

## Australia

### Auspices

In Australia, ECEC has separate and layered auspices, shared at central government level by the Department of Family and Community Services (FaCS) and the Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA), and in competency terms, by both Commonwealth and State Governments. Traditionally, day-care has been separate from education and seen as an issue of employment and family support, so responsibility for policy is held by the Commonwealth, represented by FaCS. States are responsible for minimum standards and licensing. Pre-school education, on the other hand, is considered the responsibility of the State Governments, although the Commonwealth Government, represented by DETYA, exerts a strong influence through national agenda setting, and provides supplementary funding for indigenous children and children with disabilities. Several inter-governmental committees exist at Commonwealth level. At State level, education, childcare and community services are sometimes unified in one department.

### Developments

Starting from a low base, the Commonwealth Government committed itself to the expansion of ECEC provision and quality improvement, through fostering new investment and competition in the sector. Over the past decade, a gradual shift in emphasis has occurred from funding services directly to providing increased social support to families. The provision of fee relief to families using private centres in 1991 brought new investment into childcare from the private sector. More recently, the Child Care Benefit scheme, has increased fee subsidies for parents using approved services. With some exceptions, direct operational subsidies to community, non-profit services were removed in 1996 and 1998. Indigenous and other special services, family day care and occasional care still receive operational funding. Quality issues in long-day services (and soon family day-care) are being addressed through the *quality improvement and accreditation system* (QIAS) (see Box 3.4 in Chapter 3). In the education sector, a major emphasis is on learning outcomes, especially literacy and numeracy skills, which are seen as vital for equity reasons and for future labour market participation. The commitment of several States to improving quality can be seen from their support to curriculum development and quality standards. Both Commonwealth and State governments have at their disposal a rich resource of professional expertise in their various ministries and the research universities.

### Context

*Expenditure on ISCED Level 0 institutions as a percentage of GDP<sup>55</sup>: 0.1%.*

*Labour force rates: 67.9% of women aged 25-34 years participate in the labour force, of which almost 34.1% part-time. 47% participation of women with children below 3 years; 28% participation by lone mothers, of which 7% full-time.*

*Parental leave: workers have a minimum entitlement to 52 weeks unpaid, parental leave, after 12 months of continuous employment with the same employer. This leave can be shared between mother and father at any ratio, but periods of leave cannot overlap.*

*Attention to children with special educational needs before compulsory education begins: a) Children with disabilities: inclusion of children with disabilities into ECEC services is growing; b) Children from low-income families: the child poverty level in Australia is 12.6% after redistribution (the OECD average is 11.9%); c) Ethnic and bilingual children: poverty is particularly marked in the Indigenous communities (2% of population). 40% of the indigenous population is under 15 years and life expectancy is nearly twenty years less than for the white population. Significant Commonwealth investment is being channelled toward indigenous programmes. In addition, 38% of children in ECEC are from culturally diverse backgrounds (of which 4% indigenous).*

## Provision

The Australian ECEC system is one of mixed public and private provision. Parental fees are subsidised by a comprehensive Child Care Benefit (CCB), paid for attendance at approved (formal) services both public and private (less benefit is paid if a parent uses a registered, informal service). Low-income families receive a higher rate of CCB, which can cover total costs.

*0-1 year:* parental and informal care predominate. About 4% of infants are enrolled in regulated services.

*1-4 years:* about 22% of children are enrolled in either full-day or part-day care, provided mainly by QIAS approved private-for-profit long day care centres (58%), QIAS approved community-based, non-profit, long day care centres (23%) and community-based, non-profit family day-care schemes (18%). Family day care is provided for children 0-12 years. Fee support is available to over 98% of parents using services (formal, approved and informal/registered) through the Child Care Benefit scheme.

*4-6 years:* early education services are provided through kindergartens or reception classes generally attached to schools, for 6-hours daily, during school term. Attendance in the year before compulsory schooling (at 6 years) ranges from 80.4% in Western Australia to 96.3% in Queensland.

*Child-staff ratios:* child-staff ratios in long day-care centres are: 5:1 for children 0-2 years; 8:1 for children 2-3 years, and 10:1 for children 3-6 years (variations occur across States). Staff are not necessarily qualified (see below). In general, long day care centres are required (depending on the State) to have one qualified staff for every 20-25 children.

## Staffing and training

The staffing of ECEC varies according to the regulatory requirements of each state and territory. In general, non-school services employ a mix of trained (often two-year vocational) and untrained staff. In the case of family day-care, contact staff are not required to have a qualification, other than a First Aid diploma. In Long Day Care Centres, the need to minimise staff costs so as to limit fee increases has worked against the employment of qualified staff, whenever such staff are not a regulatory requirement (see child-staff ratios above). Although they may have longer hours, greater responsibility, fewer holiday and less planning time than teachers, the status and pay of staff in non-school services is low. Turnover rates are high and difficulties in recruiting staff are reported. Men are hardly represented in care services (3.3%) or pre-school (2.3%).

In pre-schools, a teaching qualification is required, but not necessarily with an early childhood specialisation. A teaching qualification requires normally a three- or four-year university degree. The Commonwealth and State governments fund a limited number of in-service hours for teachers and staff in the non-school sector, but day-care staff report a lack of opportunity for professional development, due to the difficulty of being released from their jobs.

## OECD policy issues

Among the issues for policy attention identified by the OECD Review team for Australia were:

*Understandings of childhood and early education:* ECEC in Australia reveals a range of beliefs and policy directions depending on government philosophy, jurisdiction (the government department or administrative body in charge), type of setting and community perception. It was felt that a clearer vision (including a strategy framework) of Australian ECEC policy should be elaborated, drawing from the views and interests of children, families, communities, professionals and researchers across the states and territories.

*System coherence and co-ordination:* currently, real limitations on system coherence are imposed in Australia by the complexities of government in a federal state and the multi-layering of administration and regulation. Other difficulties arise from the vastness of the territory and the dispersion of populations.

*Quality issues:* it was felt that the low pay, low status and training levels of ECEC staff undermines quality, and may counterbalance the investments governments are making in the sector. In addition, attention was drawn to the poorer work conditions experienced by teachers and staff in the early childhood sector, compared to other education sectors.

*Training and status of ECEC staff:* the OECD team suggests that firmer regulations about the numbers of *trained* staff to be employed by long day centres and family day-care would help to improve the quality of their services, and that comprehensive in-service training at a range of levels for staff in this sector is a necessity.

*Children with special educational needs:* poverty and early education issues arise most acutely with regard to Indigenous children. The determined targeting of resources by recent governments towards Indigenous educational, economic, and health programmes is acknowledged. The key to the success of the new programmes will be their respectful approach to issues of self determination, cultural ownership, and for some, language.