



# The Early Advantage

## Australia System at a Glance

### Demographics

In mid-2016, there were an estimated 1.57 million children under age 5 in Australia. While the number of children in Australia has increased in past decades, the child-aged population has declined as a proportion of the total population. About 8 percent of children were born outside of Australia, and half of those come from non-English speaking countries; since 1996, the number of immigrants from Africa and the Middle East has almost doubled. About 4 percent of children are Indigenous.

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### Support for Children and Families

Australia has universal primary health care services, mainly orchestrated through access to general practitioners under Medicare, Australia's publicly-funded universal health system. Medicare covers free or subsidized treatment by health professionals. In 2011, Australia introduced government-funded paid parental leave of 18 weeks for eligible employees who are primary carers of children, and two weeks for eligible partners (including same-sex partners).

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### Enrollment in ECEC

In 2014, 22 percent of children under the age of 2, 54 percent of 2- and 3-year-olds, and 42 percent of 4-year-olds attended formal child care. The participation rate for preschool programs, which are universally available free of charge for 4-year-olds for 15 hours a week, is 95.1 percent. Children in "at-risk" groups are generally underrepresented in ECEC programs, despite efforts to improve access for Indigenous children, children with disabilities, and those known to child protection. Compulsory schooling begins at age 6.

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### Service Providers

Providers of ECEC services include non-profit and for-profit organizations. For-profit providers account for 46 percent of the market, an increasing share. Non-profit service providers include government (state and local), community-based organizations, schools, churches, and other welfare-related groups. The for-profit sector comprises an equally diverse group of small private businesses and large corporations, typically having a primary focus on the provision of long day care and operating on a commercial basis. Eighty-three percent of providers operate only one service. Only 1 percent of providers are classified as large (i.e., operating more than 25 different sites); however, these large providers deliver 31 percent of services.

## **Governance**

Governance is shared between the Commonwealth Government (“Australian Government”), six state governments, and two main territories, through the Council of Australian Governments. The Australian Government Department of Education and Training leads federal funding and policy for child care, while the design and delivery of ECEC preschool programs are the primary responsibility of the states/territories and are closely aligned with the K-12 systems.

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## **Finance**

With a contribution from the Australian government, states and territories fund a universal-access preschool program for 600 hours per year, to ensure children have access to high quality education in the year before school. The Australian government also funds child care, providing income-tested subsidies to offset child care fees for children aged 0-12. Under legislation that took effect in 2018, these subsidies are calculated based on the number of hours parents are engaged in “work activities,” although low-income families who do not meet the work activity test can receive minimal subsidies. Australia spends 0.6 percent of GDP on ECEC, below the OECD average of 0.8 percent.

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## **Regulation of ECEC**

Australia’s ECEC system has undergone significant reform in recent years to set high standards for quality. Unprecedented collaboration between the Australian government, states, and territories led to nationally consistent law and regulations for early childhood education and care. These reforms established National Quality Standard (NQS), which sets standards for structural and process quality in ECEC against which each center is rated. These standards require centers to use the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) (or another approved learning framework), a national framework that guides all educators working with children aged birth to age 5, and articulates the learning and development outcomes, principles, and practices to apply to their curriculum. The EYLF does not specify assessment measures; rather, educators are expected to conduct formative assessment to inform their planning for children’s learning, and share their assessments with families. Each state/territory has its own regulatory authority, overseen by the national Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA), and trained inspectors from the regulatory authorities monitor centers’ performance against the NQS. Center ratings are publicly available, and centers must develop and implement quality improvement plans based on their quality ratings.

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## **Teacher Quality**

Early childhood teachers, who deliver early learning programs (preschool or kindergarten) in a preschool or long day care center, are required to have a bachelor’s degree, typically obtained from a university. Other educators, working under the supervision of an early childhood teacher, are required to have an ECEC-related Diploma or Certificate III qualification, which can be obtained from vocational

education and training organizations. Wages in the child care sector are low, and many child care educators feel undervalued. Salaries for child care professionals range from AUD\$36,000 (US\$25,992) (just higher than the national minimum wage) to AUD\$65,000 (US\$46,930) per annum. The ECEC sector has a career structure in which higher qualifications attract leadership roles and higher remuneration, however, as employers may choose to offer a majority of positions requiring the minimum qualification, opportunities for advancement are not guaranteed, which may disincentivize educators from further study.