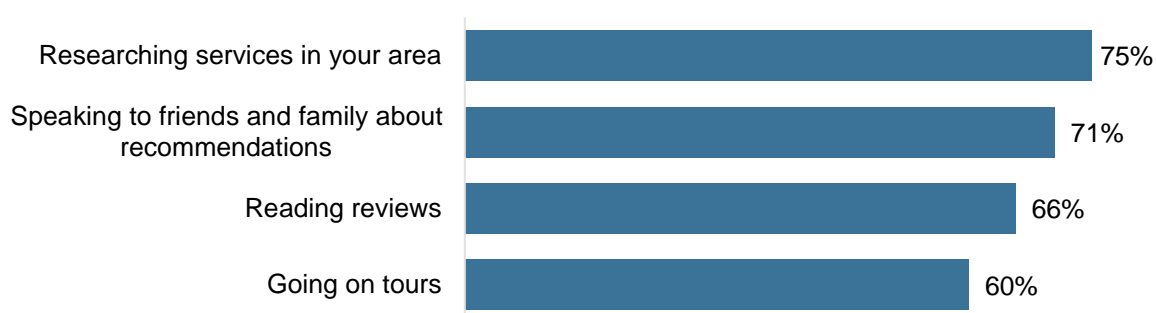
BASE: Total Sample (n=610)

10.2. Childcare decision-making process

Families were asked which activities they had been involved in, or plan to be involved in when choosing an ECEC service for their child. Most were, or intended to be, involved in researching services in the area (75%) and seeking recommendations using word of mouth (71%). Most also read reviews (66%) and made use of the tours (60%).

Nearly three quarters (73%) of parents reported considering between one and three ECEC services, and just over one in five (22%) reported considering four or five services, but only a small minority considered six or more services (5%).

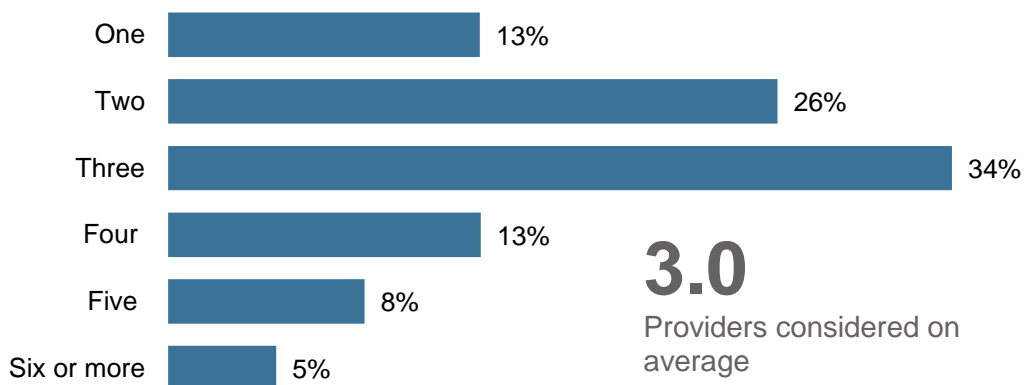
Figure 6 – Decision maker actions



A13. Thinking about your child/children and the service they currently use or plan to use, which of the following activities did you (or will you) undertake when choosing a childcare service?

BASE: Total Sample (n=610)

Figure 7 – Number of providers considered



B1. When you [CURRENT: were / FUTURE USER: will be] considering [CHILDCARE: childcare service / OOSC: before or after school care / KINDERGARTEN: ENTER AS PER A11 CODE 7] for your child/children, approximately how many different services or providers [CURRENT: did / FUTURE USER: will] you consider?

BASE: Total Sample (n=610)

10.3. Childcare decision-making factors

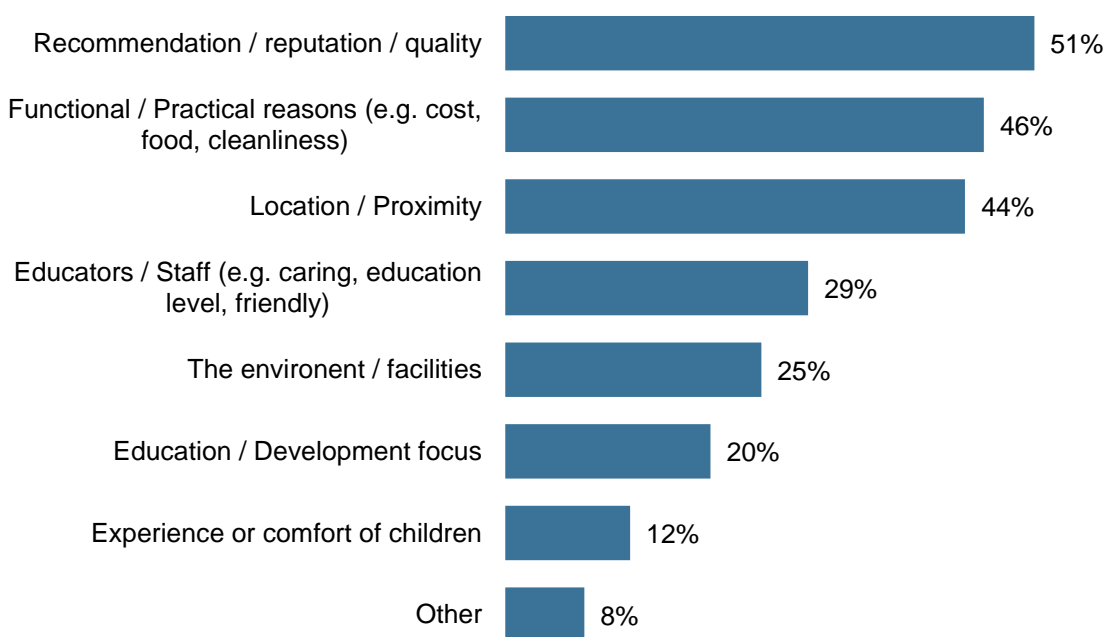
Key unprompted reasons for ECEC service decision making factors included location of the service (26%), affordability (23%), and good reviews (either online or written) (20%). However, half of parents reported that recommendation, reputation, quality, and values were also important (51%).

“I will be choosing kindergarten for my children based on location, reviews and I would be looking to seek advice from my friends and family where they’ve sent their children. Cost is another factor that influences my choice and I strongly believe in having multicultural experiences for my children.”

When prompted, the key ECEC service decision making factors were high quality and safety ratings (88%), warm, nurturing staff (87%) and good communication with families (85%). Three quarters (75%) also reported that having a ‘strong positive gut feeling’ is a ‘must have’. Niceness of the buildings (52%) and recommendation / word of mouth (55%) were more likely to be considered ‘nice to have’, and while proximity to work was also considered a ‘nice to have’ by half the sample (54%), this was the highest ‘not important’ factor (18%).

When forced to rank the ‘must have’ factors, high quality & safety ratings remained the top factor (35% 1st ranking, 63% in top 3 ranking), followed by warm and nurturing staff (17% 1st ranking, 53% in top 3 ranking).

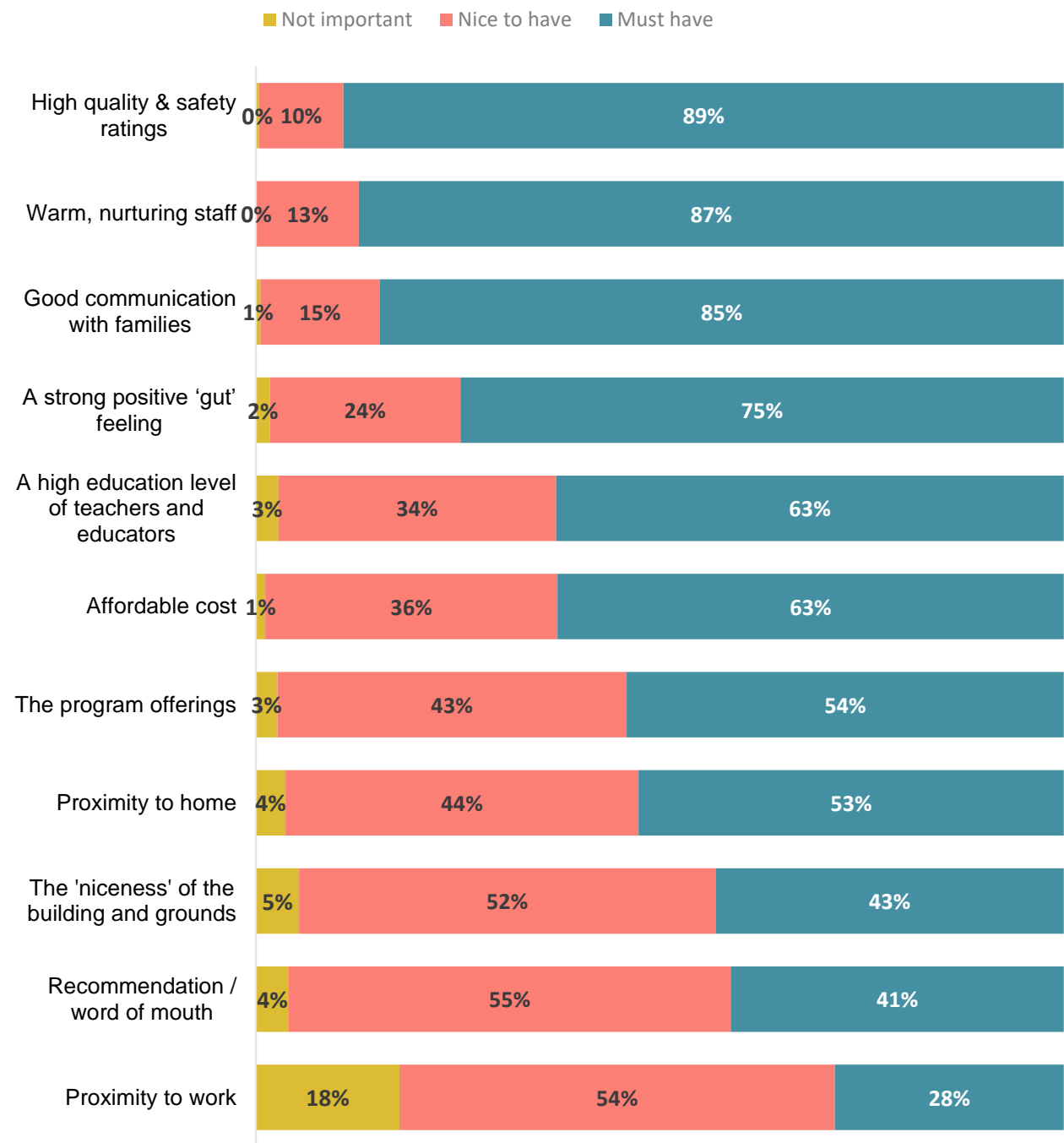
Figure 8 – Importance of features on decision making (open coded)



B2. In a few sentences, what would you say [CURRENT: were / FUTURE USER: will be] the main things you [CURRENT: based / FUTURE USER: base] your decision on when choosing a [CHILDCARE: childcare service / OOSC: before or after school care / KINDERGARTEN: ENTER AS PER A11 CODE 7]?

BASE: Total Sample (n=610)

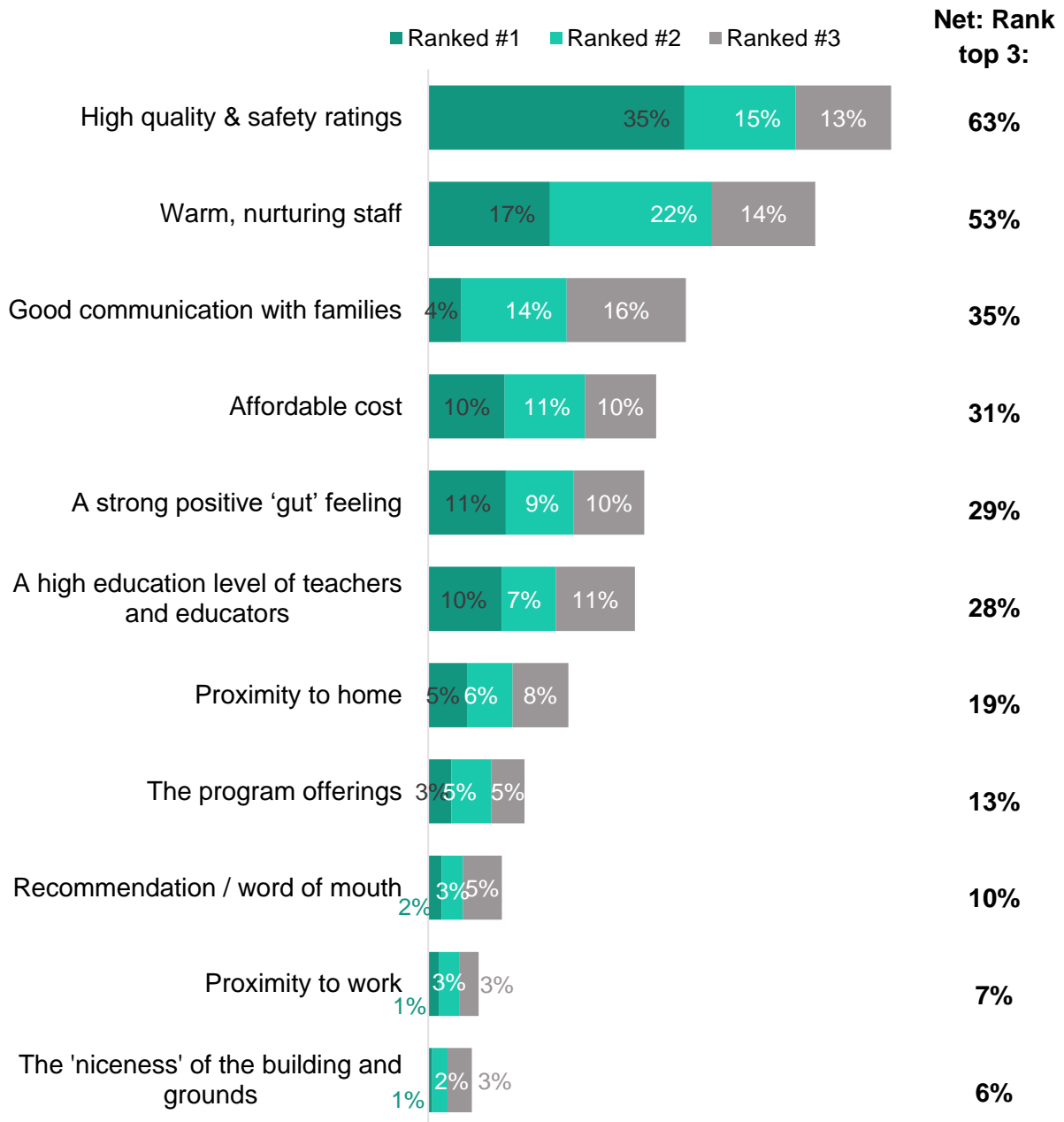
Figure 9 – Importance of factors of provider choice (Prompted)



B3. And looking at the list below, how important [CURRENT: were / FUTURE USER: will] each of the following things [FUTURE USER: be] when making your choice of [CHILDCARE: childcare service / OOSC: before or after school care / KINDERGARTEN: ENTER AS PER A11 CODE 7]? For each item, please indicate whether they [CURRENT: were / FUTURE USER: will be] 'must have', 'nice to have' or 'not important' when making your decision.

BASE: Total Sample (n=610)

Figure 10 – Ranking of factors of provider choice



B4. You mentioned that each of these things are 'must have' when choosing a [CHILDCARE: childcare service / OOSC: before or after school care / KINDERGARTEN: ENTER AS PER A11 CODE 7]. From this list, please rank your 'must have' things where number 1 is the most important and number 2 is the next most important, and so on.

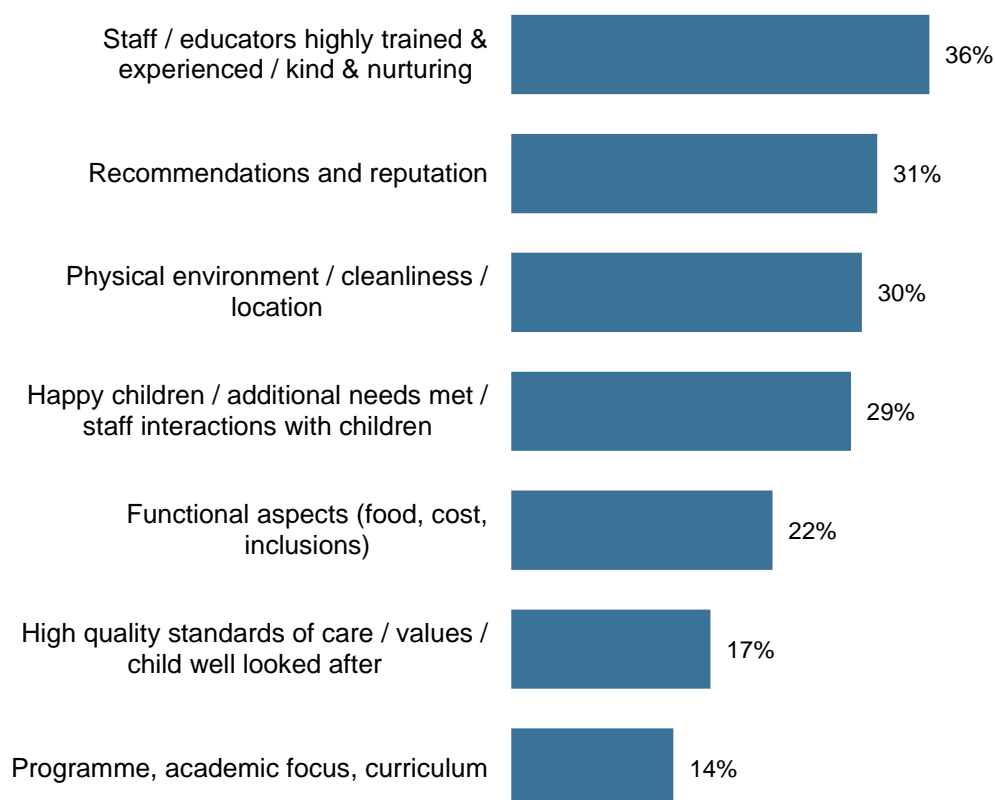
BASE: Total Sample (n=610)

10.4. Perceptions of quality

Key unprompted indicators of ECEC service quality included safety (16%), happy children who feel settled and comfortable (15%), and regular communication and updates from the service (14%).

At the prompted level, the most important factors (i.e. ranked 1-3/9) were experienced staff (59%), warm / nurturing staff (56%), and feeling emotionally and socially supported by staff (40%). Considering just the top ranked factor (i.e. ranked 1/9) experienced staff was key (25%) followed by warm and nurturing staff (20%), and an 'exceeding' rating' (14%).

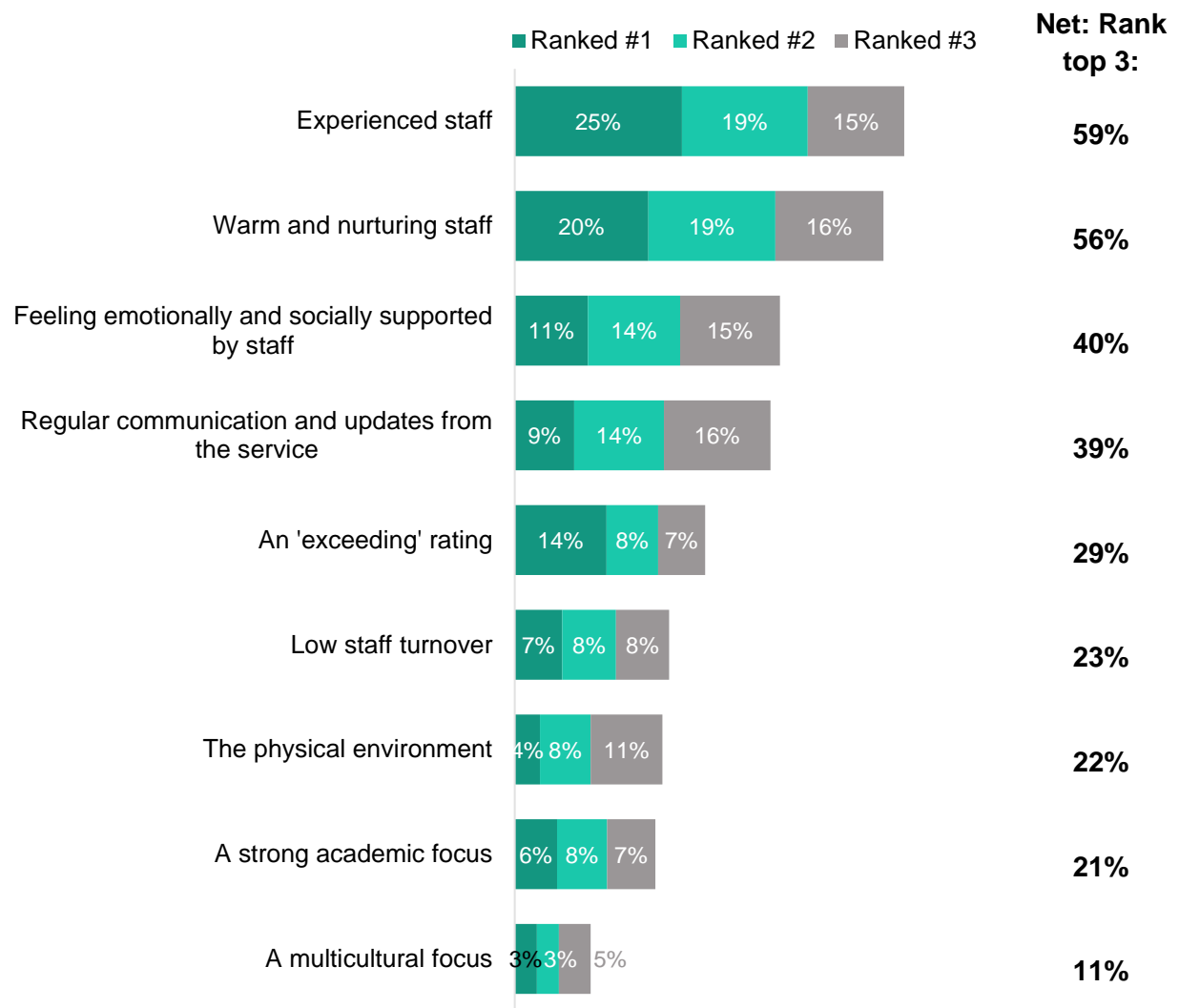
Figure 11 – Perceptions of quality (open coded)



B5. In your opinion, what are the strongest indications that a [CHILDCARE: childcare service / OOSC: before or after school care / KINDERGARTEN: ENTER AS PER A11 CODE 7] is 'quality' or offers a high level of care? Please be as detailed and specific as possible.

BASE: Total Sample (n=610)

Figure 12 – Quality Indicators



B6. And looking at this new list of things, in your opinion, which of the following things are the strongest indication that a [CHILDCARE: childcare service / OOSC: before or after school care / KINDERGARTEN: ENTER AS PER A11 CODE 7] is high quality or provides a high level of care? Please rank the strongest indication as number 1, the second strongest indication of quality as number 2, and so on.

BASE: Total Sample (n=610)

11. NQS rating scale awareness

11.1. Familiarity with National Quality Standards

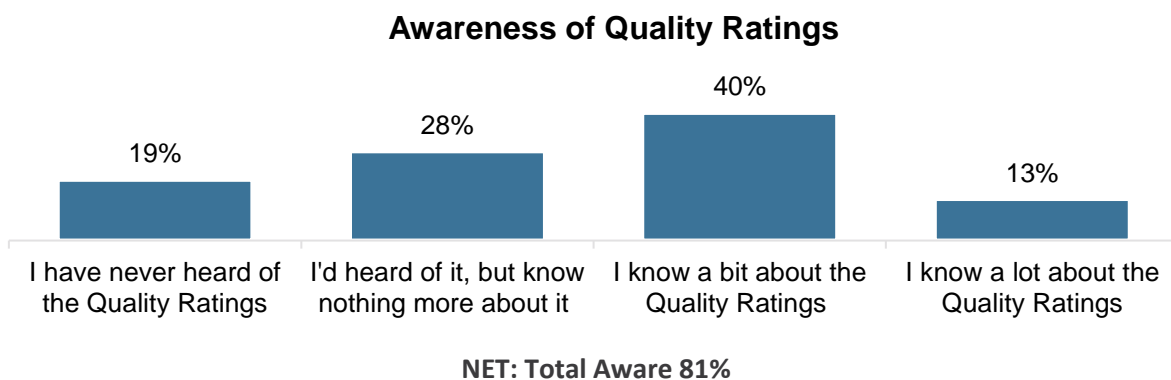
Awareness of quality ratings was strong (81%), though only half (53%) knew more than just the name. There were no significant differences found for the target groups.

Those who were aware were asked to describe the quality ratings system, with the majority (67%) mentioning minimum standards and key performance indicators (KPIs) for ECEC services primarily covering safety, the services provided and quality of care.

“It’s a system where the provider gets tested for their deliverance on certain areas and gets tested on their policies and procedures. 7-star rating is the highest recognition they can get.”

Another broad theme of descriptions focussed on the comparative value of the ratings that allow parents to use them to aid in their ECEC service choice and decision-making (19%). Specifically, this theme included the importance of the ratings and that they allow parents to choose a reliable, high-quality, safe service.

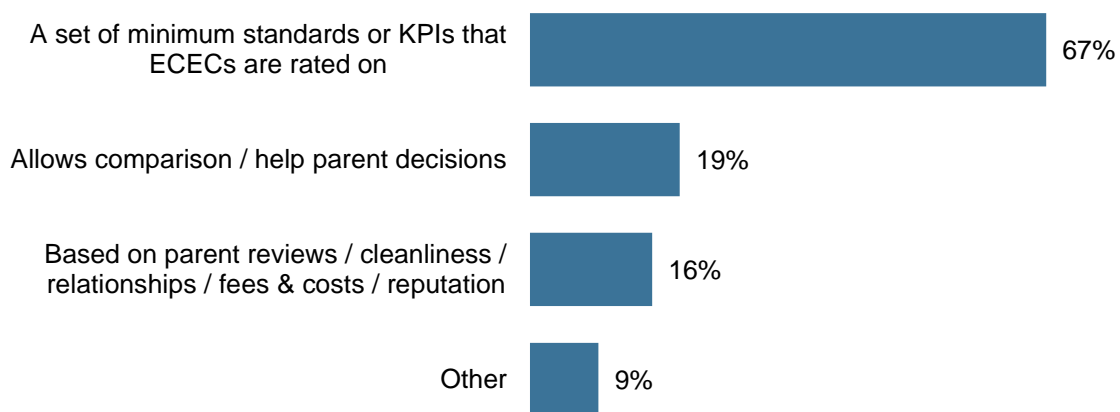
Figure 13 – Awareness and Familiarity



C1b. Before today, were you aware that each childcare service (including Family Day Care, Occasional Care, etc.), before or after school care, [KINDERGARTEN: ENTER AS PER A11 CODE 7] receives a quality rating against the National Quality Standards?

BASE: Total Sample (n=610)

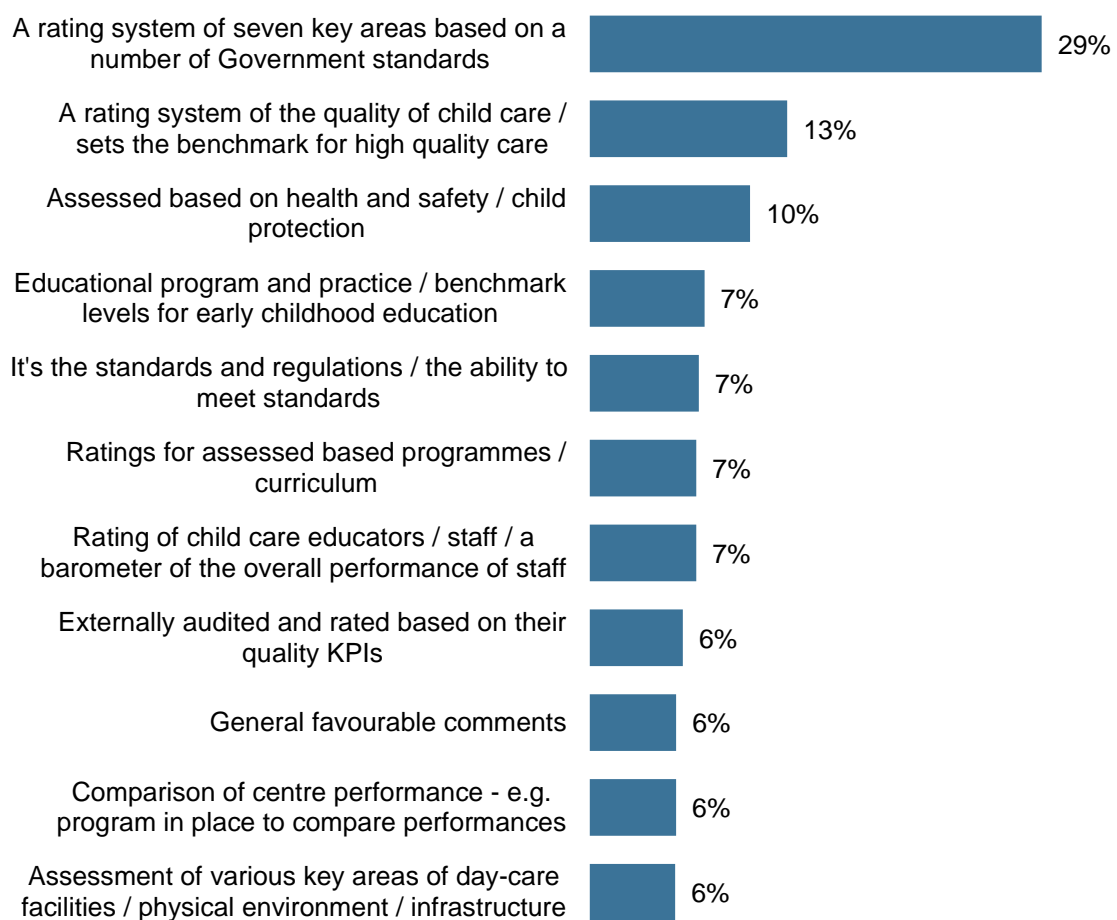
Figure 14 – Open verbatim descriptions of the NQS coded (high level themes)



C2. In a few sentences, how would you describe the Quality ratings system to a friend or family member? Please be as detailed and specific as possible

BASE: Those familiar with the National Quality Standards (n=336)

Figure 15 – Open verbatim descriptions of the NQS coded (specific themes)



C2. In a few sentences, how would you describe the Quality ratings system to a friend or family member? Please be as detailed and specific as possible

BASE: Those familiar with the National Quality Standards (n=336)

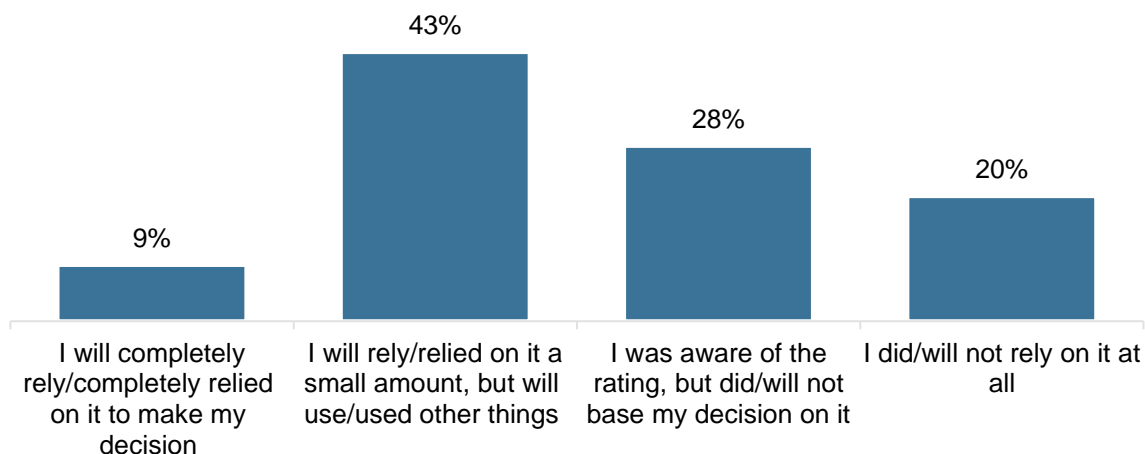
11.2. Impact and perceptions of the NQS

Just half of parents / carers (52%) reported that they relied on or will rely on individual childcare service quality ratings to make their ECEC decision(s).

Almost three quarters of parents (73%) reported that the ratings are meaningful and 62% rated them as easy to understand, with very few (7%) finding them hard to understand.

Forty two percent (42%) know the rating of the ECEC service their child attends and 29% had no awareness a rating scale existed.

Figure 16 – Impact of NQS on childcare service selection



NET: Rely on NQS a little/completely 52%

C3. When choosing a childcare service, before or after school care, [KINDERGARTEN: ENTER AS PER A11 CODE 7] for your first child, to what extent [CURRENT: did / FUTURE USER: will] you use or rely on the individual service's quality rating to make your decision?

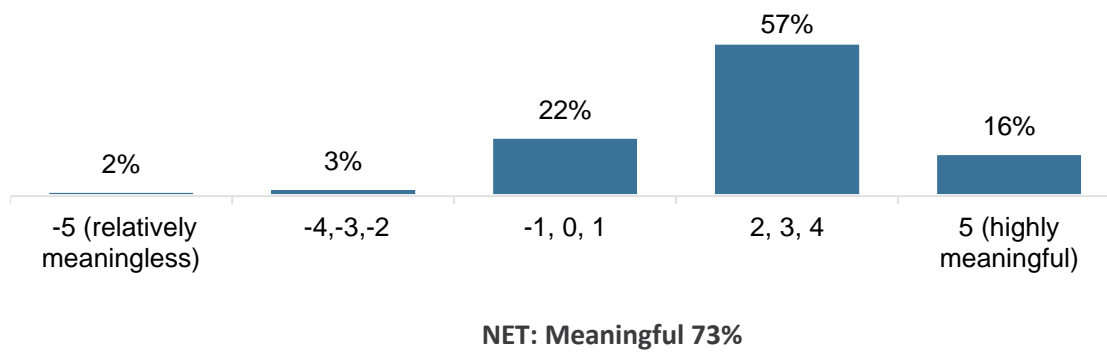
BASE: Total Sample (n=610)

Figure 17 – Rating relevance and clarity

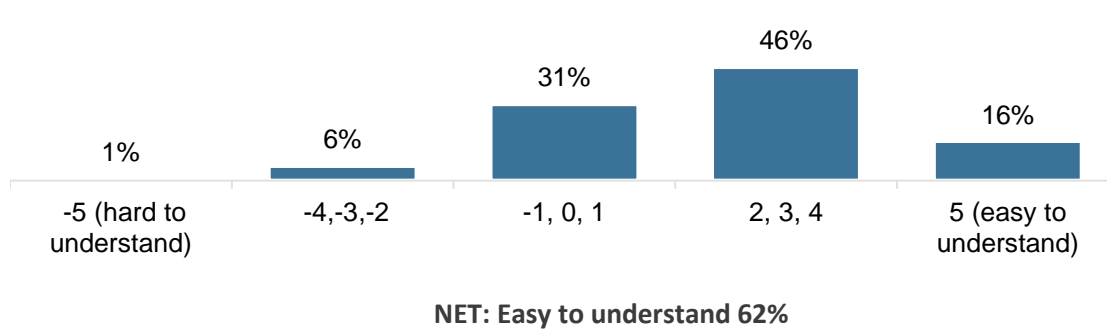
Respondents had the opportunity to choose from 11-point scales for the following questions:

Thinking about the quality ratings, would you say...		Low end of scale (-5)	High end of scale (+5)
A	The ratings are...	Relatively meaningless	Highly meaningful
B	When it comes to understanding the ratings, they are...	Very hard to understand	Very easy to understand

A: The ratings are...



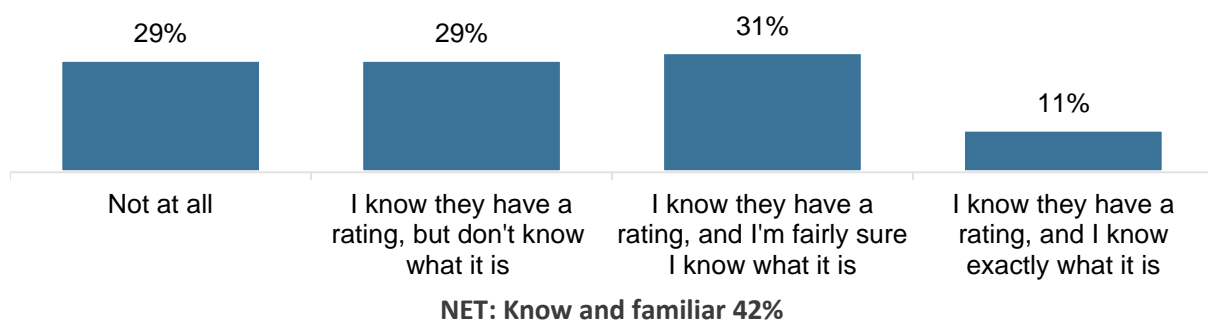
B: When it comes to understanding the ratings, they are...



C4. Thinking about the quality ratings, would you say...

BASE: Total Sample (n=610)

Figure 18 – Service rating awareness



C5. And before today, were you aware of the rating of the [CHILDCARE: childcare service / OOSC: before or after school care / KINDERGARTEN: ENTER AS PER A11 CODE 7] your child/children attend?

BASE: those who currently use or have previously used a childcare service (n=332)

12. Preferred NQS terminology and scales

12.1. Rating scale testing

Testing of the terminology used as part of the scale was paramount to this research. The first element compared the current scale ('Current') to four alternatives, all of which were agreed by state and territory jurisdictions ahead of testing as feasible options in future. The rating scales were randomised and not assigned names. The naming conventions below of 'Option 1', 'Current', 'Option 2', 'Option 3' and 'Option 4' are purely for this report.

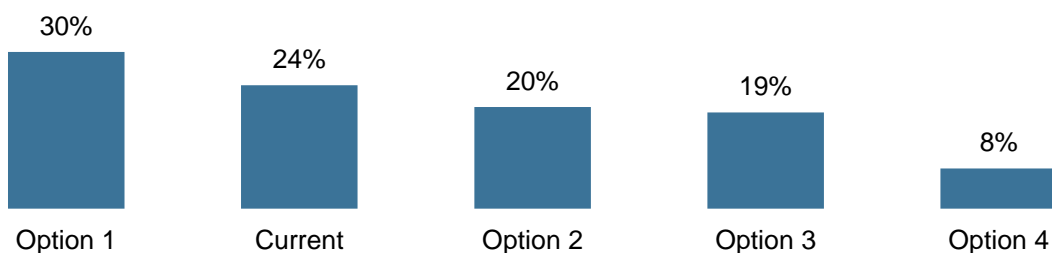
The current scale was ranked 2nd of the five options, being the preferred option of 24%. The most preferred scale, with 30% preference, has ratings of:

1. Does not meet National Quality Standard
2. Approaching National Quality Standard
3. Meets National Quality Standard
4. Exceeds National Quality Standard
5. Far exceeds National Quality Standard

Table 6: Rating scale overview

Option 1	Current	Option 2	Option 3	Option 4
Does not meet National Quality Standard	Significant improvement required	Improvement required	Significant improvement needed	Unsatisfactory
Approaching National Quality Standard	Working Towards National Quality Standard	Developing	Developing	Approaching
Meets National Quality Standard	Meeting National Quality Standard	Commendable	Meeting	Achieving
Exceeds National Quality Standard	Exceeding National Quality Standard	Highly commendable	Exceeding	High achieving
Far exceeds National Quality Standard	Rated Excellent by ACECQA	Exceptional quality rated by ACECQA	Exceptional	Exceptional Best Practice

Figure 19: Rating scale preference



D1. Which of the following would you prefer to see as a rating scale? Overview of scales.

Base: Total Sample (n=610)

Table 7: Reason for preferring Option 1 (coded verbatim)

Those preferring Scale Option 1 cite that it was the clearest and easiest option to understand, with 57% mentioning this theme. Furthermore, the level of detail, clarity of scale, and perceived levels of trust, were also important. Each of these themes were identified significantly more often for Option 1 than for the current scale.

Text response theme	Proportion of respondents
Clearest / easiest to understand	57%
Detailed explanation / explains the most / specific / comprehensive	15%
Mentions of NQS or meeting requirements	14%
Explains rating clearly and provides clarity of where the provider is at in the scale	10%
Clear and straightforward	8%
Mentions of trustworthy, honest, transparent or reliable	7%
Easy or simple	5%

D2. You mentioned [INSERT SELECTED OPTION AT D1] was your preferred rating scale. Why was that? Please be as detailed and specific as possible.

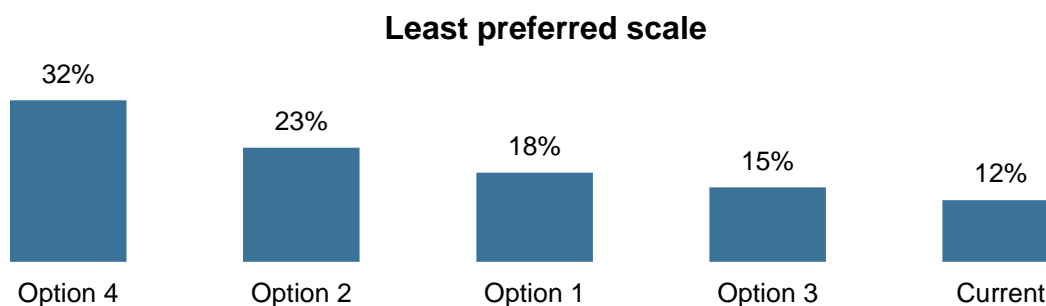
Base: Those who preferred Option 1 (n=183)

Table 8: Rating scale least preferred

Option 4 was the least preferred of the five options with 32% selecting it. The current scale has the lowest proportion of respondents selecting it as their least preferred (12%).

Option 4	Option 2	Option 1	Option 3	Current
Unsatisfactory	Improvement required	Does not meet NQS	Significant improvement needed	Significant improvement required
Approaching	Developing	Approaching NQS	Developing	Working Towards NQS
Achieving	Commendable	Meets NQS	Meeting	Meeting NQS
High achieving	Highly commendable	Exceeds NQS	Exceeding	Exceeding NQS
Exceptional Best Practice	Exceptional quality rated by ACECQA	Far exceeds NQS	Exceptional	Rated Excellent by ACECQA

Figure 20: Rating scale least preferred



D3. And which is your least preferred option?

Base: Total Sample (n=610)

Table 9: Reason for least preferred option (Scale option 4)

Respondents cited a range of issues with Option 4 – notably lack of detailed information, difficulty in understanding and unclear terminology.

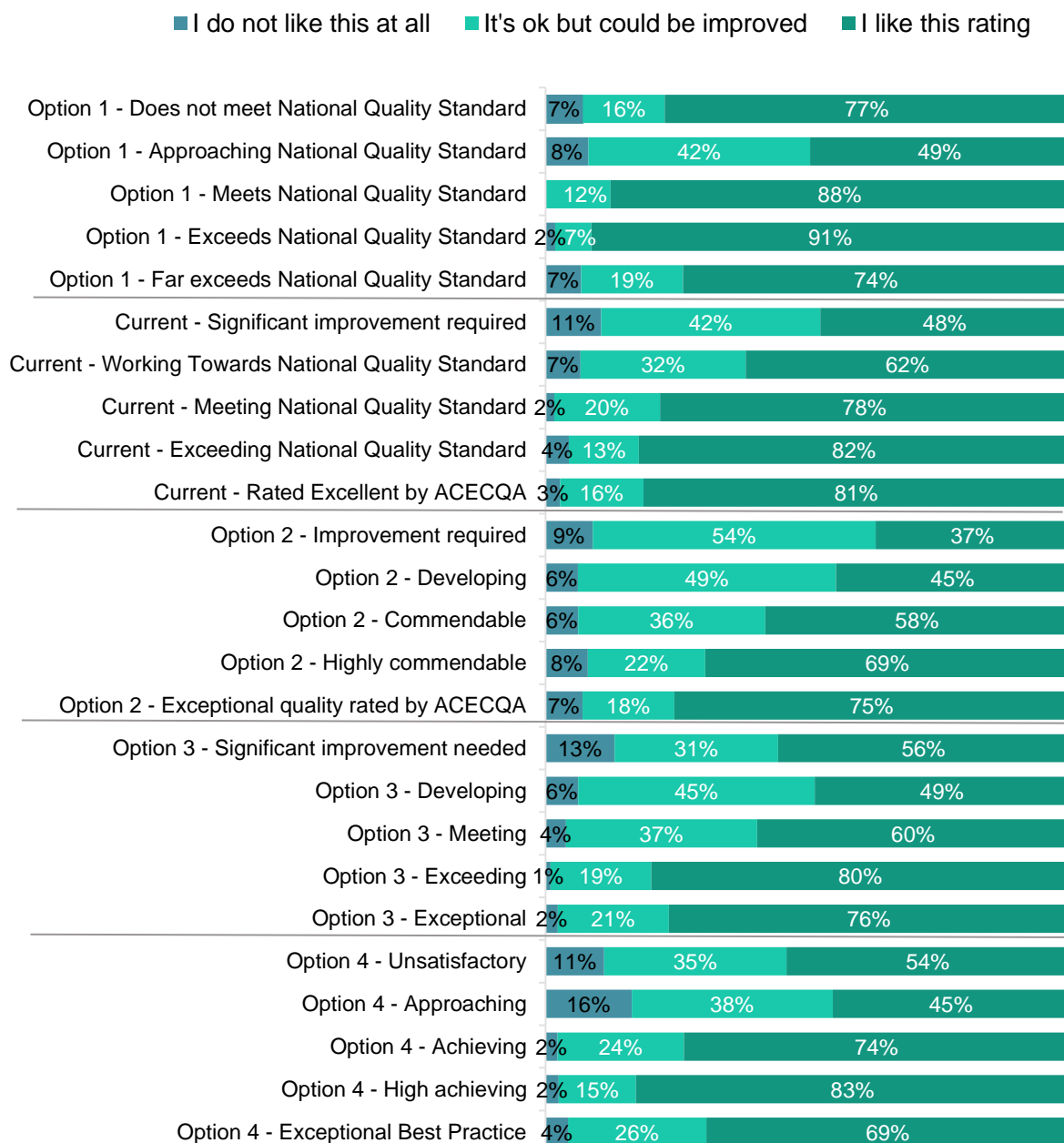
Text response theme	Proportion of respondents
Not enough detail or information	18%
Unclear, hard to understand or vague	16%
Terminology unclear	12%
Issues with the term 'unsatisfactory'	9%
Doesn't suit	8%
Issues with the term 'approaching'	4%
Issues with the term 'achieving'	3%

QD4. And why is [INSERT SELECTED OPTION AT D3] your least preferred rating scale? Please be as detailed and specific as possible.

Base: Those who preferred Option 4 (n=191)

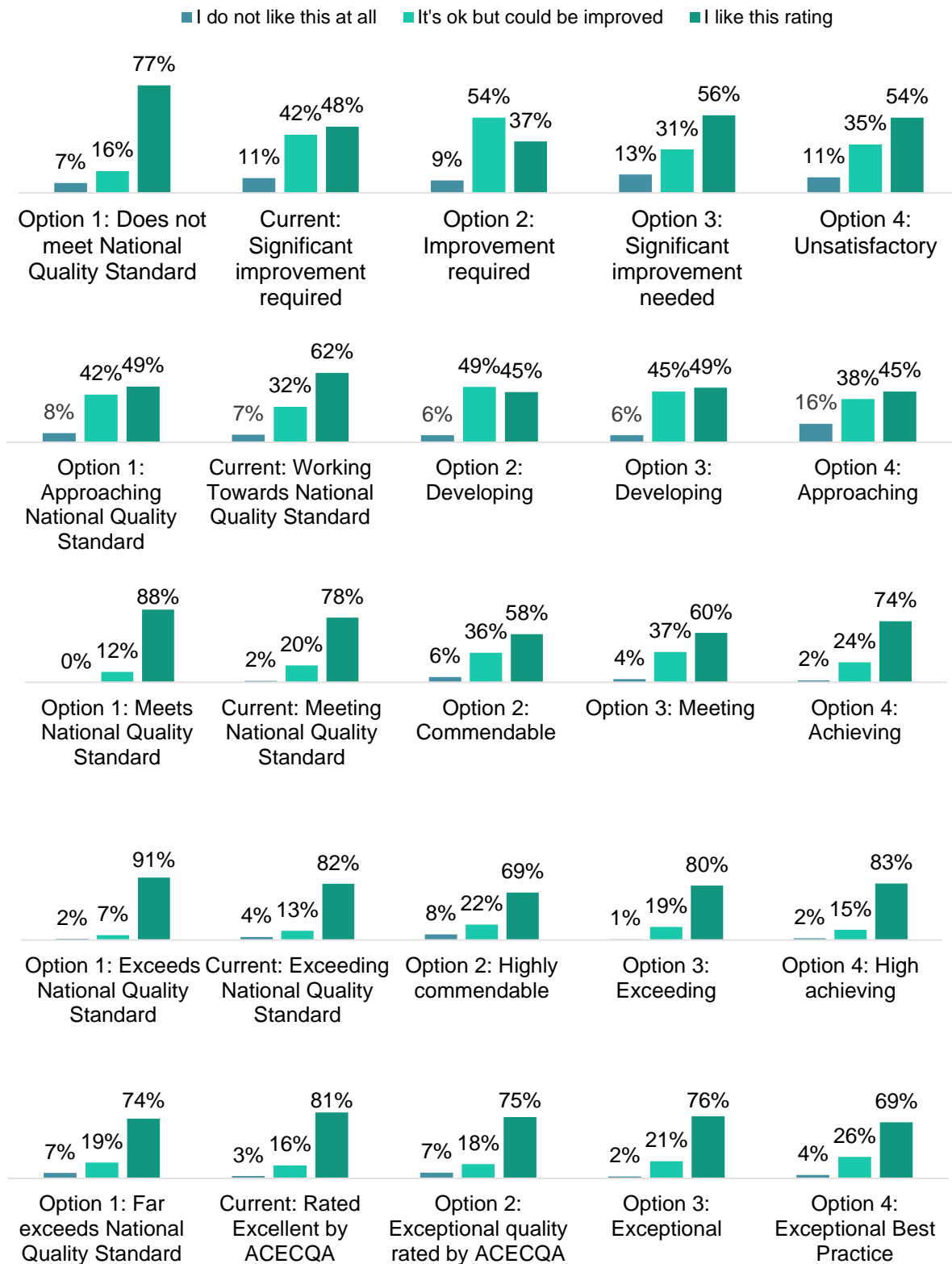
Of those preferring Option 1, parents and carers gave high scores (>70% stated they 'liked' the terminology) for ratings one, three, four and five of the scale. The terminology of the second level – 'Approaching National Quality Standard' – showed more mixed sentiment, with 49% 'liking it', but 42% stating 'it could be improved' and a further 8% 'not liking it at all'. However, other scales also generated low scores for this second level.

Figure 21: Appeal of ratings within the scale



QD5. And looking at each of the specific words in your preferred rating scale, which do you like, and which do you dislike? Base: Those who preferred current (n=143), Option 1 n=183, Option 2 n=119. Option 3: n=115, Option 4 (n=50)

Figure 22: Appeal of ratings within the scale: Level 1 (bottom scale) to Level 5 (top)

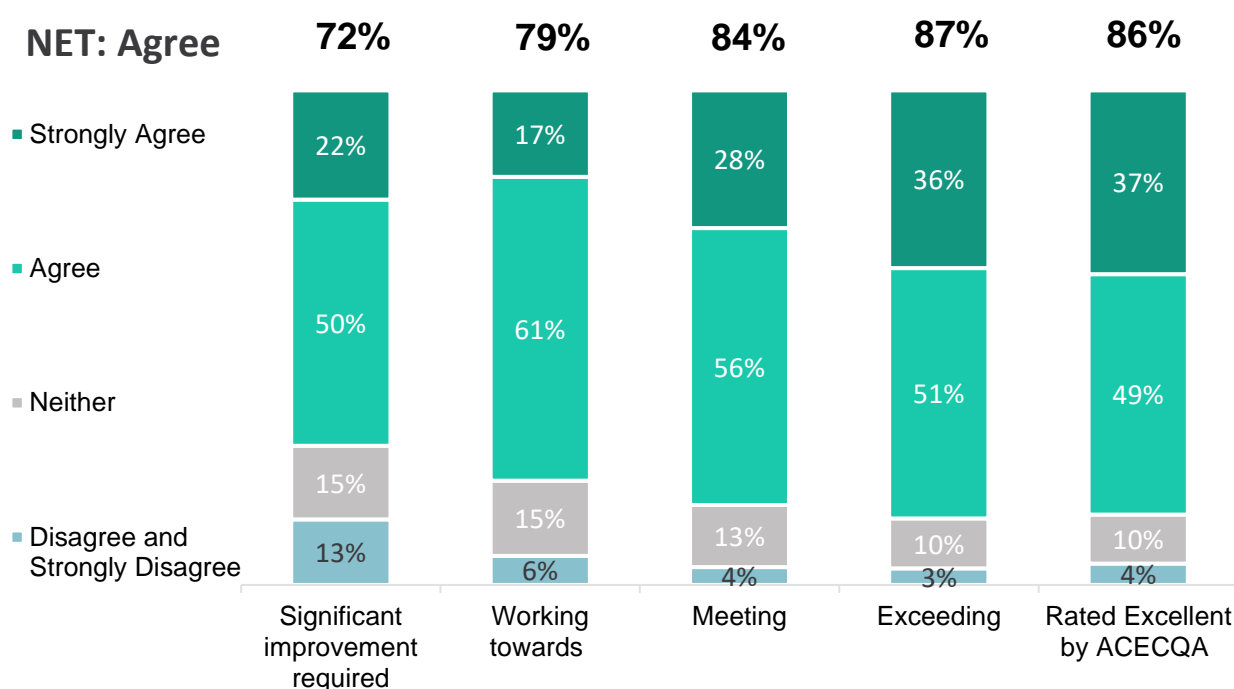


QD5. Looking at each of the specific words in your preferred rating scale, which do you like, and which do you dislike? Base: Current n=143, Option 1: n=183, Option 2: n=119. Option 3: n=115, Option 4: n=50

12.2. Evaluation of term descriptions

Most respondents agreed that the summary terms within the current rating scale are good fits. The first level ('Significant improvement required') had the lowest level of agreement at 72%. 'Working towards' was at 79% agreement with the other ratings having at least 84% agreement.

Figure 23: Ratings of current scale summary terms



QD8. Each of the ratings have a summary to describe the rating. To what extent do you agree or disagree that each of the summary terms used in the ratings, are a good fit for their descriptions?

Base: Total sample (n=610)

Four of the five current ratings were perceived to best describe the existing descriptions. At level three, 'Meets' National Quality Standard was preferred to the current 'Meeting' NQS. The statements perceived to best align to current descriptions were:

1. Significant Improvement required (current)
2. Working Towards National Quality Standard (current)
3. Meets National Quality Standard
4. Exceeding National Quality Standard (current)
5. Rated Excellent by ACECQA (current)

The target groups of CALD, Indigenous Australians and Low Literacy shared these preferences. There was one significant difference amongst the Low Literacy group, with them preferring 'Exceptional Quality Rated by ACECQA' for the top level.

Table 10: Preference of terminology by level

Level 1 description: There is an identified significant risk to the safety, health and wellbeing of children. Immediate action will be taken to address issues.

Level 1 (Significant improvement required)	Proportion preferring
Significant improvement required (Current)	45%
Does not meet National Quality standard	21%
Unsatisfactory	13%
Improvement required	12%
Significant improvement needed	11%

Level 2 description: Service provides a safe education and care program, but there are one or more areas identified for improvement.

Level 2 (Working Towards)	Proportion preferring
Working Towards National Quality Standard (Current)	57%
Approaching National Quality Standard	16%
Approaching	14%
Developing	13%

Level 3 description: Service meets the NQS. Service provides quality education and care in all seven quality areas.

Level 3 (Meeting NQS)	Proportion preferring
Meets National Quality Standard	43%
Meeting National Quality Standard (Current)	31%
Achieving	14%
Meeting	7%
Commendable	4%

Level 4 description: Service goes beyond the requirement of the NQS in at least four of the seven quality areas.

Level 4 (Exceeding)	Proportion preferring
Exceeding National Quality Standard (Current)	34%
Exceeds National Quality Standard	33%
Exceeding	14%
High achieving	11%
Highly commendable	7%

Level 5 description: Service promotes exceptional education and care, demonstrates sector leadership, and is committed to continually improving.

Level 5 (Rated Excellent)	Proportion preferring
Rated Excellent by ACECQA (Current)	34%
Exceptional Quality Rated by ACECQA	23%
Far exceeds National Quality Standard	20%
Exceptional	13%
Exceptional Best Practice	11%

QD9. And which of the following words do you think would best describe each of the rating levels?

Base: Total sample (n=610)

12.3. Inclusion of 'Rating Excellent by ACECQA' as part of scale

The current rating scale has five levels. One hypothesis was that it may be clearer to present the NQS as a four-level scale, with the top scale ('Rated Excellent by ACECQA') sitting outside the core scale, as an additional 'badge' or award. The rationale behind this, is that the top level of 'Rated Excellent by ACECQA' is achieved by so few services, and can only be achieved as an overall rating, not for each of the seven quality indicators.

To test the impact of a five or four level scale on decision making fairly, respondents were split into two cells, each of n=305. Cell A were shown a five level scale and Cell B a four level scale. The potential for the fifth level 'Rated Excellent by ACECQA' to be retained as a separate award or badge alongside a four-point scale was not explored within Cell B. Each cell was then asked the likelihood they would send their child to a childcare service rated as 'Meeting' the National Quality Standard.

A higher proportion of respondents shown the four-point scale would send their child to a childcare provider 'Meeting' the National Quality Standard.

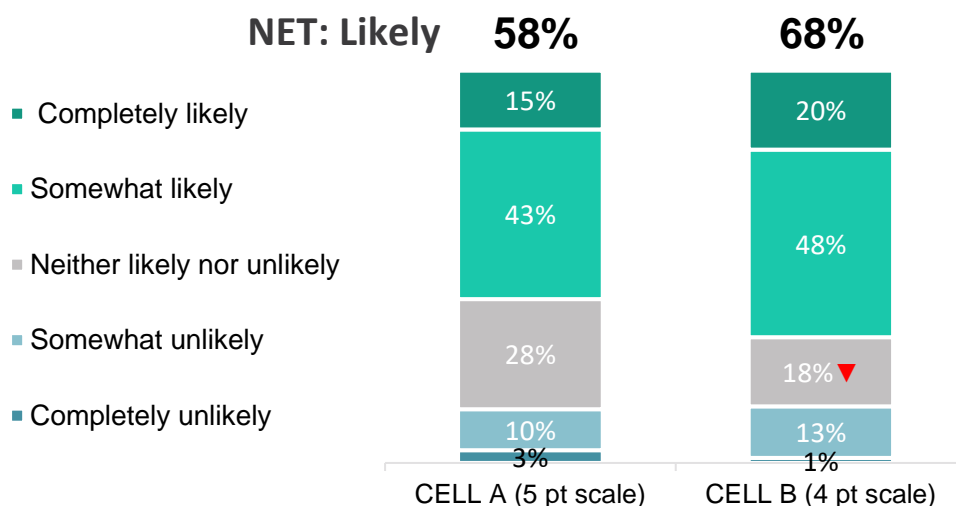
- Cell B (4-point scale): 68% tested stated they would be 'completely likely' or 'somewhat likely' to send their child to a childcare service 'Meeting' the National Quality Standard (3 out of 4).
- Cell A (5-point scale): 58% stated they would send their child to a provider 'Meeting', rated 3 out of 5 on the scale.

Interestingly, there was no difference between the two options in terms of those who stated they would be unlikely to send their child to a service 'Meeting' the National Quality Standard, with both scales showing 14%.

Table 11: Overview of cell A and B test terminology

	Cell A	Cell B
Level 1	Significant Improvement Required	Significant Improvement Required
Level 2	Working Towards National Quality Standard	Working Towards National Quality Standard
Level 3	Meeting National Quality Standard	Meeting National Quality Standard
Level 4	Exceeding National Quality Standard	Exceeding National Quality Standard
Level 5	Rated 'Excellent' by ACECQA	Not shown

Figure 24: Likelihood to send child to service 'Meeting', split by cell



QD7 intro. While there are five levels under the National Quality Standards ratings, only select childcare services and [KINDERGARTEN: ENTER AS PER A11 CODE 7] are invited to be 'Rated Excellent by ACECQA', with only a very small number of services currently holding this rating. The vast majority of services currently fall into 'Working Towards', 'Meeting' and 'Exceeding'.

QD7a. How likely would you be to send your child to a childcare service or [KINDERGARTEN: ENTER AS PER A11 CODE 7] that is rated as 'Meeting' the National Quality Standards, and therefore rated as 3 out of 5 on the rating system? In this instance, the 'Rated Excellent by ACECQA' would be included as part of the standard ratings.

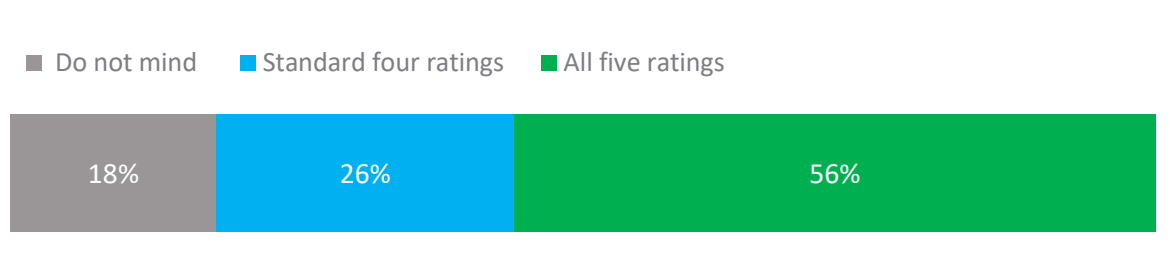
QD7b. Now we'd like you to imagine the rating system consists of 4 levels instead of 5. How likely would you be to send your child to a childcare service or [KINDERGARTEN: ENTER AS PER A11 CODE 7] that is rated as 'Meeting' the National Quality Standards, and therefore rated as 3 out of 4 on the rating system? In this instance, the 'Rated Excellent by ACECQA' would not be included as part of the standard ratings.

Base: Total sample allocated to each cell (n=305 each)

All respondents were shown options of 'Only the standard four ratings' or 'All five ratings including 'Rated Excellent by ACECQA' and asked to choose their preference between them. Fifty six percent (56%) opted for the current method of all five ratings, with 26% preferring only the four ratings and 18% did not mind. There were no significant differences by target groups of CALD, Indigenous Australians and low literacy Australians.

Parents and carers pointed out that the five-point scale provides a more comprehensive and transparent representation. They also believed it conveyed the quality of the service provider more explicitly and was considered "better for children" due to the inclusion of the fifth point.

Figure 25: Preference of four or five ratings



QD15 Knowing that a 'Rated Excellent by ACECQA' is not part of the standard ratings, do you think the rating certificates should show just the first four levels (Significant Improvement Required, Working Towards, Meeting, and Exceeding), or all five levels including 'Excellent' even if the service has not been invited to apply for this rating?

BASE: Total sample (n=610)

Table 12: Reason for preference of five-point scale

Text theme	Proportion of respondents
Shows the full picture / has greater transparency	43%
More clearly signifies quality of provider and is better for children	32%
General preference to 4-point scale	18%
Provides more opportunity and motivation for providers to improve	11%

QD16 Why did you say All five ratings including 'Rated Excellent by ACECQA' is your preferred rating system.

Base: Sample preferring All Five Ratings (n=344)

13. Conclusions

13.1 Preferred scale

Overall, across both the qualitative and quantitative stages, the current NQS scale was well received, and perceived to accurately reflect the existing rating level definitions. Indeed, four of the five terms that were identified as aligning with the rating definitions most closely by the quantitative research, are already used in the current scale.

Overall, the quantitative research found that the terms perceived to best align to the current definitions were:

1. Significant Improvement Required (current)
2. Working Towards National Quality Standard (current)
3. Meets National Quality Standard
4. Exceeding National Quality Standard (current)
5. Rated Excellent by ACECQA (current)

The quantitative research identified that only one change, at the third level, from 'Meeting' National Quality Standard to 'Meets' National Quality Standard is required to provide parents and carers with their preferred terminology throughout all five levels. This preference for 'Meets National Quality Standard' was consistent with the qualitative findings.

Interestingly, the qualitative research identified a comprehension issue with the first rating level 'Significant Improvement Required', which was not perceived to accurately reflect the current definition. However, this was not a significant issue within the quantitative stage.

13.2 An alternative option, if descriptions could be changed

When offered four alternative scales of viable terms within the quantitative research, parents and carers favoured 'Option 1' over the current scale, describing it as 'clearest / easiest to understand'. Interestingly, however, the terms within this scale were not seen as a suitable match when compared to the current descriptions. Furthermore, target groups of CALD, Indigenous Australians, and Low Literacy all significantly under-indexed for their preference of 'Option 1'.

We therefore recommend that, at least without clearer descriptions, the current scale as mentioned in section 13.2 is used.

13.3 Rating scale length

While the five-point scale was the preferred choice for most, the length of the scale does have some impact on the likelihood of parents and caregivers sending their child to a service 'Meeting' the National Quality Standard. Parents and caregivers presented with a four-point scale indicated a higher likelihood (68%) of sending their child to a service 'Meeting' the National Quality Standard, compared to a five-point scale (58%).

Furthermore, whilst not explored in the quantitative research, inclusion of the fifth level as an overall award or badge alongside a four-point scale, may overcome some of the concerns stated by those that preferred the five-point scale, around issues of 'transparency' and 'recognising excellence'.

Therefore, if it is a priority of the Department to encourage families to use services that are 'Meeting' the NQS, it may be worth considering a four-point scale with optimisations.

Appendix A – Parent Involvement

An additional ‘out of scope’ question was asked within a small number of group discussions, to understand if, and how, parents would like to be involved in the assessment and rating of ECEC services.

Overall, amongst this small sample, parents believed there would value in reading reviews from other parents who could offer a more personal perspective on the ECEC experience. However, parents also recognised that peer reviews would be highly subjective, that not all parents would have the same values and standards that they may have, and there is a risk of peer reviews attracting those with more negative experiences, which could skew results or negatively impact a service.

Most parents agreed that any involvement from families should be captured and reported separately to the official ECEC ratings, to ensure the process is standardised.

Appendix B – Quantitative Questionnaire



Quantitative
Questionnaire

Appendix C – Weighting Application

During quantitative fieldwork, extra sample was introduced to specifically target CALD, low literacy, and Indigenous Australians. This was done to ensure a reportable base within these groups. Since the obtained sample sizes for these groups is then disproportionately large compared to the broader Australian population, we have applied weighting to all charts and tables that do not explicitly mention these target groups. This weighting aims to ensure that the data accurately reflects the distribution of age, gender, and geographic location among parents and caregivers of children aged 0-5 in Australia.

Appendix D - Using this Research

It is important to note that qualitative research deals with relatively small numbers of respondents and attempts to explore in-depth motivations, attitudes and feelings. This places a considerable interpretative burden on the researcher. For example, often what respondents do not say is as important as what they do. Similarly, body language and tone of voice can be important contributors to understanding respondents' deeper feelings.

Client should therefore recognise:

- That despite the efforts made in recruitment, respondents may not always be totally representative of the target audience concerned; and
- That findings are interpretative in nature, based on the experience and expertise of the researchers concerned.

The role of Researcher and Client

ChatHouse believes that the researchers' task is not only to present the findings of the research, but also to utilise our experience and expertise to analyse and interpret these findings to deliver actionable insights and recommendations.

This is what stands us apart from other research agencies and is what we believe clients seek when they hire our services. Such interpretations and recommendations are presented in good faith, but we make no claim to being infallible.

Clients should, therefore, review the findings and recommendations in the light of their own experience and knowledge of the market and base their actions accordingly.