

**ACT EDUCATION AND TRAINING DIRECTORATE  
RESPONSE TO PRODUCTIVITY COMMISSION INQUIRY**

## **ACT Education and Care Sector**

The ACT has a population of 381,743 (March 2013) with 25,157 0-4 year olds in June 2012. The numbers of 0-4 year olds is projected to increase to 27,000 by 2021 in a population projected to be over 414,000.

As at 16 January 2014, services for education and care include-:

Services approved under the National Quality Framework					
Long Day Care	School Age Care	Family Day Care	Government Preschool	Independent School Preschool	
115	98	8	77	18	
Services licensed under the <i>Children and Young People Act 2008</i> (ACT legislation)					
Occasional Care	School Age Care				Playschools Budget Based Funded service
2	3				15 1

Of these services:

- 175 operated by community not-for-profit organisations;
- 53 operated privately (individuals or companies);
- 31 operated by independent schools; and
- 78 operated by government agencies.

Other care types which are currently outside the national and ACT legislation are known to operate in the ACT, including short term care at shopping centres and fitness clubs, nannies, in home care and individual family day care which is not part of an approved family day care service.

The Children's Policy and Regulation Unit, a business unit of the Education and Training Directorate, is the Regulatory Authority for education and care in the ACT. Its role includes monitoring services' compliance with the education and care legislation and assessment of services against the National Quality Standard.

## **Supply and demand for education and care**

Women in the ACT have consistently participated in the workforce at higher levels than the national average. This characteristic has continued for many years with female workforce participation peaking in September 2013 at 70.8%, compared with the national average in November 2013 of 66.2%<sup>1</sup>. The level of workforce participation is seen as a likely indicator of demand for education and care.

<sup>1</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics Catalogue No 6202.0 Labour Force, Australia – Labour force by Sex – Australian Capital Territory (November 2013)

The demand for education and care services remains strong, particularly for sites in close proximity to employment centres. The ACT has the highest proportion of children in long day care and outside school hours care of any State or Territory<sup>2</sup>.

**Case Study: Current demand in the ACT<sup>3</sup>**

*The following comments were posted online on The Riot ACT on 20-21 January 2013:*

*"I can give you a story about being on a list for 6 months for just one day of care for a 12 month old. I was on the list with three preferred centers [sic] who I called every few weeks until the date came that I needed that spot. Out of desperation, I downloaded the entire list of centres for the ACT from the mychild.gov.au website. I called 28 places until I was taken pity on, and given a spot. I drive 30 minutes out of my way to use this spot."*

*"We were on a waiting list for 18 months, checking in every couple of months, kept getting told "no problem, you'll have a place". Return to work is getting closer, and then the centre tells us there's "no chance as we've had a lot of siblings enrol and they get preference"."*

*"We were on waiting lists for over 24 months, two of the places we were preferred, ended up going with Au pair, that has its pros and cons. We are still on 2 waiting lists that we put our son on 5 months before he was born, he is now 2 years and 2 months old."*

*"We were on 10 waiting lists, calling monthly, then weekly as the wife was due back at work in a month. Then a new centre opened, we got a spot."*

The ACT's population is expected to increase over the next 20 years with a steady growth in the 0-4 year old age group<sup>4</sup>, which is expected to increase demand for education and care services.

Since 2002 there has been a steady increase in the number of licensed long day care centres and available child places<sup>5</sup>. However, the ACT has one of the lowest vacancy rates in Australia<sup>6</sup>.

Around 21 per cent of Indigenous children in the ACT aged from birth to 12 years of age access approved education and care services (excluding Government Preschools), compared with the national average of 16 per cent<sup>7</sup>.

Demand for outside school hours care is also growing, with 8,720 ACT children using outside school hours care in March quarter 2013<sup>8</sup>, up from 7,250 in March quarter 2011<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Economic Development Directorate, *ACT Government Indicative Land Release Programs 2013-14 to 2016-17*

<sup>3</sup> <http://the-riotact.com/under-2-childcare/122630>

<sup>4</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (2013) Catalogue No 3222.0 - Population Projections, Australia, 2012 (base) to 2101 - ABS Series b (Medium) projection – ACT

<sup>5</sup> ACT Government, *Supporting Quality Early Childhood Education and Care*, April 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, *Child Care Vacancies Quarterly Snapshot, June 2012*.

<sup>7</sup> Australian Government Department of Education, *Child Care and Early Learning in Summary, March quarter 2013*; Australian Bureau of Statistics, ABS Cat. No. 2002.0 *Census 2011*.

<sup>8</sup> Australian Government Department of Education, *Child Care and Early Learning in Summary, March quarter 2013*.

With the introduction of 15 hours of preschool through the National Partnership on Early Childhood Education (Universal access), the demand for preschool education is strong. In the ACT, the Australian Government funding under the National Partnership Agreement was passed on to ACT Government preschools, which provide 15 hours per week of free preschool education. The funding was not extended to independent schools and long day care services. Funding restraints have thus far prevented funding being extended to other early childhood settings. The long day care sector in the ACT is keen to be supported to offer 15 hours of free preschool education, which would provide working families with more flexible options for education and care in the year prior to primary school. Currently some children attend two education and care services per week in order to support parents' workforce participation as well as obtain 15 hours of free education and care.

## **ACT Government involvement in early childhood education and care**

The Education and Training Directorate is committed to increasing the number of children who benefit from early childhood education and care<sup>10</sup>. This agenda requires us to support an increase in the availability of early childhood education and care places in the ACT, and to support quality improvement in order for children to obtain benefits from education and care.

### **The ACT Government supports access to and availability of education and care in a number of ways:**

**Provision of education and care:** The Education and Training Directorate operates 77 preschools in scope of the National Quality Framework. Public preschools provide free access for 4 year olds for 15 hours per week, 40 weeks per year. They are integrated into local government schools to support continuity of learning for children through their public schooling.

Places in ACT Government preschools have recently increased to meet current and future demand. This has occurred through the establishment of new preschools as part of new primary schools, extensions to existing buildings where possible and the addition of extra classes in existing services.

A key barrier to further extension of existing services is the physical capacity of the preschool itself as well as the feeder school to cope with additional enrolments during the following years.

#### **Case study: Public early childhood schools**

*The ACT has developed an innovative early childhood framework for education and care<sup>11</sup>. There are currently five Early Childhood Schools across the ACT, which offer education and care for children from birth to year 2. These schools provide integrated services which support children's learning, health and wellbeing. These services were situated in localities where the integrated service model was likely to be of greatest benefit to families.*

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<sup>9</sup> Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, *Child Care Update, March quarter 2011*.

<sup>10</sup> ACT Government Education and Training Directorate, *Education Capital: Leading the Nation. ACT Education and Training Directorate Strategic Plan 2014-17*.

<sup>11</sup> *Early Childhood Schools – A Framework for their development as learning and development centres for children (birth to 8) and their families*. ACT Department of Education and Training Canberra 2008

*Examples of integrated services include: an early childhood school located in Canberra's south offering long day care and out of school hours care provided by a community organisation, 3 and 4 year old preschool, Koori preschool, kindergarten and years 1 & 2. Health services include maternal and child health nurses and midwives. Family support services (Paint and Play, Move and Groove, Story Time) are supported by the school's community coordinator.*

*This integrated service model places the rights and needs of children and their families at the centre. Families have access to a comprehensive array of programs that support children's early learning and development, thus building family and community capacity. The early childhood schools model will be externally reviewed in 2014 to ensure it is meeting its objectives.*

The Directorate also operates five Koori preschools which support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families as a supplement to mainstream preschool education. The Koori Preschool program provides opportunities for children to engage in rich play based experience that focus on engaging children in a love of learning, support transitions to formal schooling and the development of strong literacy and numeracy skills. There is a strong focus on culture and identity, with collaborative partnerships between families and educators to guide children's understandings in a culturally safe and inclusive learning environment for Aboriginal children and Torres Strait Islander children.

The Koori Preschool program will also be reviewed in 2014 to ensure its delivering the intended benefits to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families.

The Education and Training Directorate provides a range of early intervention programs for children with additional needs. Programs are available to children aged from 2 years to school entry who have, or are at risk of having a developmental delay, disability, communication and social difficulties, or are at risk from social or environmental factors. Educators, families and other professionals work together to develop strategies to assist children to learn and develop. Educators provide information to families within sessions, including modelling appropriate play interactions and communication strategies.

The ACT Government also funds emergency education and care for vulnerable children referred by agencies such as Care and Protection, family support services, respite services and health professionals.

**Facilities:** Forty-seven (47) long day care and independent preschools operate from ACT Government-owned facilities. Co-location with schools is being considered.

The Education and Training Directorate has embarked on a program of facility upgrades to support services to meet the requirements of the National Quality Framework and to increase available places. The infrastructure program includes extensions, refurbishments and upgrades to facilities owned by the Education and Training Directorate, including long day care centres and preschools.

The majority of long day care services operating from ACT Government owned facilities pay a discounted rent, while others receive a discount on commercial rents.

School age care services, generally provided by a community organisation, are predominately located in ACT Government primary schools with rent, if charged, determined by the school.

**Planning and land release:** Identification of sites for education and care centres is part of the planning for new suburbs. Land releases are programmed to respond to emerging demand in newly established areas as well as changing demand in established areas<sup>12</sup>.

### **The Education and Training Directorate supports quality improvement in education and care in a number of ways:**

**Regulation, quality assessment and regulatory education and information:** The Education and Training Directorate has invested additional resources into the Regulatory Authority to enable it to fulfil its functions, including providing information and guidance to ACT services. Education and information is provided in the areas of compliance and quality improvement. The Children's Policy and Regulation Unit offers regular sector meetings, workshops, visits and information sheets to support services in the implementation of the National Quality Framework.

**Workforce initiatives:** The ACT Government recognises the critical impact of the education and care workforce on quality outcomes for children. Prior to the introduction of the National Quality Framework, long day care services in the ACT were required to have Diploma-qualified educators, but had provisions for replacement with unqualified educators during short periods of leave. Additionally, there was no regulatory requirement for long day care services to employ an early childhood teacher.

The rates of educators holding, or actively working towards, a Certificate III, Diploma or early childhood teaching degree appear to have improved since the introduction of the National Quality Framework. Currently, only 12 education and care services have a waiver in place for early childhood qualification requirements<sup>13</sup>, which represents less than 6 per cent of the ACT services that are subject to those requirements.

While the ACT Government acknowledges the progress made in the education and care workforce, there is more to be done to ensure the workforce is sustainable and sufficiently skilled to implement quality standards. The ACT Government, in partnership with the Children's Educators ACT Forum, developed the *ACT Education and Care Workforce Strategy 2012-2014*, which outlines a shared commitment to implement initiatives in order to:

- attract new educators,
- retain existing educators,
- develop workforce skills, and
- increase the professional profile of the sector in the community.

As part of the Workforce Strategy, the Education and Training Directorate has invested significantly in a number of initiatives, particularly:

- Education and care media campaign: Initiated by educators at a Minister's Roundtable, this involved engaging a marketing agency to develop television commercials, website, print media and online advertising to promote careers in education and care. The ACT Government and various education and care providers and agencies funded this campaign.

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<sup>13</sup> Education and Care Directorate data.

- ACT Workforce Study: ACIL Allen Consulting were engaged to undertake a study into the workforce challenges in the ACT sector and to assess the sector's readiness to meet the qualification requirements being introduced under the National Quality Framework from 2014.
- Educator scholarship programs: The Education and Training Directorate has provided scholarships to assist educators to obtain a Certificate III qualification. There are targeted places for people from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander backgrounds.
- A scholarship program to support educators to obtain an early childhood teaching degree is currently under development. Additionally, the Education and Training Directorate supported government-employed teachers and assistants to upgrade their qualifications through scholarships and traineeships.

The Education and Training Directorate also funds vocational education and training in education and care through traineeships delivered in partnership with a Registered Training Organisation and the student's employer. In 2012, the number of traineeship completions in the Diploma of Children's Services was 86 per cent higher than in 2010. The number of completions in Certificate III traineeships was almost 70 per cent higher than in 2010<sup>14</sup>.

## Flexibility of education and care

ACT Government preschools, in partnership with their communities, decide the schedule for the delivery of the 15 hours program. The current models are:-

1. A five-day fortnight, with two days (6 hours daily) one week and three days the following week;
2. Two-and-a-half days per week; and
3. Half day sessions (3 hours daily) each week.

The most common arrangement is model number 1. These current operating hours provide challenges for some working families, particularly those working full-time or non-standard hours. Working families often require education and care services on non-preschool days as well as before or after preschool. While school age care services are able to enrol preschool children, many choose not to due to the additional qualification requirements.

Most long day care services in the ACT operate from 7.30am to 6.00pm. A small number of ACT education and care centre-based services operate outside standard hours. These services are usually employer-supported and operate during hours which suit their families' employment circumstances. Family day care services generally offer more flexibility, with some educators available to provide care outside standard hours.

Currently one community organisation provides in-home care for 30 full time places. Previously the service experienced difficulty in recruiting educators, and subsequently reduced their number of places. Over the past 6 months the service has been operating at capacity and has a waiting list.

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<sup>14</sup> ACT Education and Training Directorate data, 2013.

***Case Study: Wrap around services provided by a school age care provider to meet the needs of families for education and care for children from 4 years of age.***

*The school age care program is operated by a large provider with a strong network across the ACT. The service, situated in a large primary school (Preschool- Year 6), provides outside school hours care for up to 122 children. There is a close relationship between the school and the service with regular meetings to ensure consistency for the children.*

*There are 3 distinct groups with preschool, junior and senior spaces and programs. The preschool group is able to access the school preschool outdoor play facilities, and each group has a qualified coordinator and program to cater for their specific needs. A number of children with special needs also attend the service and these children are integrated into the program.*

*This arrangement enables families to access care that supports their workforce participation. The strong partnership between the school and education and care provider enables children to experience quality, consistent education and care with transitions between school and the service supporting children's wellbeing.*

*The service achieved an overall rating of Meeting National Quality Standard, with 3 quality areas rated at Exceeding National Quality Standard. The service continues to improve their quality to enhance their service to families and the community.*

***Case study: Catholic Early Learning Centres***

*There are six Catholic Early Learning Centres in the ACT, each part of a Catholic Primary School. Each class is staffed by an early childhood teacher and a Certificate III or Diploma-qualified assistant during core preschool hours. The services also provide optional before and after preschool care, and vacation programs. The wrap around care is staffed by Diploma and Certificate III-qualified educators, often the preschool assistants who are rostered on during core hours, and operates in the early learning centre. The familiar staffing arrangements and environment support continuity for children, and the optional wrap around care provides additional flexibility for working families. These services are also approved to offer Australian Government rebates to assist with affordability.*

## **National Quality Framework in the ACT**

The National Quality Framework has introduced an increased focus on the quality of educational program and practice in the ACT, particularly in long day care and family day care services. The requirement for an early childhood teacher in centre-based services is new for ACT long day care services and has been largely welcomed by the sector. It is anticipated this requirement will improve the quality of early childhood pedagogy in these services, as well as the perception of the professionalism of these services and educators within the community.

The provision of a highly skilled and professional education and care workforce continues to be a significant task with a number of strategies being undertaken by government and the sector.

International research<sup>15</sup> demonstrates that positive outcomes from education and care are dependent on the quality of the service provided and that more highly qualified educators improve outcomes for children. While increasing education and care places may improve workforce participation in the short term, the impact on children attending poor quality services for extended periods of time will continue to have long term effects for both the child and society at large.

The National Quality Framework introduced a 1:4 educator-to-child ratio for children from birth to two years of age. This was an increase of educators from a 1:5 ratio. The ACT sector supported this change and many services chose to implement this prior to 1 January 2012. Educator-to-child ratios for other age groups in the ACT have been unaffected by the National Quality Framework. Maintaining required ratios under the National Quality Framework appears to be achievable for the most part in the ACT, with no waivers in place for ratio requirements.

Unlike many jurisdictions, the ACT previously regulated school age care. Previous qualification and ratio requirements have been maintained with no significant impact being observed due to regulatory requirements. Anecdotal evidence shows that many school age care services have begun to embrace the assessment and rating process. To date, there are a similar proportion of school age care services rated at either meeting or exceeding the National Quality Standard as long day care services.

The ACT education and care sector, through the Children's Educators ACT Forum, have indicated a strong support for the National Quality Framework and the quality improvements being driven by higher national standards. The Forum advised the Education and Training Directorate that the main barrier stems from workforce issues including poor pay and conditions, lack of qualified educators, quality of training, and poor professional profile of the education and care sector. The Education and Training Directorate acknowledges these challenges and is committed to continuing to work with the sector to address workforce issues. The Forum indicated that, although workforce continues to be a high priority for the sector, there is a commitment to working towards the new requirements rather than lessening the required qualifications and standards. The Regulatory Authority and services have anecdotally reported improvements to the quality of education and care, and to working conditions and the professional profile of educators, as a result of these requirements.

Local tertiary education providers have also commenced tailoring courses to provide educators with the knowledge and skills to meet new national quality standards.

Several services that are currently licensed under ACT legislation have indicated a desire to come into scope of the National Quality Framework, as they see this as a means to improve community perception of their educational program and practice. Many of these services have chosen to implement the national Early Years Learning Framework and attend professional learning related to the National Quality Framework.

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<sup>15</sup> Centre for Community Child Health, *Policy Brief No 2: Quality in children's services*, 2006.

The Education and Training Directorate strongly supports the objectives of the National Quality Framework. Large change management can always be seen as burdensome, however this perception is anticipated to decrease as providers become more familiar with the Framework and practices begin to be embedded. The Regulatory Authority is working with ACECQA, the Australian Government and other jurisdictions to streamline processes further to ensure that regulations optimise children's learning and development, rather than adding unnecessary requirements.

It is important that the best interests of children are at the forefront of decision making about early childhood education and care. The Education and Training Directorate welcomes measures that support affordability and access for ACT families without compromising outcomes for children.