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2014 Review of the National Partnership Agreement on the National Quality Agenda for Early Childhood Education and Care

A. Introduction

1 The IEU welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the 2014 Review of the National Partnership Agreement on National Quality Agenda.

2 The IEU is the federally registered union representing over 75,000 education professionals (teachers and other education staff) in the non-government education sector, many of whom work in kindergartens, preschools, and early child care centres which may be either not for profit or profit corporations.

3 The IEU is responsible for negotiating collective agreements for members in these various early childhood education and care settings. The processes and outcomes of these negotiations as well as the experiences of our members have strongly formed the basis for our views regarding this sector.

B. The National Quality Agenda

4 The National Quality Agenda has achieved for the first time in Australia a clear focus on the importance of quality early childhood education and care. It gives practical effect to decades of research into the positive outcomes generated by high quality early childhood education settings.

5 The IEU supports the continued implementation of all agreed milestones under the National Quality Agenda for early childhood education and care to 2020.

6 The IEU notes that the 2014 Review of National Quality Agenda seems to have an emphasis on the efficiency and cost effectiveness of the regulation of services, despite this not being the major objective of the National Quality Agenda.

7 The IEU is concerned that a narrow cost efficiency focus will detrimentally be applied to a review of the National Quality Agenda and thereby limit the overall outcomes of the review.

8 The focus and intent of the National Partnerships for early childhood education and care has been to deliver quality early childhood education and care and to improve the access for children, particularly from disadvantage families through the delivery of universal access to quality early childhood education in the year before full time schools and to establish a National Quality Agenda for quality early childhood education and care.

9 IEU believes that there is a need to ensure that the focus of the Review is on the importance of the provision and accessibility of quality early childhood education. It is recognised there is a need to deliver a world class early education system which also allows

parents to participate in the workforce. However, the raison d'être of early childhood education must be the educational development and wellbeing of our children.

10 It will be detrimental to all if a narrow narrative of cost efficiency and affordability to childcare be applied to the Review of the National Quality Agenda, without serious consideration of the quality indicators and long term education outcomes.

11 The real benefits of improved outcomes for children and the broader Australian society and economy have not yet been modelled in detail.

12 The IEU believes that any cost – benefit assessment of the National Quality Agenda must take into full account both the short term and long term effect of investing in high quality early childhood education and care.

13 If the focus of the review is to be solely on costs associated with the implementation of regulations and in particular the hiring of staff with higher qualifications, the hiring of additional teachers and staff to create better adult to child ratios, higher productivity and greater stability in utilisation; we will not see the full picture.

14 Any cost and efficiency review must take into account the quantum of impact compared to the alternatives. For example, the employment of a residual and unqualified workforce in ECEC has historically been highly problematic with inefficiencies from constant training and high rates of staff turnover.

15 Further any cost and efficiency review should consider the long term productivity gains achieved from early childhood education. Research is readily available which outlines the productivity benefits gained from long term investment in early childhood education and care.

16 For example, the University of Melbourne's research examined the impact of participation in early education in the year prior to formal schools on Year 3 National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy scores (NAPLAN). This research shows that children who access a preschool education lead by a qualified early childhood teacher scored 15 – 20 points higher than those who do not.¹

17 Elsewhere, the 2012 PISA results demonstrates that across OECD countries students who participate in early childhood education programs performed better – a full year ahead of their peers. The OECD recommends that countries increase investment in early learning for disadvantaged children and states that the best outcomes are achieved when children spend two years in early childhood education.²

18 These benefits flow on to the broader community through the returns from the increased workforce participation of parents, as well as from the effects of greater social inclusion.

C. Regulating for Quality – National Quality Framework

19 In 2011, the Productivity Commission Inquiry provided the finding that:
“market pressures alone are unlikely to lead to the provision of quality early childhood education and care – an appropriate regulatory system is required”.³

¹ Warren and Haisken, 2013.

² OECD (2012)

³ Productivity Commission (2011)

20 The IEU supports the National Quality Framework as it comprises a significant first step towards professionalising the early childhood education and care workforce and ensuring the provision of nationally consistent high quality early childhood education and care.

21 The National Quality Framework targets a range of structural and process quality drivers, incorporating measures to improve adult to child ratios, to ensure minimum qualifications and to improve curriculum and reporting requirements.

22 Instead of eight state and territory systems operating independently of one another, there now exists a “national system” with the potential to enhance regulation, investment and impact measurement in a coherent and integrated way.

23 These measures represent a significant transformation of the sector. It is readily recognised that there have been some issues with the implementation of the National Quality Framework. However, a review of the regulations by ACECQA showed that over 78% of providers were supportive or very supportive of the National Quality Framework. The report furthermore found that:

“Despite the frustration and stress driving the perception of burden around quality assessment and ratings visits, providers whose services have been quality rated are among the groups most supportive of the National Quality Framework. These providers also perceived a much lower level of administrative burden, suggesting that as regulatory authorities engage more with providers about quality, and rate more services, support for the National Quality Framework will grow and the perceived level of administrative burden may reduce.”⁴

24 Where IEU members have raised issues relating to the regulatory burden, it has been in an industrial context, that adequate face to face release time and administration time had not been provided; thus forcing members to add on to their already busy workload. While our members have raised issues of meeting attendance and completion of documentation outside the normal working hours without compensation, they have provided positive feedback on the National Quality Framework.

25 This remains a structural funding issue in the implementation of the National Quality Framework and not a fault within the framework. This issue should not be seen as a reason for rolling back the implementation of the National Quality Framework rather it points to the necessity of proper resourcing of administration time for early childhood professionals and providing them with consistent professional development and support and advice.

26 The conditions for quality early childhood education and care have now been established through the National Quality Framework, which is based on cogent body of evidence on the positive effect of high- quality early childhood education on children’s cognitive development, social/emotional resilience and capacity for life long learning.

27 Reforms to National Quality Framework must not result in any weakening of quality requirements. As Price Waterhouse Coopers noted in their review:

“...The National Quality Framework quality standards are not ambitious, they fall short of the precedents set by ECEC systems overseas in terms of the qualifications required by early childhood staff and compare poorly with those quality standards that are taken for granted in the school education system.”⁵

⁴ ACECQA Report on the National Quality Framework and regulatory burden, page 19

⁵ Price Waterhouse Coopers, March 2011

D. The most important aspects of quality and most important quality areas within the National Quality Standard

28 The IEU concurs with research that demonstrates that the most significant drivers of quality early childhood education and care are staff qualifications, in particular qualified early childhood education teachers and high staff to child ratios.

(i) Staff Qualifications

29 The IEU believes that quality early childhood education and care is provided only through tertiary qualified early childhood teachers, supported by qualified early childhood teacher assistants and child care educators.

30 Teachers with specialised early education qualifications possess significantly greater knowledge and skills in relation to early childhood development and children learning styles than employees with other qualifications.

31 Specialist early childhood teachers are knowledgeable in early childhood development and learning and skilled in the development of programs based on the evidence which support children's learning in individualised way.

32 Research is unequivocal on the link between staff qualification and training and improved outcomes for children in early childhood education programs.

33 The UK effective provision of preschool education project (EPPE) a comprehensive and widely regarded longitudinal study, found that settings which employ university qualified teachers have higher quality scores on quality rating systems and children make better progress as learners. The EPPE findings show that having university qualified teachers working with preschool children (aged three to five years) for a substantial amount of time had the greatest impact on quality and was linked specifically with improved outcomes for children's literacy and social learning at age five⁶.

34 Shonkoff (2011), Hamre and Pianta (2004) and others have identified that educators with low qualifications and limited training are at a higher risk of burning out, suffering from depression and poor emotional health which compromises their ability to develop the type of relationship that support young children's learning and development.⁷

35 Researchers have also defined the characteristics of the most effective early childhood settings as containing detailed and focused planning, strong leadership and management skills, adult-child interactions that supported and challenged children's thinking and at least one university-trained early childhood teacher supporting and working with less qualified staff⁸.

36 These findings are compelling evidence on the importance of staff qualifications and in particular the necessity for qualified early childhood education teachers.

37 The IEU supports the National Quality Framework requirements for qualified staff in particular the mandatory employment of early childhood teachers. We believe that the requirement for the engagement of qualified early childhood teachers is the necessary commitment to raise the overall quality of early childhood education and care provision in Australia.

⁶ Sylva K, Melhuish E, Sammons P, Siraj-Blatchford I and Taggart B (2004).

⁷ Shonkoff J (2011).

⁸ Sylva K, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, Taggart & Elliot, 2003

38 The IEU believes that the establishment of the National Quality Framework and in particular its qualification requirements, has increased the professionalization across the early childhood education and care service workforce.

(ii) Recruitment and Retention of Qualified Early Childhood teachers

39 Achieving the goal of increasing the number of qualified early childhood education teachers and raising the level of qualifications for other qualified staff requires a commitment to act against factors that deter qualified staff from working in the sector.

40 The Productivity Commission has recognised in its 2011 study of the early childhood development workforce that the standing and wages of early childhood teachers were a determinant factor in achieving the National Quality Framework requirements.

*“In order to attract and retain a sufficient number of early childhood teachers to achieve the reforms set out in the National Quality Standard and the National Partnership Agreement on Early Childhood Education, salary and conditions offered by Early Childhood Education and Care services will need to be competitive with those offered to primary teachers in the school sector. Community – and privately managed preschools in NSW will also need to offer similarly competitive salaries and conditions for their teachers, which is already the case in other jurisdictions. Teachers qualified to work in ECEC typically have the option to work in LDC, preschool or primary school settings”.*⁹

41 The IEU calls for the funding system to be reformed to ensure that services are able to pay professional wages which reflect the level of qualifications required. This will aid in the attraction and retention of qualified teachers.

(iii) Waivers for staffing requirements

42 The IEU notes the most recent figures from ACECQA 2014 show that only 3.24% of services had waivers for staffing requirements.¹⁰ We also note that some parts of the sector have argued for the removal of the requirement to seek temporary waivers for failing to meet the requirement of employing an Early Childhood Education teacher. We also note that there have been some recent changes to the regulations which allows this to occur.

43 However, as most services are meeting the requirements, the IEU would argue that there is no reason to repeal the current qualification requirements. In fact, the current qualification requirements still remain below those standards internationally (Canada and New Zealand). In addition, on going exemptions from the regulations must be discouraged.

44 The IEU notes that remote and indigenous regions have expressed difficulty in accessing qualified staff. Yet these are areas where the benefits of quality early childhood education provided by qualified early childhood education teachers are most needed.

45 The IEU believes that neither changes to the National Quality Framework requirements nor exemptions for the employment of qualified early childhood teachers are the answer for these areas as these children deserve the same access to quality early childhood education as those living in metropolitan regions.

46 The IEU calls for increased Government investment to assist with access to training and upgrading of qualifications. Mechanisms such as course fee scholarships/subsidies, travel

⁹ Productivity Commission (2011)

¹⁰ ACECQA, July 2014.

and accommodation subsidies, paid study leave, access to quality professional development as well as funded salary classification structures which recognise qualifications are all needed to improve the recruitment rates of qualified early childhood staff.

(2) Quality Driver 2 - Staff:Child Ratio

47 There is sound evidence from research that the ratio of staff to children makes a positive difference in early childhood education programs. This is particularly so for children from birth to three years of age. Infants and toddlers do not thrive in environments where their need for individualised, responsive attention and attachment with caring, consistent educators is compromised because there are insufficient skilled adults to meet these critical needs. Research also indicates that the level of sensitive, responsive care for infants and toddlers decreases when the ratio of staff to children decreases.¹¹

48 The research also shows that higher numbers of staff to children aged three to five is associated with important learning outcomes including:

- More extensive language skills through increased opportunities for conversations with adults
- Increased literacy skills
- Improved general knowledge
- More co operative and positive behaviour with peers and adults
- Better concentration and attention skills¹²

49 The current National Quality Framework staff to children ratio requirements have been designed to assist early childhood education teachers and staff in providing individualised assistance.

50 Under the National Quality Framework, it was agreed that new staff to child ratio would be implemented gradually to allow the sector to prepare and minimise the impact of the changes. States and Territories that did not meet the ratio requirement, for children 36 months to school age, negotiated individual transitional arrangements so that these ratios would come into force on 1 January 2016.

51 Likewise, where States/Territories had better staff to child ratios, these were recognised and maintained.

52 Any opposition to the National Quality Framework staff to child ratio requirements ignores the fact that the changes to the ratios under the National Quality Framework are not that different from some previous state or territory regulations as well as the actual practice of many ECEC centres which operate above the legal minimum requirements for staff to child ratios.

53 The IEU has maintained the position that where regulations or practice exists that provide for better staff to child ratios, that such arrangements should continue and opposes any attempt to reduce staff to child ratios.

54 Further, the IEU believes that national quality standards should reflect international best practice as outlined in the OECD research; namely staff/child ratios of at least 1 adult to 3 children for infants; at least 1 adult to 4 children for one to two year olds and at least one adult to 8 children for three to five year olds.¹³

¹¹ NICHD, 2000 ECA submission page 8

¹² Ibid, ECA page 8

¹³ OECD (2012)

55 The IEU believes that the current ratio requirements of qualified early childhood education teachers to children can be improved. While we have welcomed the standardisation of the requirement to employ qualified early childhood teachers, we have never accepted the existing ratios as being sufficient.

56 We call for an increase to the existing ratios of teacher-to-children overtime.

57 Teachers need to be present and involved directly in the implementation of early childhood education and care program. Early childhood programs must be continually evaluated and adapted to ensure that they continue to meet the needs, abilities and learning styles of all children.

58 IEU members have raised workload issues as being a contributing factor to the low morale of the sector. More detailed consideration must be given to the non contact time available and the impact of expectation on early childhood teachers to provide “educational leadership” to less qualified staff in addition to developing, implementing and monitoring the outcomes of the education program for a large group of children.

59 The IEU recommends the full time engagement of a qualified early childhood education teacher in centres where there are 20 children and for this qualified teacher to be assisted by qualified staff, depending on the adult to child ratio.

60 We further recommend the full time employment of an additional qualified early childhood teacher for each additional 20 children enrolled in the service.

Summary

A National Quality Agenda Review

1 The IEU supports the continued implementation of all agreed milestones under the National Quality Agenda for Early Childhood Education and care to 2020.

2 The IEU supports the National Quality Framework as it comprises a significant first step towards professionalising the early childhood education and care workforce and ensuring the provision of nationally consistent high quality early childhood education and care.

3 IEU believes that there is a need to ensure that the focus of the Review is on the importance of the provision and accessibility of quality early childhood education. It is recognised there is a need to deliver a world class early education system which also allows parents to participate in the workforce. However, the *raison d'être* of early childhood education must be the educational development and wellbeing of our children.

B Quality Drivers - Qualified Staff

4 The IEU believes that quality early childhood education and care is provided only through tertiary qualified early childhood teachers, supported by qualified early childhood teacher assistants and child care workers.

5 The IEU believes that there is a need to remain committed to the National Quality Framework requirements for qualified early childhood teachers and qualified staff if we are to continue to raise the overall quality of early childhood education and care provisions in Australia.

6 The IEU supports the National Quality Framework requirements for qualified staff in particular the mandatory employment for an early childhood teacher. We believe that the requirement of the engagement of qualified early childhood teachers is the necessary commitment to raise the overall quality of early childhood education and care provision in Australia.

7 The IEU believes that the establishment of the National Quality Framework and in particular its qualification requirements, has increased the professionalization across the early childhood education and care service workforce.

C Government Investment for Professional Wages

8 The IEU calls for the funding system to be reformed to ensure that services are able to pay professional wages which reflect the level of qualifications required. This will aid in the attraction and retention of qualified teachers.

D Government Investment for Upgrading of Qualifications and Skills

9 The IEU calls for increased Government investment to assist with access to training and upgrading of qualifications. Mechanisms such as course fee scholarships/subsidies, travel and accommodation subsidies, paid study leave, access to quality professional development as well as funded salary classification structures which recognise qualifications are all needed to improve the recruitment rates of qualified early childhood staff.

E Quality Driver – Adult : Child Ratio

10 The IEU has maintained the position that where regulations or practice exists that provide for better staff to child ratios, that such arrangements should continue and opposes any attempt to reduce staff to child ratios.

Further, the IEU believes that national quality standards must reflect international best practice as outlined in the OECD research; namely staff/child ratios of at least 1 adult to 3 children for infants; at least 1 adult to 4 children for one to two year olds and at least one adult to 8 children for three to five year olds.

F Teacher : Child Ratio

11 The IEU recommends the full time engagement of a qualified early childhood education teacher in centres where there are 20 children and for this qualified teacher to be assisted by qualified staff, depending on the adult to child ratio.

12 We further recommend the full time employment of an additional qualified early childhood teacher for each additional 20 children enrolled in the service.

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