



nsw commission for
children & young people

This is a joint submission from NIFTeY and CCYP.
NIFTeY and CCYP have been working together over a number
of years to influence Australian policy on the care and
education of all babies and young children.

GENERAL COMMENTS

- Policy initiatives in Australia and many other countries are now reflecting the importance of the early years for children's lifelong development
- The COAG document, "Investing in the early years – a national early child development strategy", clearly articulates this importance for Australia's young children and the cost effectiveness of early investment in this area, particularly for disadvantaged groups
- As Professor Jack Shonkoff has said, we are now in the position of moving forward to close the gap between what we know and what we do
- NIFTeY and the Commission are supportive of the general direction of the reforms proposed for early childhood care and education in Australia. Such reforms are long overdue
- NIFTeY and the Commission support the broad outcomes agreed by COAG (July 2009) and the objectives of the reforms as identified in the RIS document (p.1).
- NIFTeY and the Commission welcome the opportunity to provide specific comments/suggestions relating to various aspects of the RIS document to assist with further development and refinement. In providing these comments, NIFTeY and the Commission also draws attention to limitations of the document, particularly the absence of detail around areas such as implementation issues including future Commonwealth/State Territory roles, timeframes and funding priorities.
- The proposed reforms present a real opportunity to articulate a clear vision for the future provision of effective, supportive services for children and families. Such a vision also requires the development of interagency collaboration at the highest level within government. It cannot be achieved if government agencies continue to operate in isolation, i.e. co-existence rather than an integrated approach. This is a limitation of the document. As recent research along with current government initiatives is indicating the importance of integrating professional practice to achieve better outcomes for children, such an approach is also essential within government.
- Such a new vision also requires the setting of new government funding priorities. In the latest OECD review of early childhood care and education across 28 countries, Australia is ranked as the third lowest for expenditure on pre-primary education as percentage of GDP, being 0.03%. Changes to the nature of public expenditure require setting new priorities. Without such a vision, talk about the importance of the early years for children's future

development and the importance of access to programs of high quality is limited. It is widely acknowledged across many countries that the provision of high quality early childhood care and education programs is expensive. When the cost of providing these programs are not met, many children pay the price in their subsequent development and achievements by experiencing programs of poor/low quality.

CONSULTATION QUESTIONS

National Quality Standard and Ratings Framework

1. **Governments are proposing to implement consistent minimum standards across Australia. Do you agree with this approach? Why or why not?**

- NIFTeY and the Commission agree with this approach in principle as it offers an opportunity to improve standards and therefore influence the outcomes for children and their families.
- Equity and consistency in a minimum standard across Australia should be implemented so that child development needs are met regardless of where children live or the service type they attend
- NIFTeY and the Commission also welcome all service types being involved in a Quality Assurance system which currently does not apply to preschools in Australia. This can assist families in understanding the key components of program quality. NIFTeY and the Commission support the inclusion of other service types in the COAG deliberations. In home care, occasional care and indigenous services should be included at the beginning of the setting of the National Standard so that their particular views can be taken into account.
- Integrated national standards can also be a means for raising the status of the early childhood profession and for communicating to the wider community what they can expect from a quality early childhood service.
- Whilst consistency is supported, the Quality Rating System needs to be flexible to allow for the fact that outcomes can be achieved in different ways. It should allow for the specific needs of the children and families using the service and the community in which it operates. The System needs to support the professional autonomy of qualified staff.
- The approach should not prevent States/ Territories or a new national system of governance from maintaining or adopting higher standards particularly for staff/child ratios and qualifications than those agreed to as the minimum National Quality Standard. The consistency would therefore be only in the minimum standard and would not preclude at any time a higher standard being adopted by any jurisdiction.
- **Evidence base and implementation issues;** As the current standards operating within States and Territories vary significantly it is important that the minimum National Quality Standard reflects the current evidence base for the education and care of young children. It should raise the Standard above the lowest level standard that currently exists. This will then raise the minimum quality standards to apply for all children. Consistency at the lowest level must not result in any lowering of the bar for jurisdictions. The document is not at all clear on how this should be achieved ie whether there should be separate regulations in each State/Territory so that the statement in the RIS "Where a jurisdiction is above the agreed National

Quality Standard that jurisdiction will not be required to change” (page 27) can be implemented (ie no change to an existing higher standard) or whether this can be achieved through national legislation with different agreements for each State/Territory under this as currently occurs with the Food Safety Standards. We do not support the statement suggesting that jurisdictions could not increase standards unilaterally (Page 29) around qualifications and ratios as the best interests of children should be the priority. NIFTeY and the Commission support a national governance and implementation model which is addressed further under question 6.

- **Recognition of service diversity;** NIFTeY and the Commission recognises that different service types may have a different standard given the difference between home based services with small numbers of children and centre based services for children prior to formal schooling and OOSH services. Information provided for families should make these differences clear so they can make informed choices. The standard for different centre based services (preschools and long day care) should be the same so that the divisions that currently exist within the care/education dichotomy will be broken down if early childhood teachers are responsible for planning and implementing the program in preschools and long day care centres for all children.
- Consistency in the Rating Framework is supported at the level of principle but when the details of what will be measured and how, are made available for consultation we would expect some difference between a service type such as OOSH and preschools and centre based long day care for example. We support the headings for the quality areas as suitable for all service types.

2. For each care type, which of the options set out on Chapter 5.3 do you believe would best achieve a good balance between meeting the government’s objectives or enhancing learning and development outcomes for children and families, and affordability for parents, and why?

General comments;

Research has consistently identified ratios and staff qualifications are the key predictors for the structural elements of quality. The options proposed do not reflect the evidence base in all aspects eg lack of requirements around early childhood teachers and very long timelines for the implementation of improved ratios for the youngest babies.

These elements are also the ones which significantly impact on the cost of the service. One of the serious limitations of the document is the lack of clarity around costs and who pays. There are difficulties in commenting on options without clear decisions about costs, who pays and the different impacts on the range of service types. NIFTeY and the Commission believe that there is a need for the Productivity Commission to conduct an inquiry into the effectiveness of current funding mechanisms for early childhood education and care services given that there is no evidence that the current funding mechanisms support the determinants of quality.

For states/territories where the current standards are high, these options would result in little change or increase in costs.

Specific comments;

- Option 4 for long day care and preschools is the preferred option (page 26) of those provided but it does not give sufficient weighting to the employment of early childhood teachers and the timelines for ratios such as 1:3 for babies is too long when planned for 2020. *Where is the best interest of our current youngest children being served with such a timeline?* Option 2 (page 27) is the preferred option for Family Day Care. Neither have the full support of NIFTeY and the Commissions other options are set out below.
- There is no attention to other important aspects of staffing and ratios. In centre based services the National Standard should require two staff on duty at all times. Attention also needs to be given to how the ratios will apply in services where mixed aged groups are used and the beginning and ends of days in most long day care centres where mixed age groups are the norm. It needs to be clear that the Standard for ratios and qualifications apply at all times. This means additional staff are required for the cleaning, meal preparation and when staff are on breaks or absent from rooms to undertake program planning and evaluation so that ratios and qualification standards are maintained for the children at all times.
- If children of school age attend an early childhood service for before or after school care or vacation care then the ratios for the younger children must be maintained and additional staff employed to work with the older children.
- In Outside School Hours care services the National Standard should be a requirement from 2010. This should then move to improved ratios for the younger children aged up to eight to a 1 to 12 ratio by 2015. A requirement to have two staff employed at all times children are present should also be a requirement from 2010 or at least if numbers are low a single employee has easy and immediate access to another person in cases of emergency eg a teacher on the site in a school
- Group size has been identified as an important aspect of quality but without a clear operational definition it is impossible to support any group size options as it has proved to be a difficult concept to operationalise in current Regulations.
- There are major challenges associated with the timelines for transitions. In particular work force issues and affordability. NIFTeY and the Commission strongly recommends a staged approach to implementation and lists priorities and an alternative option below.
- Option 5 with priorities for consideration taking into account increased costs.

Transition arrangements/ staff shortages and recruitment issues option 5:

- Long Day Care and Preschools;
 - 1) Requirement for a Cert 3 to apply only to new staff employed after 2013. Current unqualified staff who have worked for many years and have often undertaken extensive in house professional development are expressing concern and many say they will resign and not undertake training. This appears to be a particular issue for staff from NESB and ATSI backgrounds or staff who have worked for many years and are anxious about any formal study. These people contribute a wealth of experience and bring diversity to staff teams and the early childhood field cannot afford to lose their contribution. This delayed implementation

would also ensure that funds for courses could be directed to the availability of other qualifications such as Diplomas and Degrees.

2) In all long day care and preschool services there should be one university qualified specialist early childhood teacher in each service with 18 children to provide pedagogical leadership and then an additional teacher for each group of 20 children ie 2 teachers at 38 children, 3 teachers at 48 children etc. The RIS contains no reference to what will be required to meet the Governments commitment to universal access for 4 year olds but NIFTeY and the Commission believes these teachers should be both planning and implementing the program for these children. There needs to be time and resources given to enable 3 year qualified teachers to obtain the 4th year of their qualification by 2015.

3) the notion of alternative qualifications is not accepted but should form part of future planning as part of a staff team in integrated services.

4) In FDC the same should apply to Cert 3 requirements as for Centres as stated in 1) but all Coordination units with 10 or more carers should have a University degree early childhood teacher with additional staff with a Diploma to support every additional 10 carers

5) The ratio for babies in centre based services aged from birth to 12 months should be introduced by 2013 and for those aged 12 months to 24 months by 2015. The current proposal set out in Option 4 is too far off and paid parental leave is likely to reduce the numbers of the youngest babies being enrolled so will reduce the cost in this area.

In summary if increased costs result in some savings being required to implement Option 5 set out above then the top 3 priorities for centre based services should be : Cert 3 for all new staff by 2013 with existing unqualified staff able to remain in positions : 1 to 4 ratio for children birth to 4 years by 2011 and then to 1 to 3 for birth to 12 months from 2013; and specialist early childhood university qualified teachers in all centres for 18 children or more with another teacher for each group of 20 children by 2013.

3. Do the proposed standards address different cultural and diversity requirements and considerations adequately? If not, do you have any suggestions for how the standard could be further improved?

The current document is written as broad outcomes and provides no detail on what or how the Ratings Framework will look like when applied to practice. It appears to reflect a view that by referring to “each child” that a flexible approach will be taken. It is therefore not possible to say whether diversity and inclusion will be dealt with adequately. When the Ratings Framework has more specific detail there needs to be extensive consultation with the field, experts in the areas of inclusion and diversity in education and care of young children and field testing before one could respond to this question.

4. What would be the impact of changes to FDC arrangements?

It would increase costs as in other service types and some carers may be reluctant to undertake the Cert 3 training with the result carers are lost to current Schemes.

5. What would be the impacts of the proposed changes to staff qualifications on services, particularly small, or rural and remote services?

- Attention to workforce issues applies across all services but is compounded in remote areas. Workforce planning needs to look at the current remuneration and conditions for staff so that people are attracted to work in early childhood and wish to remain working in this career path. This will not occur whilst wages are so low. There is lack of parity and conditions which do not make the job achievable eg lack of child free time to plan and resource the program etc. Loadings for working in isolated settings should apply as we understand they do for other professions. Special courses such as those offered by the Institute of Early Childhood at Macquarie University for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander early childhood teacher education students need to be provided across Australia.
- Support strategies such as distance education and scholarships are required to develop the capacity of local people in rural and remote communities to take up training and employment.
- Services will adjust enrolments around the Standard for ratios and qualifications as they do now. This could result in some reduction in places as providers avoid employing extra staff to implement improved ratios etc. This would not just be in rural and remote areas. Paid parental leave may also result in reduced numbers of staff in services required to care for children under 12 months.

6. Do you think the proposed quality rating system would be an effective indicator of service quality?

- NIFTeY and the Commission suggests rewording of the levels as they would mean very little to parents in their current form.
- The “National Quality Standard” suggests a higher operational level than would be a reality. The levels could start with Unsatisfactory then move to “Interim” or “Moving Towards a Basic Quality Standard” and then “Basic Quality Standard”.
- It is important that if services are failing to meet the basic level and fall into the proposed “Operating Requirements” level that this is time limited. If they do not accept assistance and make and maintain improvements then they should become Unsatisfactory. It is recognised that whilst it is not appropriate to close a service overnight unless it is a major risk nor is it satisfactory to leave children in services which consistently are not meeting a basic standard. This currently happens when sanctions are not applied with the removal of CCB to services which fail accreditation a number of times. Children could spend their whole childcare experience over 5 years in an unsatisfactory service and this is not acceptable.

- The RIS gives almost no detail about the rating system. There are no details on rewards or sanctions and these are critical aspects in determining the Ratings Framework. Nor does it explain if the higher levels can only be worked towards after gaining the basic standard of quality and whether these are optional. There is also no information on the qualifications of those undertaking the assessment or the process involved eg does it involve self study, assessment by people qualified in assessment and early childhood education and care and if so what level of qualification. All this information including details of what exactly will be measured, how services will demonstrate that they are meeting a rating and the process to be used by the service and the assessors is required before support can be given to the Ratings Framework.
- Criteria for each level need to reflect the latest evidence around structural and process variables. These criteria are a critical element of the proposed reforms and need to be developed by a group established by government with representation from academics, professionals (practitioners), and licensing bodies
- There is no mention within the document for any future role for a body such as NCAC. A total restructure of this body and the current State/Territory licensing departments to reflect the new reforms could present cost efficiencies. NIFTeY and the Commission believes a national form of governance would provide national consistency in the implementation of the Quality Framework which cannot be achieved when implementation is the responsibility of many jurisdictions. Such a new body should have national responsibility for the administration and implementation of the operational and compliance oriented levels of the Standards and Framework as well as the higher quality levels which require a different approach to measurement. It is essential that if a new national body is made up of representatives from the various jurisdictions that there is an expert advisory group providing guidance around changes needed to the National Quality Standard and Ratings Framework so they are informed by the latest in international research and implications for practice. The national body would be responsible for data collection and research/ evaluation of the implementation of the National Quality Standard and ratings Framework. There also needs to be provision made for a range of resource and support functions to assist services in implementing quality programs and using quality improvement processes. Governance and resourcing should be separate in some aspects as there is no one right way to implement quality programs thus a range of approaches to teaching and learning need to be available. The situation of a national body which basically sets the “test”and implements it should not be the only or preferred resourcing agency because of conflict of interest and the potential to be seen as “teaching to the test”.

7. Would the quality rating system help to drive continuous improvement in the ECEC sector? If not, do you have any suggestions for how the quality rating system could be further improved?

- Again the document provides no details as to how the system will be operationalised. There are significant differences between implementation of Regulations and assessment of key aspects such as the quality of the program and relationships. There is no indication how this will be handled

in the information available. Relationships for example cannot be assessed through a compliance or regulation type approach.

- NIFTeY and the Commission believe the “excellent” Rating should be removed. All centres, even those operating at a high level should strive to improve various elements of their practice. Further, quality cannot be assured. There should be a basic level of quality required and the level above that should be optional with a Quality Improvement focus rather than accreditation. Four levels and not five with the top level optional.
- It is essential that resources are focussed on assisting services not meeting the proposed minimum requirements so that children are not left in poor quality services. Support for quality improvement is essential at the lowest level.
- The field needs to be able to accept that the content of the Quality Ratings Framework is what research shows is essential for providing quality to meet the education and care needs of children and will not result in staff being overwhelmed by bureaucratic detail and paperwork. Without the details on what exactly will be measured, how and by whom it is not possible to say if the Rating system will drive continuous quality improvement. It is processes of reflection, goal setting, evaluation, professional development and the leadership around pedagogy that are critical to continuous improvement. How these are resourced, measured and assessed is essential.
- Current statements like “recognised as high quality” under the High Quality ratings in Appendix B are circular. Who is doing the recognition and how does it look different for children to the outcomes at the current National Quality Standard?
- Given the constraints of time it is not possible to comment in any detail on the content of the grid set out in Appendix B. It also raises many unanswered questions. For example is each quality area or outcome seen as equal? Some areas would seem to be of increased importance if the focus is to be on early childhood education as well as care. Whilst the physical environment is an important component of the educational environment it would be misleading if a service received a high quality rating because they had a new building but the actual relationships and the program were of poor quality and were not meeting the developmental needs of all children. NIFTeY and the Commission is unsure whether the important role of families and the support that early childhood services can provide to them is recognised adequately in the Framework.

8. What criteria do you think should be used to rate a service as excellent? How should the rating be assessed and by whom?

Refer to comments provided in responses to Q.7. Should the government continue to include this rating NIFTeY and the Commission would provide additional specific comments reflecting the current evidence base and professional practice

Licensing and regulatory arrangements

9. Do you think integrating the existing regulatory arrangements will reduce costs to the industry and for governments? Do you think this approach will be sufficient to ensure ECEC provided in high quality?

- Such an approach should be cost effective in the long term particularly if governance including implementation is through a national body. But implementing reform costs money initially for governments and the early childhood sectors. Given the acknowledged importance of the early years and the role of quality services for young children and their families then a commitment of resources to enable the reforms is essential
- The approach would NOT be sufficient to ensure ECEC provided is high quality. Licensing and regulations are a necessary but not sufficient mechanism for ensuring quality in early childhood services. They provide a means whereby the structural/contributing aspects of quality can be specified. The degree to which regulations can ensure even basic levels of quality depends on how good they are, how effectively they are monitored, how they are supported by Governments through funding to achieve them as well as other resourcing, and the qualifications/training of professionals undertaking the roles
- Licensing/regulations and quality improvement systems have quite distinct yet complementary functions. Compliance around structural aspects can be measured in far more objective ways than process variables which means a different approach to this aspect of the National Standard and Rating Framework. An integrated approach which takes account of these differences can play an essential role in working towards and requiring demonstration of standards linked to high quality but it cannot ensure it.

Implementation

10. What do you consider to be the key advantages and disadvantages of the proposed reforms?

- Opportunity to raise the quality of service provision and so achieve better outcomes for children and families. The commitment to produce the Early Years Learning Framework and its inclusion in the Framework is a significant step forward for Australia
- Improved standards for adult/child ratios and qualifications have the potential to significantly improve the quality for children but also to reduce turnover of staff as the stress of working in the profession is reduced. Over time this could also be an opportunity to attract and retain professionals in services as the role of pedagogical leadership is better understood and promoted.
- Opportunity for parents to have better information about the importance of the early years, their role as the first and most important educators of their children and what to look for when selecting an early childhood service and so make an informed choice.
- There is a real opportunity to reduce the overlap and duplication between Regulations and the Quality Systems and to reduce what the sectors currently experience in bureaucratic demands which take their time and attention away from children, families and the program

- The lack of detail on the Quality Ratings Framework in regard to what is to be measured and how means that another round of consultation with all stakeholders is essential before one can be sure the reforms are what is acceptable to the field and based on current research evidence and practice wisdom.
- There are a range of other issues that need consideration. These include a review of all courses that prepare staff/carers to meet the National Standard. This could include consideration of setting up a national board to approve qualifications or registration. Currently every State/Territory does this in its own way and concerns have been raised about the adequacy of some courses particularly for graduates working with or having responsibility for the program and its implementation for babies. In some cases Universities appear to be under pressure from institutions which register teachers to include or structure courses to meet the needs of teachers to work in primary schools to the detriment of preparation to work in prior to school settings. Concerns have also been raised at the lack of checks on RTO's and whether they ensure graduates have covered all the requirements set down in the ITAB approved courses. In particular the need for responsive care for babies needs to be well understood by graduates from courses at all levels who will be working with or in leadership positions responsible for this age group. It is essential in raising the standards for qualifications that there are requirements at a national level to ensure that courses/qualifications are appropriate.
- It is also an opportunity to review funding such as CCB and the Child Care Cash rebate and State funding to preschools. If the cost of providing care and education to babies and toddlers is increased under the reforms then CCB rates could reflect this with differential rates introduced. If State/Territory funding withdrawal is to be used as a sanction for preschools in the same way as CCB can be for Commonwealth funded services then the implications would need to be explored.

11. What do you consider to be the key challenges associated with the implementation of the proposed reforms?

- Timeframe
- No priorities set for staged implementation that takes into account workforce issues, costs and resource needs.
- Staff shortages/critical workforce issues such as quality of courses, remuneration and parity, conditions of employment and turnover
- Costs associated with changes
- No evidence of government interagency collaboration to work towards a new vision for child and family services
- Opposition from some stakeholder groups eg some private sector providers

12. What factors may impact on the ability of ECEC services to implement the reforms?

- (same as above)

13. What transition arrangements do you consider appropriate for implementing the proposed staff-to-child ratios and staff qualifications?

Refer to previous comments dealing with options. NIFTeY and the Commission has set out the top three priorities which allow for a phased in approach to better ratios and higher qualifications. (See response to Q 2)

14. What is the overall impact of the proposed changes on you and what would be your response?

There is the potential/opportunity to work towards the achievement of the outcomes agreed by COAG and the objectives set out on Page 1 of the RIS.