



National Quality Standards

A call for transparency and clarity

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In the last decade, Australia's childcare sector has undergone many significant changes, some of which can be attributed to results from the 'Thematic Review of Early Childhood Education and Care', which was conducted in 2006 by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). In this review, Australia was identified as one of the lowest-spending countries on the provision of high-quality education and care (see Figure 5.3). These alarming statistics have perpetuated many government and state territory policy changes, the most significant of which has seen the review of the way childcare provision is assessed nationally.

In line with the OECD recommendation of nominating a lead ministry that works in cooperation with other departments and sectors (2006), the National Quality Framework has been adopted as the system in place to efficiently assess and regulate childcare provision. The purpose of the National Quality Framework (NQF) is for 'all Australian governments to work together to provide better educational and developmental outcomes for children'. A key aspect of the National Quality Standard (NQS) is to set a high national benchmark and provide families with a better understanding of quality education and care.

In response to recent events, which I will explain later in this article, I became particularly interested in the calibre of professionals who assume roles in assessing services against National Quality Standards. To my surprise, I found information in this area to be rather scarce. While the assessment and rating (A&R) process itself is well documented, limited information is available about the level of qualification, background and/or experience of the 'authorised officer'. The Regular Authority in each state (under section 225 'Functions of National Authority' in the Education and Care Services National Law) is responsible for determining 'the qualifications for authorised officers and to provide support and training for staff of Regulatory Authorities'. However, their level of qualification and the type of training received is not clearly articulated. What is interesting to note is the information available about the role of the authorised officer. According to ACECQA, 'The roles and responsibilities of an authorised officer are set out in the Education and Care Services National Law and may include:

- monitoring education and care services, and enforcing compliance
- assessing applications for approval
- conducting assessment and rating visits
- investigating incidents and complaints
- providing advice and guidance.'

This data suggests that authorised officers don't always get it right; in fact, many get it wrong

Public expenditure on ECEC services (0-6 years) in selected OECD countries

	Public expenditure as % of GDP
Canada	0.25
Australia	0.4
Italy	0.43
Germany	0.45
Netherlands	0.45
United States	0.48
United Kingdom	0.5
Austria	0.55
Hungary	0.8
France	1
Finland	1.3
Norway	1.7
Sweden	1.7
Denmark	2

Note: Expenditure estimates, based on replies provided by country authorities to an OECD survey in 2004. The figures provided suggest that Denmark spends 2% of GDP on early childhood services for 0- to 6-year-olds, and Sweden 1.7%. Each country – and Finland – also allocates an additional 0.3% (approximately) to the pre-school class for children 6 to 7 years.

Source: Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care (OECD, 2006)

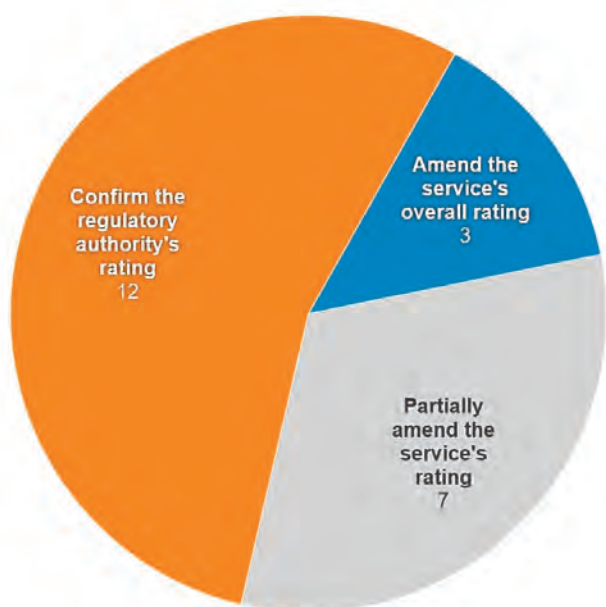
http://www.keepeek.com/Digital-Asset-Management/oeecd/education/starting-strong-ii_9789264035461-en#page1

What is an authorised officer?

If the role of the authorised officer 'may include' the above responsibilities, or not, how can we ever get to a position where national consistency is achieved? In reality, we can't. Until there is explicit clarification about what each authorised officer does, and transparent information about levels of qualification, we are far from feeling confident that the new A&R system is equitably enforced by personnel who are adequately trained. ACECQA, by its own admission, maintains that qualification levels (for assessment officers) are well overdue for review. Unfortunately, this won't occur until 2020, posing serious implications for services undergoing assessment in the next three years.

The equity issue is one that rings true for many services that have participated in the process since the system was first introduced. I continue to reflect on one such experience that has left me and many of my colleagues hugely disappointed. In January last year, I had the pleasure of supporting a very eager service to undergo A&R for the first time. The centre director, proud of her team, spent countless hours reviewing documentation and reflecting on educator practices, leaving no stone unturned. The fact that a 'sister centre' underwent the exact same process three months prior, and achieved an 'Exceeding' rating, gave the team much comfort and reduced stress significantly.

It was pleasing to witness the relationship between these two centres, evident in the way they collaborated and supported one another. Given that both services were governed by the same organisation, sharing policies, processes and programs, one would assume that their A&R experience would also be similar. On the contrary; one couldn't be compared to the other. The approach differed so greatly, in fact, that it appeared that the authorised officer was using a completely different set of criteria to assess the service.



http://files.acecqa.gov.au/files/Misc/OperationalActivity/OS_build_C1.html

It goes without saying that undergoing such an arduous process is stressful enough, without having the added pressure of dealing with the negative conduct of an authorised officer. Not only was this centre not given adequate notice that the visit was taking place, but they were literally brought to tears by the authorised officer's demeanour. I have no doubt that many of you reading this article can relate to this experience. It came as no surprise, then, that once results were received, some weeks later, a lower rating level was determined. Had a sound rationale for this rating been clearly articulated and supported by evidence, then it would have been a case of 'suck it up and focus on improvement'. In the case of this centre, many assumptions were made without thorough review of the supplied evidence. It was anything but equitable.

Rather than feeling powerless, they decided to challenge the decision through a First Tier Review process, at which point ratings are reviewed by the Regulatory Authority. There are specific fees for this and processes that must be followed, so it's important to access the information available on the ACECQA website first. A Second Tier Review process is also available, in the event that the approved provider is dissatisfied by the

outcome of the First Tier Review. I have no doubt that most of you have not considered going down this path and I must say, it does not suit everyone. So, familiarise yourself with the process and make the best decision for your service.

Having conducted further research on Second Tier Reviews, I came across some interesting statistics. Between 2013 and 2016, ACECQA received 25 Second Tier Review applications, most of which were from New South Wales. Out of all those received, 45 per cent resulted in service rating changes (see the adjacent pie graph).

This data suggests that authorised officers don't always get it right; in fact, many get it wrong. They may get it wrong because they themselves are victims of the process and, for the most part, are left in isolation to make an independent decision. Regardless, until we delve deeper into these issues and make necessary changes, we are far from having a system in place that equitably assesses service standards and provides valuable feedback. Instead, we are left with an arbitrary system that fails to recognise the importance of mentoring improvement, one where clarity is seriously lacking. Such a method assumes that those receiving the final rating understand how they were assessed and, more importantly, what specifically they need to do to raise their standards. It makes their journey of improvement very difficult, and they are literally left to work it out themselves. In the case of the centre I mentioned, it has now had its rating changed from 'Meeting' to 'Exceeding' as part of the ACECQA Second Tier Review process. 🐼

State	Number of applications reviewed between 2013 and 2016
New South Wales	18
Victoria	2
Australian Capital Territory	1
Queensland	1
South Australia	2
Western Australia	1
Northern Territory	0
Tasmania	0