

# Training for early childhood education and care in Australia <sup>[1]</sup>

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## AVAILABILITY

PDF report <sup>[2]</sup>

### Executive Summary

The Australian Skills Quality Authority (ASQA) commenced operations as the national regulator for Australia's vocational education and training (VET) sector on 1 July 2011.

ASQA's review into early childhood education and care training was prompted by the Productivity Commission research report, *Early Childhood Development Workforce* (Productivity Commission 2011), and further informed by the subsequent inquiry report, *Child Care and Early Childhood Learning* (Productivity Commission 2014).

Early childhood education and care services have been the subject of significant national reforms over the past four years. Almost all children in Australia are exposed to some form of early childhood education and care services prior to starting formal schooling. The Australian Government is the largest funder of the sector, with outlays exceeding \$5 billion a year and growing. The quality of training undertaken by those who deliver such services has significant implications for the families and children who utilise these services, as well as for the wider economy.

Of particular concern to ASQA were the Productivity Commission's findings that 'the quality of early childhood education and care training delivered by registered training organisations (RTOs) is highly variable' and that 'concerns about poor training from RTOs are widespread' (2011a, p. 203). A number of key issues undermining the quality of the training in the early childhood education and care workforce were identified in the *Early Childhood Development Workforce* report (2011a). The issues identified included:

- the quality and variability of training provided to prepare early childhood education and care workers
- the different lengths of training provided for the same qualification by registered training organisations
- whether sufficient practical on-the-job training was being provided
- whether trainers and assessors possessed current industry experience, and
- the variable nature of assessment practices, including recognition of prior learning (RPL).

ASQA responded to the release of the *Early Childhood Development Workforce* report by taking a number of actions, both to increase regulatory scrutiny of early childhood education and care training, and to investigate the quality of RTOs' delivery of this training:

- First, ASQA agreed to prioritise the regulatory scrutiny of early childhood education and care training. From the end of 2013, any ASQA audit of an RTO that offered early childhood education and care training automatically included that training as part of the audit. (Audits conducted by ASQA usually consider a sample of the training delivery, rather than all qualifications offered by the RTO). This priority has meant that from 2013 early childhood education and care training was scrutinised in ASQA audits of RTOs delivering this training.
- Second, in February 2014, ASQA completed a survey of ASQA-regulated RTOs offering the certificate III or diploma in children's services and early childhood education and care. The survey sought to gather new information about how RTOs are providing early childhood education and care training.
- Third, following discussions with the Honourable Ian Macfarlane, the then Australian Government Minister for Industry, ASQA Commissioners decided to establish this national strategic review of early childhood education and care training. The review was established by utilising the powers conferred on ASQA under the National Vocational Education and Training Regulator Act 2011. The Act allows ASQA to conduct national strategic reviews of training quality in any areas of concern within the vocational education and training sector.

The national strategic review commenced in January 2014. The review was guided by a management committee comprising ASQA's Chief Commissioner and representatives from the Australian Government Departments of Industry and Education, the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority, the Community Services and Health Industry Skills Council, Early Childhood Australia, Australian Community Children's Services, Family Day Care Australia, United Voice, the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority and the Western Australian Department of Education Services.

In total, the results of 77 audits conducted by ASQA of registered training organisations informed the review's findings. This represents almost 30% of the RTOs delivering early childhood learning and child care. Forty-seven of the audits were undertaken by ASQA as part of its ongoing regulatory work and 30 were initiated specifically for the review.

The findings of this strategic review into early childhood education and care training were similar to the findings of ASQA's aged and community care strategic review of 2013. One major concern identified through this strategic review (and also through the 2013 aged and community care strategic industry review) is that many RTOs are delivering training in considerably less time than recommended in the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF). Excessively shortened courses may lead to poor quality outcomes, as often they cannot deliver the rigour and depth of training and competency required by industry (Halliday-Wynes and Misko 2013). There is likely to be a causal link between short course delivery and poor quality training and assessment. The AQF details the period of time a 'typical' student should spend to gain and demonstrate the competencies for a qualification.

This review has found that a significant proportion—just over 70%—of the delivery of the Certificate III in Child Care was occurring in programs of less than one year's duration, even though the AQF guidelines stipulate one to two years as the appropriate benchmark for a certificate III. (ASQA made similar findings in relation to aged and community care in 2013). A particularly worrying finding was that 20% of the delivery is occurring in programs of 26 weeks or less. The AQF benchmark equates to a volume of learning requirement of at least 1200 hours of delivery for a certificate III—whereas almost three-quarters of the delivery of Certificate III in Child Care was found to be 750 hours or less.

The other major finding is that too many RTOs are not able to demonstrate full compliance with the required national standards when they are audited. Most, however, are able to do so at the completion of the regulatory process. Of the 77 RTOs audited, only 20 (26.0%) were found to be fully compliant with the required national training standards. The 57 (74.0%) RTOs that were not able to demonstrate full compliance with the standards at the initial audit were given a 20-working-day period to rectify their noncompliance. Some 33 RTOs were able to do so, bringing the total number of RTOs who were able to demonstrate full compliance by the completion of the audit process to 53 (68.8%), with 24 RTOs (31.2%) not complying with all of the required standards.

In this review, we found that providers of early childhood education and care training had lower levels of compliance at the completion of the audit process when compared with all RTOs audited in the period 1 July 2012 to 31 December 2013. That is, 68.8% of the RTOs in this review were fully compliant at the completion of the audit process compared with 75.5% of all RTOs. The likely reason for the lower level of post-rectification compliance among the 77 providers audited for the review is that during the review period, RTOs were transitioning to a new training package. As such, one of the recommendations discussed below is to test this supposition through some targeted audits later in 2015.

ASQA undertook various regulatory actions against the 24 RTOs that were unable to demonstrate full compliance at the completion of the audit process. Some 16 of these RTOs were subsequently able to demonstrate full compliance with the required standards following ASQA issuing them with a notice of intention to cancel/suspend all or part of their registration. Once this regulatory action was complete, this brought the total number of RTOs fully complying with the standards up to 69 (89.6%) of the 77 RTOs in this review. Of the remaining eight RTOs, two had their re-registration rejected, two had applications to add early childhood education and care training onto their registration refused, two withdrew their registration following ASQA's regulatory activity, one moved to a different regulator and one appealed ASQA's decision in the Administrative Appeals Tribunal (AAT).

In all cases where non-compliance was identified, the RTOs experienced difficulties in achieving compliance with the standard concerning assessment (Standard 15.5 [Standard 1.8 of the 2015 Standards]). This is consistent with ASQA's findings across the VET sector and is not limited to early childhood education and care training. The new Standards for RTOs 2015, which commenced on 1 April 2015, have considerably strengthened requirements around assessment. Together with the work ASQA is doing to better inform RTOs about what is required to meet the new standards—particularly around assessment—it is hoped this will lead to an improvement in how RTOs undertake assessment.

After taking account of the fact that RTOs delivering early childhood education and care training were in the process of transition to a new training package, ASQA has concluded that the quality of training here is largely comparable with that in the VET sector as a whole. Although only a quarter of RTOs were able to demonstrate full compliance with all the standards when initially audited, the majority of RTOs were able to do so after a short (20 day) rectification period.

Nevertheless, the main findings in this report—of inadequate assessment and the delivery of too many courses in a very short time—is common across the rest of the VET sector, giving rise to two key concerns. The first concern is that trainees are not being fully skilled and properly assessed, meaning that employers are not always getting fully skilled employees. The second concern relates to those RTOs that are trying to provide high-quality programs that are capable of delivering the skills and competencies required in a meaningful way—these RTOs are being faced with unfair competition (in terms of downward pressure, or the lowering of costs or prices to unrealistic levels) from those RTOs that are providing 'cheap' and unrealistically short training programs. This situation is threatening the long-term financial sustainability of the Australian training market.

#### **Related link:**

**Abbott Government orders urgent intervention into training providers spitting out childcare 'graduates' in matter of weeks** <sup>[3]</sup>

**Region:** Australia and New Zealand <sup>[4]</sup>

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