

Staying Power

The Case for
Educator Stability in
Early Childhood
Education and Care

2026

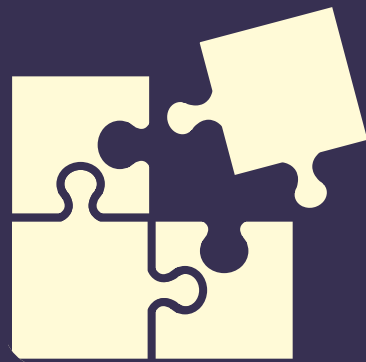
www.thefrontproject.org.au

The Front Project respectfully acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the land on which we work and learn, and pay respect to Elders, past and present. Sovereignty has never been ceded. It always was and always will be, Aboriginal land.

**the
FrontProject**

We wanted to find out...

Is there a connection between staffing profile of a service and its quality?



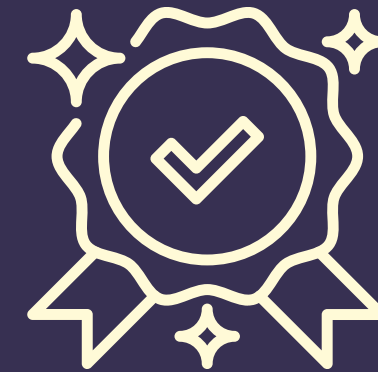
Where are the weak spots in lower-quality services?



What does staffing instability look like currently across the sector?



What are high-quality services doing to achieve stability?



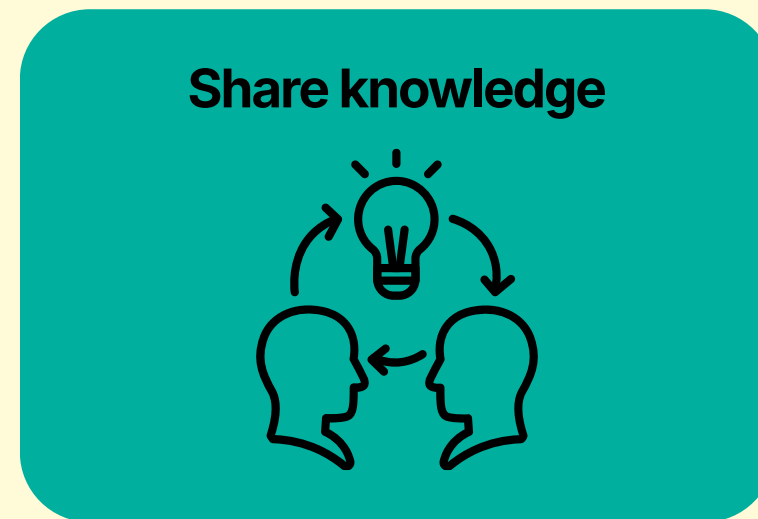
What policy settings will lift quality for children across the whole sector?



What's good for children and what compromises healthy development?

Children need consistent relationships to support their healthy development, learning and wellbeing. Workforce stability is key to this.

It also strengthens staff satisfaction and wellbeing, as consistent teams:



Conversely, staffing turnover and high casualisation undermines stability and quality.

Research consistently shows that when children experience ongoing, familiar relationships with trusted adults, they are more confident, socially competent, and engaged in learning.

National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2004). Young Children Develop in an Environment of Relationships: Working Paper No. 1. www.developingchild.harvard.edu.

As Australian researchers have noted, emotional qualities of educator–child interactions are among the most powerful predictors of long-term outcomes in learning, language and wellbeing.

Thorpe, K., Panthi, N., Houen, S. et al. Support to stay and thrive: mapping challenges faced by Australia's early years educators to the national workforce strategy 2022–2031. Aust. Educ. Res. 51, 321–345 (2024). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-022-00607-3>

ECEC Workforce projections

21,000

Current shortfall of qualified ECEC professionals needed to meet existing demand and support more sustainable working conditions.

18,000

Additional qualified ECEC staff required to meet estimated unmet demand in services not yet established.

18,000

Additional staff to fully realise CCS changes and expanded preschool policies.

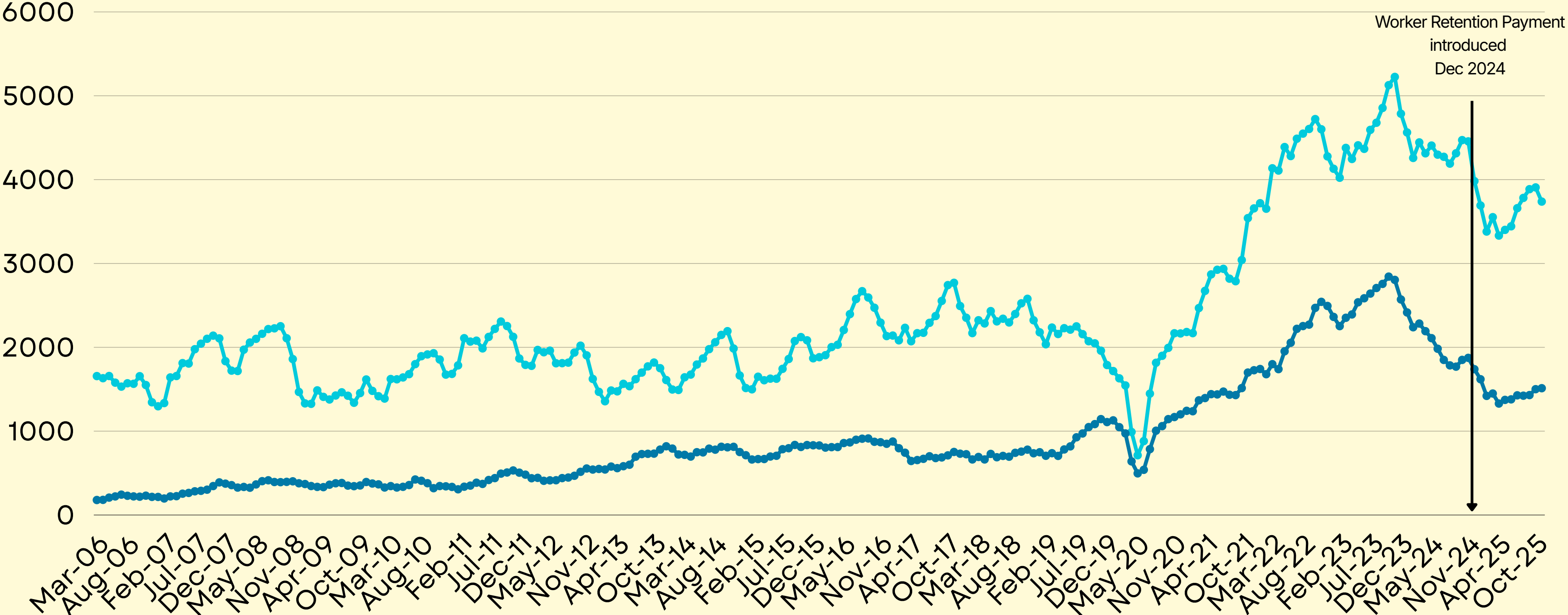


16% growth

To meet sustainable staffing levels and unmet demand for services.

Tracking vacancies

● Child carers ● Early Childhood (Pre-primary School) Teachers



A sector under strain

**Over a
third**

of educators are leaving
services each year.

35%

of services reported staff
turnover in the previous
month and nearly 60 per
cent of services had at least
one vacant position.

77%

of educators report their
centre operating below
minimum staffing levels at
least weekly.
For 45 per cent of staff, it
was daily.

A sector under strain

Turnover in ECEC is significantly higher than the national average

Annual educator turnover rates typically sit between **17 and 32 per cent**, well above the Australian workforce average of 12 to 20 per cent.

The Future of the Early Childhood Education Profession, Jobs and Skills Australia, 2024



Qualified educators do not stay long at a centre

69.8 per cent of educators in centre-based care have only been at their current centre for 3 years or less.

National ECEC Workforce Census, 2024.



Early childhood educators are leaving to become primary teachers

Nearly 25 per cent of departing Early Childhood Teachers and 10 per cent of Educators leave to become Primary School Teachers.

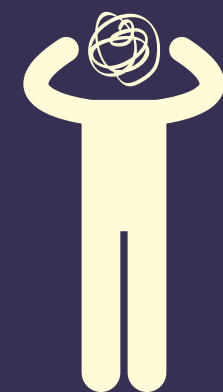
The Future of the Early Childhood Education Profession, Jobs and Skills Australia, 2024



Work environment and leadership strongly influence retention

A lack of leadership structures and capacity with the sector detracts from job satisfaction and drives attrition.

The Future of the Early Childhood Education Profession, Jobs and Skills Australia, 2024.



Qualifications, experience and tenure

Despite minimum qualification requirements being in place since 2014, a significant proportion of staff working with children in long day care lack relevant qualifications, and the workforce is heavily weighted toward early-career educators. The Front Project welcomes the Australian Government's commitment to review this.

12.2%

of staff don't have qualifications
in a relevant field

55.3%

have 6 years or less experience.

34.6%

are very new to the sector with
3 years or less experience.

9.9%

of staff working with
children in long daycare
don't have a qualification.

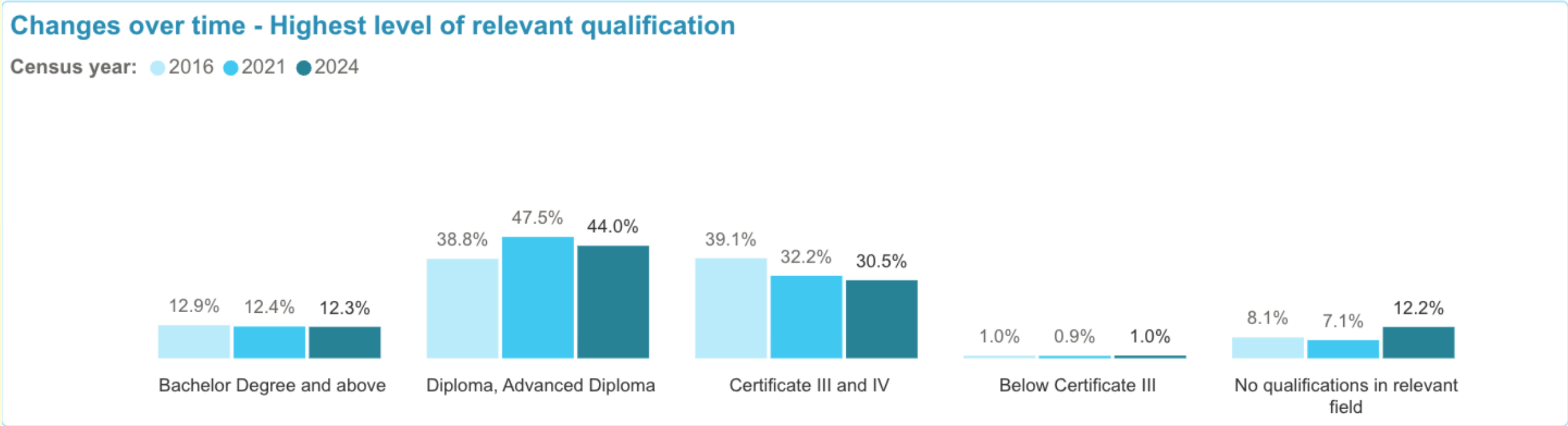
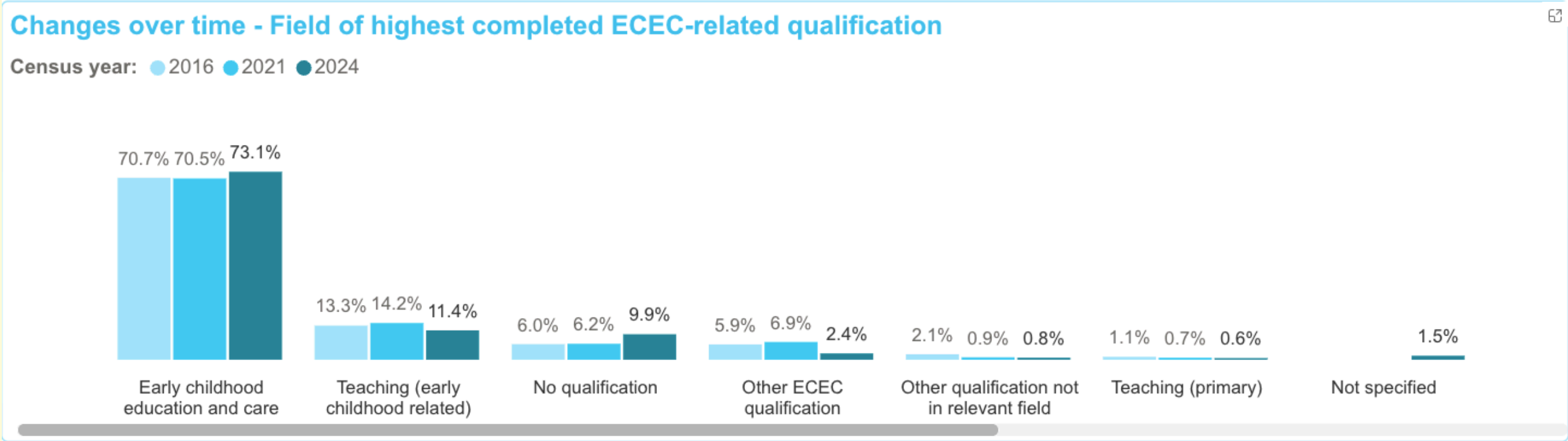
<1 in 3

educators have 10 years or
more experience.

7 in 10

educators have been at their
current centre for 3 years or
less.

The trends among staff with no qualification, staff with no qualification in a relevant field, and the decline in teaching qualifications paint a revealing picture of the overall qualification profile. This data relates specifically to teachers and educators working directly with children in centre-based day care (childcare).



ECEC Workforce

55.3%

of educators in centre based day care (childcare) are quite new to the sector (6 years or less)

68.4%

have only been at their centres for a relatively short period of time (3 years or less)

School teacher workforce

66%

has at least 10 years' experience

20%

were early career teachers in their first five years of teaching

Unqualified and not studying

38,000

staff are currently studying for an ECEC qualification

1,930

do not hold an ECEC qualification and are not currently studying

1 in 5 centres



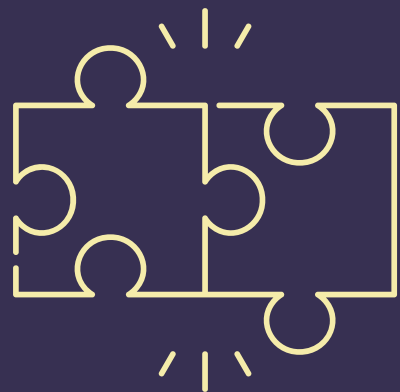
with an unqualified staff member, not studying, whilst working with children.

Minimum qualification requirements of a Certificate III were introduced in 2014. Various initiatives have been in place to upskill the workforce, including grandparenting qualification, recognising prior experience, scholarships and free TAFE.

Workforce readiness

Suitability and purpose

ECEC should attract people who are motivated by children's wellbeing and learning, and who are suitable to work with children. Entry settings, admissions, and placements should screen for this purpose and readiness, not just eligibility.



Qualification integrity

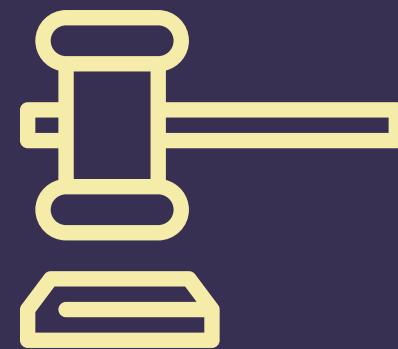
As the ECEC workforce expands, maintaining the integrity of qualifications and training is vital for staff readiness and high quality practice. For a qualification to be recognised under the National Quality Framework, it must be assessed and approved by ACECQA, with approval reviewed on a five-year cycle under current arrangements.



Regulator alert (Nov 2025)

Qualification regulators TEQSA and ASQA issued a joint sector alert warning of emerging risks in early childhood education training, including admissions quality, migration agent conduct, placement quality and supervision, and assessment integrity.

Joint ASQA and TEQSA sector alert: Compliance concerns about early childhood education and training



Qualification review (in train)

HumanAbility is reviewing the ECEC Certificate III and Diploma, with advice due to Skills Ministers by August 2026.

[Early Childhood Education and Care Qualification Review](#)



Children's outcomes are compromised by poor staffing and employment practices

High staff turnover, excessive reliance on casual or agency educators, frequent use of staffing waivers, poor adherence to ratios and supervision requirements, and inadequate recruitment and vetting processes all increase children's exposure to risk.

As roles are stretched to cover gaps, educators have less time for planning, supervision, and relationships, creating a cycle of fatigue and further attrition.

Reviews of recent safety incidents in ECEC services have consistently found that breakdowns in oversight and staff continuity, often linked to workforce instability, compromise both supervision and accountability.



Professor Karen Thorpe recently shared with me about a study of toddlers in Queensland services.

*In the almost 13 months (on average) children in their sample had spent in ECEC, the number of primary educators the children had ranged between **2 and 25**.*

*Put differently, they had an average of **eight different educators caring for them**.*

*Or a new educator **roughly every six weeks since ECEC entry**.*

Dr Caroline Croser-Barlow, speech to National Childcare Summit, December 2025.



Casualisation

In Australia, casualisation is markedly higher in childcare than in most other occupations.

A certain amount of casual staffing is necessary and helps services adjust to the ups and downs in enrolments and attendance that happen throughout the day, week and year. Some staff also prefer to work casual hours.

However, high levels of reliance on casualisation can also signal workforce instability and potentially impact the quality of a centre.

National ECEC Workforce Census, 2024.
Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2025, August). Working arrangements.
Jobs and Skills Australia, The Future of the Early Childhood Education Profession (Workforce Capacity Study), 2024.

19%

casual workforce across the wider labour market

8.9%

of qualified preschool teachers employed on a casual basis

27.1%

of qualified educators employed on a casual basis in childcare



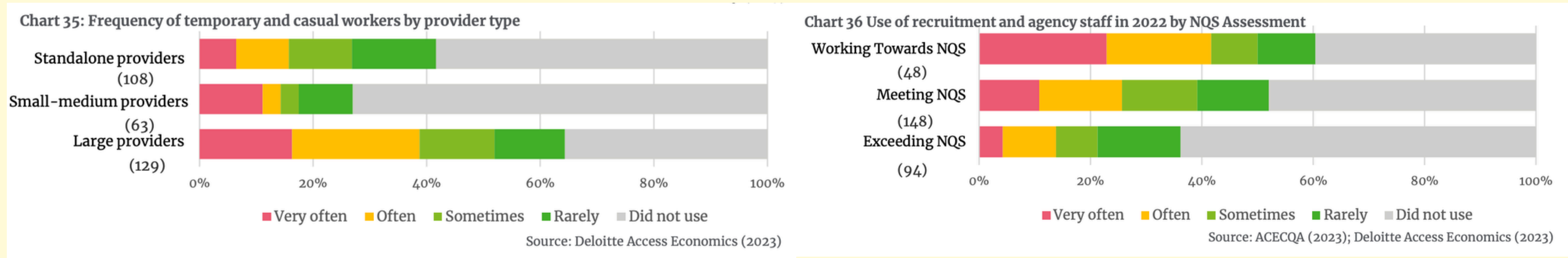
More than **1 in 4** childcare educators are casual

Fewer than **1 in 5** Australian workers are casual

Who is relying on casual and agency staff?

In a survey of providers to inform the SA Royal Commission into ECEC, it was found that large providers were more likely to report using temporary and casual workers than small or stand-alone providers.

Private for-profit providers used temporary and casual staff at greater frequencies than not-for-profit providers
Service rated Working Towards relied more heavily on recruitment and agency staff.



Case study: Relational Leadership in Practice

Brooke Eerden owns and manages a single early learning centre, and her leadership is visible from the moment she walks in each morning. She starts her day in the rooms, greeting children and educators, checking in, listening. She does not ask anything of her team that she would not do herself.

The structure is deliberately flat rather than hierarchical, and staff are regularly invited to share their perspectives and ideas. Conversations are open, comfortable and intentional. Recruitment is equally thoughtful. Many new educators were once students or volunteers at the centre, already known to the children and team. Prospective staff undertake one or two paid trial shifts, giving both sides a genuine opportunity to assess fit, observe interactions with children, and ensure values align.

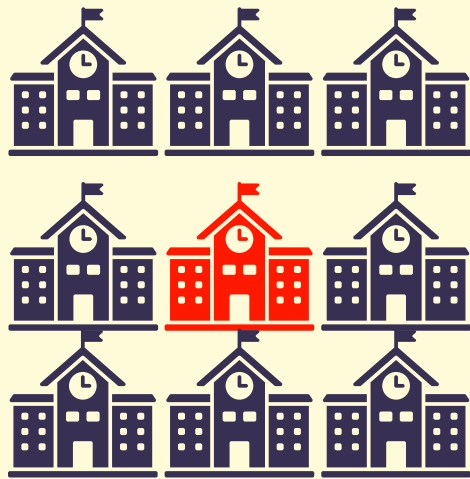
Stability is designed into the service. Rosters are consistent so families know who they will see at drop off and pick up. Staff meetings are purposeful, with dedicated time for professional reflection and learning rather than administration. The service closes for a full day each year so the whole team can undertake professional development that strengthens best practice.

Brooke's focus is clear: relationships and emotional intelligence sit at the heart of the centre. By investing in trust, consistency and shared ownership, she has created a culture where educators feel supported, families feel connected, and children are surrounded by adults who genuinely know and understand them.

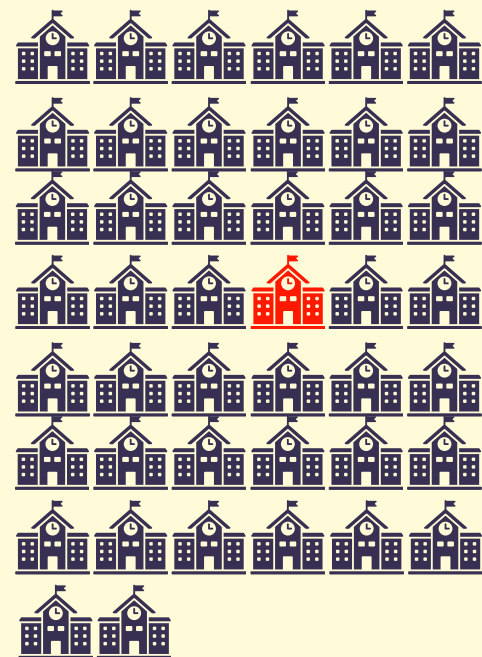
Staffing Waivers

Under the National Quality Framework, ECEC staffing waivers are issued by state and territory regulatory authorities on a case-by-case basis when a service can demonstrate genuine difficulty meeting qualification or ratio requirements.

Waivers are time-limited, subject to conditions, and typically require services to show active recruitment efforts and strategies to return to full compliance.



Childcare centres rely more on staffing waivers to manage workforce gaps. The latest ACECQA snapshot shows that, nationally, **11 per cent of child care centres are operating under a staffing waiver** — equivalent to **1,047 services**, or around 1 in every 9 centres. Most waivers are in respect of teachers.



By contrast, staffing waivers are far less common in **preschools**, where the national average is **2.3 per cent**. This equates to **71 services**, or around **1 in every 44** preschools.

Providers also bear the cost of turnover and instability




It costs approximately 40 - 50% of a teacher or educator's annual salary to replace them.

Research shows that high staff turnover also disrupts trusting relationships with families, while job dissatisfaction and thoughts of leaving can reduce educators' capacity to provide sensitive, attentive care.

Staff turnover places a significant burden on those who remain. Directors face increased administrative demands as they recruit and reorganise staff to meet ratios and regulatory requirements, while ongoing turnover can undermine staff morale.

For educators who stay, workloads and stress often increase, reinforcing a cycle of dissatisfaction that can further destabilise the workforce.

Bull, McFarland, Cumming and Wong, (2024) [The impact of work-related wellbeing and workplace culture and climate on intention to leave in the early childhood sector](#), Early Childhood Research Quarterly, Volume 69, pp13-24.

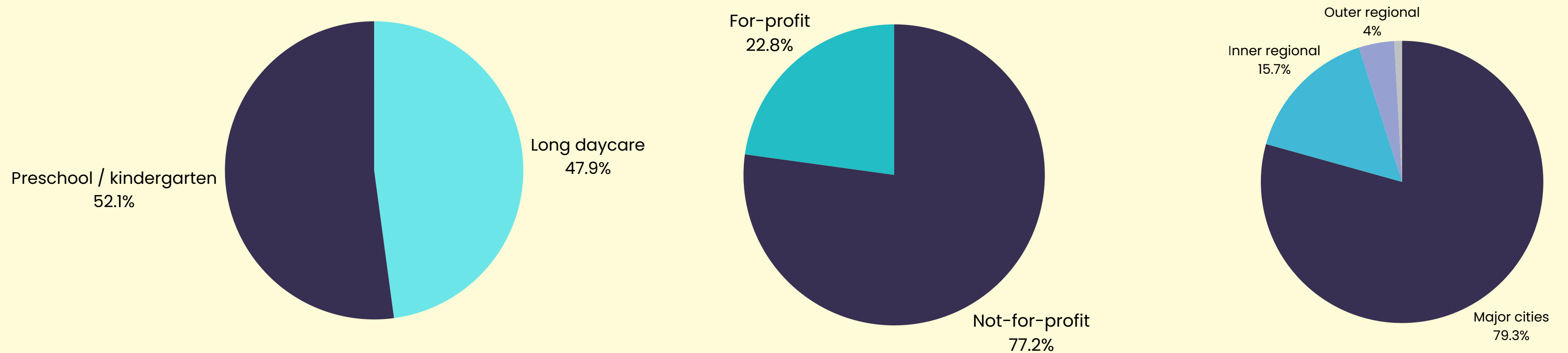
Financial costs of workforce turnover		
 Recruitment costs	 Offboarding exiting staff	 Onboarding and training
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• advertising• reviewing applications• interviewing• reference checking• agency placement fees	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• exit interviews• administration and paperwork• reduced productivity• agency or casual staff backfilling fees	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 'non-teaching' induction time for staff member and leader• organisational training• onboarding and set up requirements

Victorian Department of Education (2024) [Best Start, Best Life, Early Childhood Workforce Retention Guide](#), p6.

What do we know about staffing at Exceeding Quality centres?

There were 477 long daycare centres and preschools rated Exceeding in 2025

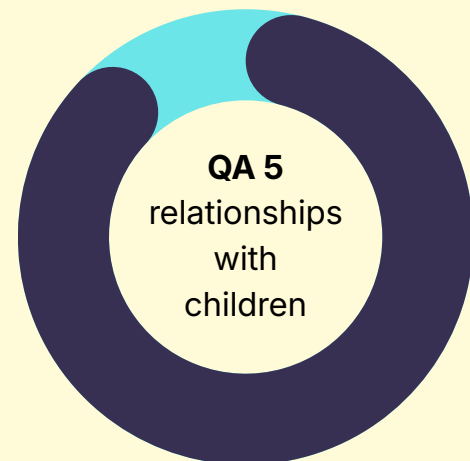
ACECQA Q3, 2025 snapshot



High quality services pay attention to staffing, relationships and leadership



77% are Exceeding



91% are Exceeding



72% are Exceeding

Quality Areas 4, 5 and 7 make the greatest contribution to quality and safety.

Together they shape the people, relationships and leadership that underpin every aspect of early learning.

They reflect the stability of educator teams, warmth and trust between the adults and children, and the strength of governance that keep services safe and effective.

Element 4.1 looks specifically at the organisation of educators across the service to support children's learning and development, and that every effort is made for children to experience continuity of educators at the service.

79% of Exceeding services rate highly on this particular element.

Services rated
Exceeding in
2025, n=477



We know that it's the people around children who keep them safe. But beyond safety alone, stable long-term relationships are a critical factor in children's learning and development outcomes. Children need to feel seen, safe and welcome in order to learn.

We also know what works. Services with a strong track record of quality and child safety design staffing ratios that enable high-quality supervision and care. They maintain a stable, professionally paid workforce so children can form consistent attachments with educators and teachers.

These services employ and support the development of a highly qualified workforce, including paid access to ongoing professional development. They also approach much of their training, particularly child safety training, together as a team, so everyone understands their role in keeping children safe and what to do if they identify risk.

They invest in developing leadership capability and embed quality and safety from recruitment through to induction, at every staff meeting, and throughout every aspect of service delivery.

And importantly, they manage government funding in ways that prioritise these key elements.

Michele Carnegie, Community Early Learning Australia.



Case study: Stability, capability and connection

Teacher and Inclusion Coordinator Lorraine Cotter knows the importance of stable teams and intentional leadership. Low turnover and staff satisfaction is the result of deliberate leadership and sustained investment in people across the six centres operated by her provider.

Many educators have been at her long daycare centre for years, some growing from Certificate III to Diploma or teacher qualifications with the service's support. Children see the same familiar faces each day. Families feel welcome, with inclusion a key priority. Two teachers are employed to work in the preschool room. Lorraine says this makes a big difference, especially for those children who need some extra support.

Staff speak about feeling respected, backed by management and genuinely connected to one another. The team is supported with good pay, planning time, paid meetings and overtime, and meaningful professional development. Staff are consulted about what they want to learn. They are mentored, encouraged to lead, and supported to reflect on practice together.

In Lorraine's words, *"I feel respected and supported by management and my colleagues. Relationships are the key."*

Case study: Stability, capability and connection

Kindergarten Teacher and Inclusion Coordinator Lorraine Cotter understands that workforce stability is not incidental, but the result of intentional leadership and sustained investment in people. At her service, low staff turnover and high levels of educator satisfaction are achieved through strong professional support, and a culture of reflection and growth.

Like all services, periods of workforce movement do occur. However, maintaining stability remains a deliberate focus, guided by adaptive leadership, ongoing reflection, and a commitment to continuous improvement.

Many educators have remained with the service for several years and have progressed from Certificate III to Diploma and Bachelor teaching levels. The majority now hold a Diploma. This approach to career progression builds workforce capability and aligns with evidence that higher levels of educator training are associated with improved outcomes for children. Continued investment in educator learning is critical, as research consistently highlights the link between professional knowledge, interpretive capacity, and the quality of teaching interactions.

A purposeful staffing model of two teachers in each kindergarten room enhances program depth and pedagogical decision-making. This enables sustained shared thinking, richer curriculum design, and deeper professional collaboration, while embedding inclusive practice and increasing responsiveness to children's individual needs, which are key indicators of effective learning environments.

The service intentionally cultivates a culture of growth and learning. Educators participate in meaningful feedback processes, work within high expectations, engage in mentoring, and contribute reflective dialogue. Leadership prioritises professional trust while maintaining clear standards of practice aligned with the service's philosophy and values.

Educators describe feeling respected, valued, and genuinely connected to one another. The team benefits from competitive pay, protected planning time, and funded, meaningful professional development. Staff are actively consulted on their learning priorities, contribute to mentoring relationships, take on leadership opportunities, and participate in shared reflective practice.

In Lorraine's words,

"I feel respected and supported by management and my colleagues. Relationships are the key."

This example highlights how leadership, professional culture, and investment in people work together to strengthen inclusion, safety, and learning outcomes in early childhood settings. Continued focus in these areas is essential to achieving strong long-term benefits for children and families.

How are Exceeding centres employing staff?

Of the 447 centres rated Exceeding in 2025, around two-thirds employ staff under a registered multi-employer or enterprise agreement. This includes the Early Childhood Multi-Employer Agreement 2024-2026.

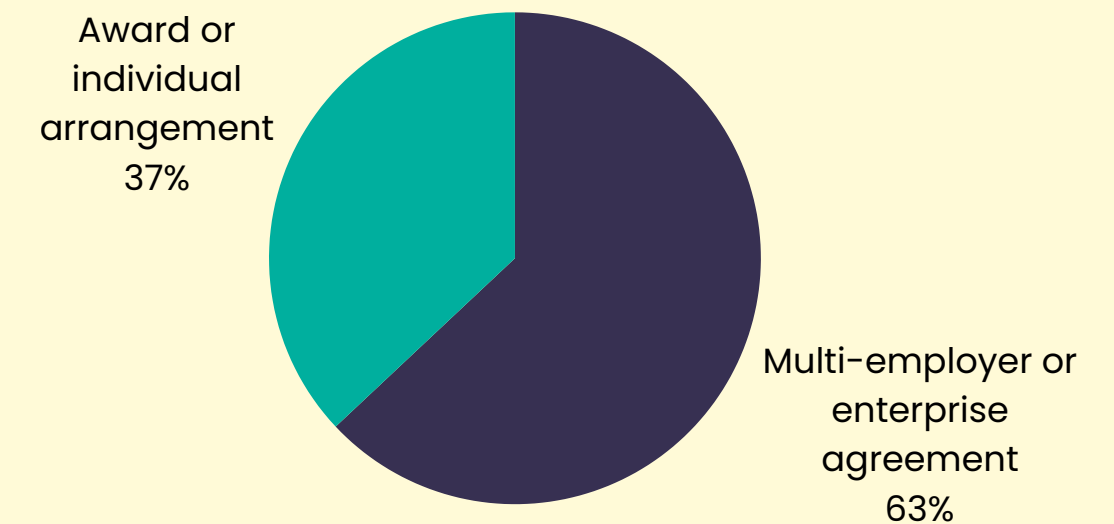
We matched the 447 Exceeding-rated services against the Fair Work Commission's Registered Agreements database to identify registered agreements.

Agreements contain above award pay and conditions.

They typically offer time for planning and assessment, support to undertake professional learning, support for leadership roles, and attractive pay and career pathways

The remaining third are not formally respondent to an EBA.

They rely on the relevant awards as the base and may offer improved pay and conditions via centre policy or individual agreements/contracts.



How are Working Towards centres employing staff?

Of the 216 centres rated Working Towards in 2025, **5 in 6 centres** employ staff under the Awards or individual arrangements or contracts*

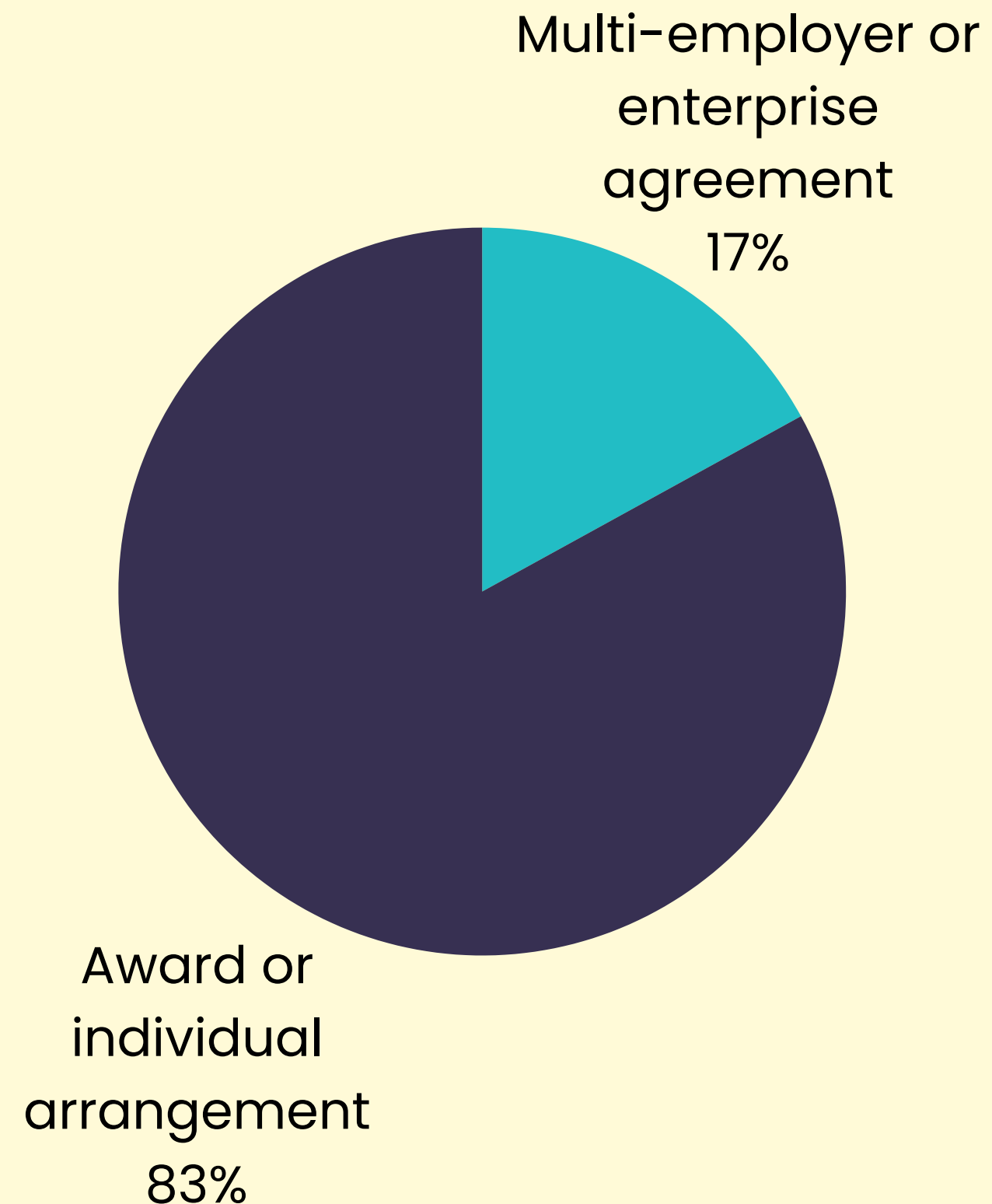


Only around **1 in 6 of these centres** employ staff under a registered multi-employer or enterprise agreement.



They are predominantly state / territory / local government provided centres, along with large providers.

*Registered agreements could not be found for these centres on the Fair Work Commission's database.



What do we know about Working Towards centres?

216

long daycare centres and preschools rated Working Towards in 2025.

[ACECQA Q3, 2025 snapshot](#)



1 in 5 of these centres are not meeting the quality standards for staffing arrangements



1 in 4 are not meeting standards for relationships with children



1 in 4 are not meeting standards for children's health and safety



2 in 3 of these services don't meet governance and leadership standards

Centres that are not improving their quality rating

9%

of all ECEC services are currently rated Working Towards

69%

improve their NQS rating at reassessment

31%

do not improve their NQS rating
at reassessment

15%

remained at Working Towards for
two rounds of assessment

Below quality standards, overdue for assessment

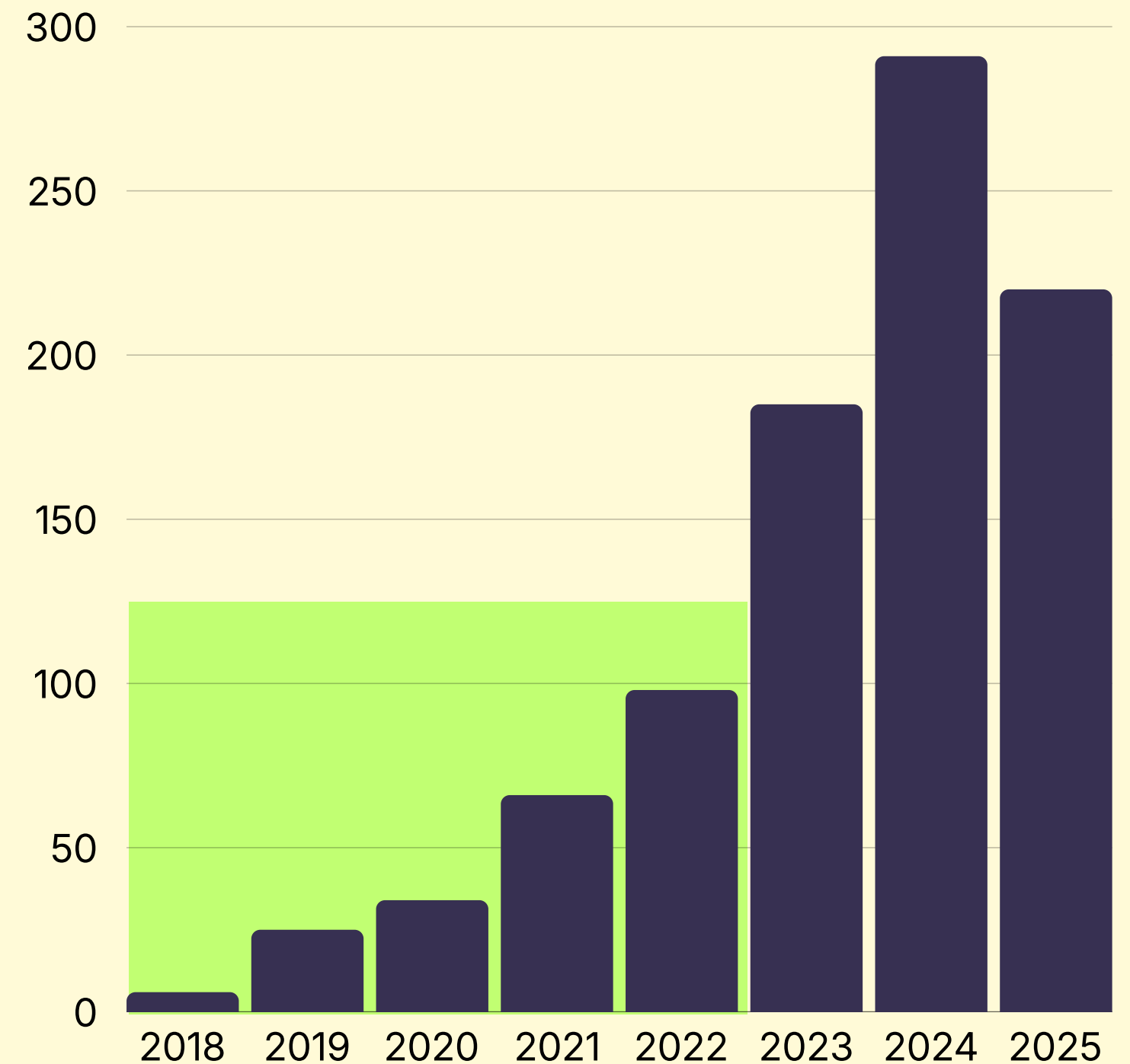
“
By 2030, the proportion of ECEC services that are Working Towards the National Quality Standard should be halved, to reach 5%, and that services should not be allowed to hold this rating for longer than two years
”

Productivity Commission. (2024). A path to universal early childhood education and care. Inquiry report – volume 1. Australian Government.p6.

25%

of below-quality centres (229 centres) have a rating that is 4 - 8 years old.

NQS Q3 2025 quarterly split data.



Location of childcare centres and preschools operating below the National Quality Standard, with quality ratings that are 4–8 years out of date

There is no mandated schedule for reassessment timing and frequency. State and Territory regulators are guided by the advice from ACECQA.

“

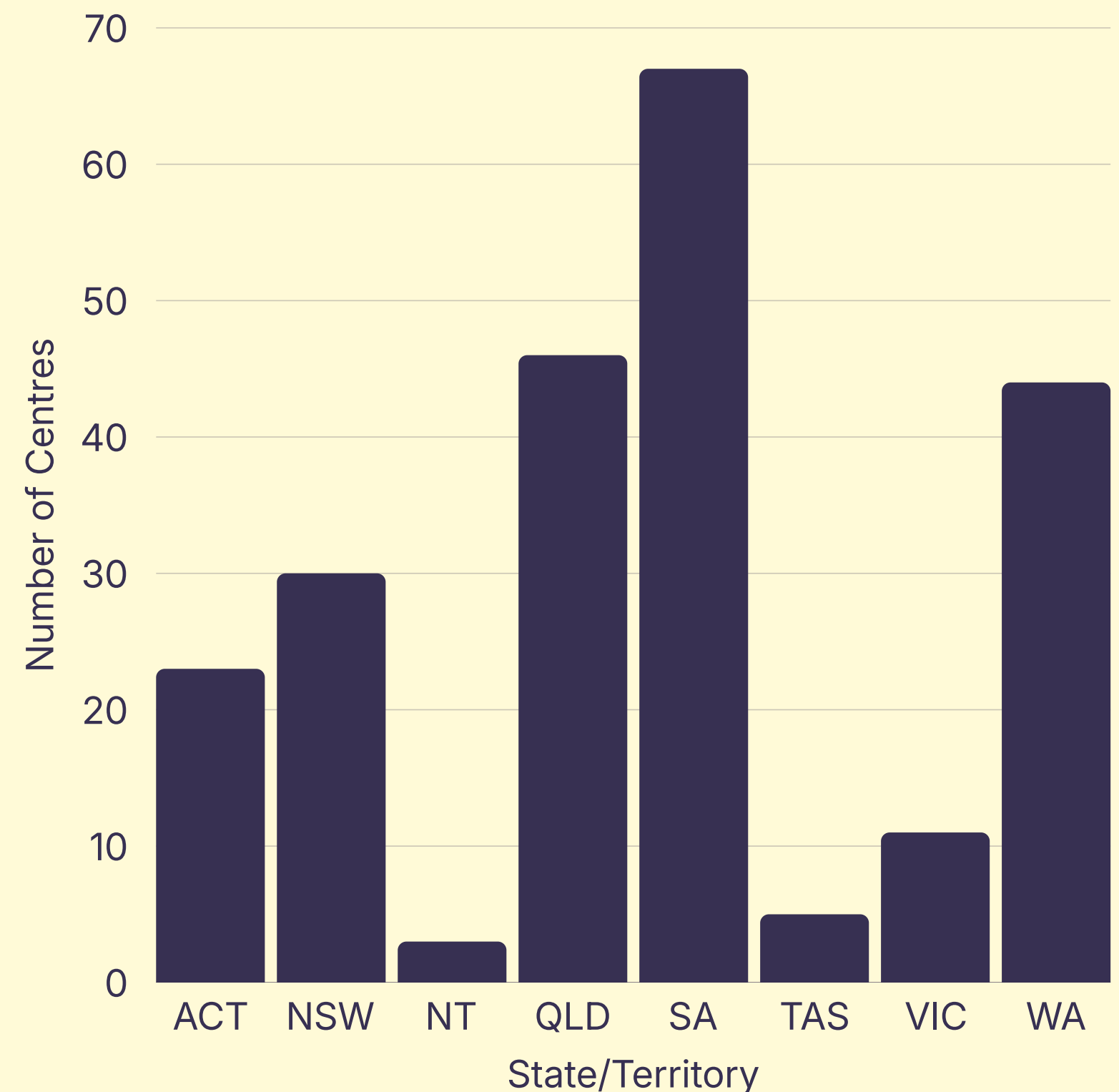
When regulatory authorities schedule quality rating assessments, the goal is to assess and rate the quality of services, drive continuous improvement and keep information for families and communities accurate and up to date.

To focus resources on services most in need of service improvement, the actions of regulatory authorities are responsive and risk-based. Services with a lower quality rating will be re-rated more frequently. Services with higher quality ratings will generally have a longer period of time between assessment and rating visits in recognition of their ability to operate above the NQS. Regulatory authorities may also schedule a service for a partial reassessment based on risk.

”

<https://www.acecqa.gov.au/national-quality-framework/guide-nqf/section-3-national-quality-standard-and-assessment-and-rating/assessment-and-rating-process/3-rating-system>

Number of childcare centres below NQS standard for 4-8 years



NQS Q3 2025 quarterly split data.

Persistently below quality standards

110

long day care centres and preschools currently rated Working Towards or Significant Improvement Required have a history of poor quality. It's impacting children already facing disadvantage.

108

have been Working Towards for two assessment cycles in a row.

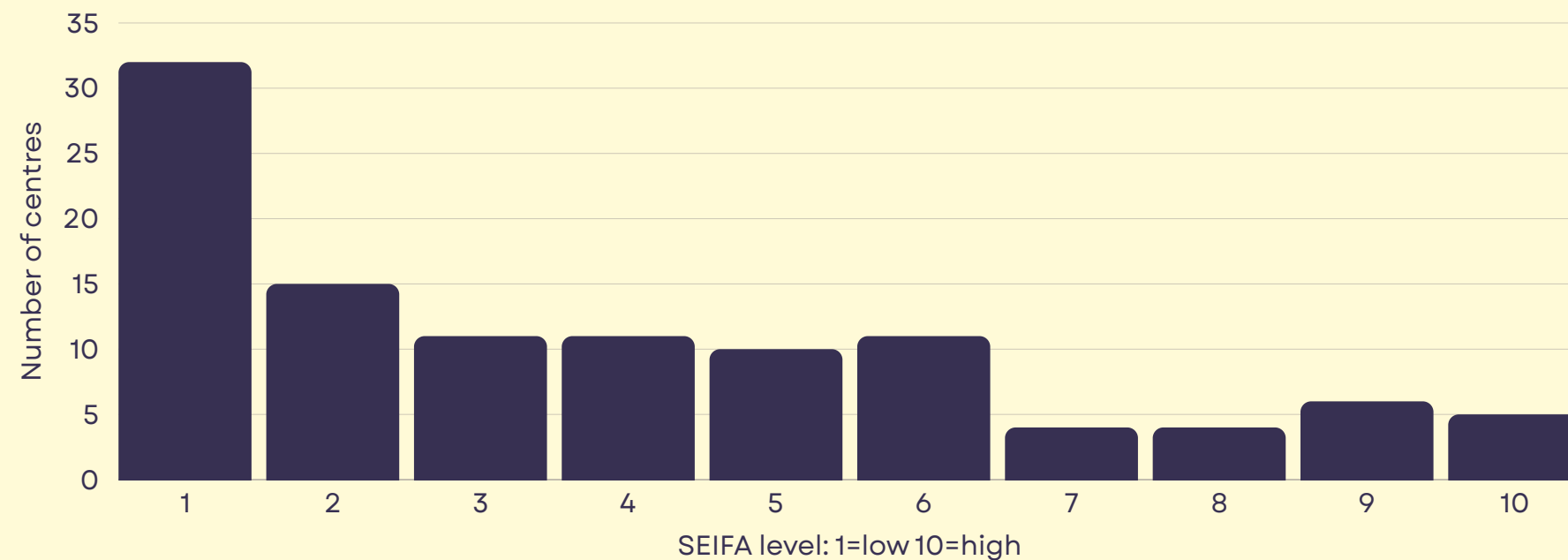
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have declined from Working Towards to Significant Improvement Required.

34

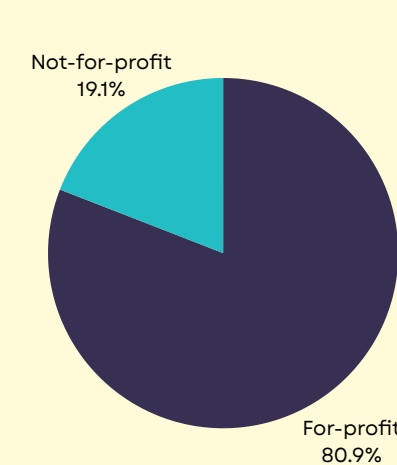
have changed provider in the last 5 years.

SEIFA distribution

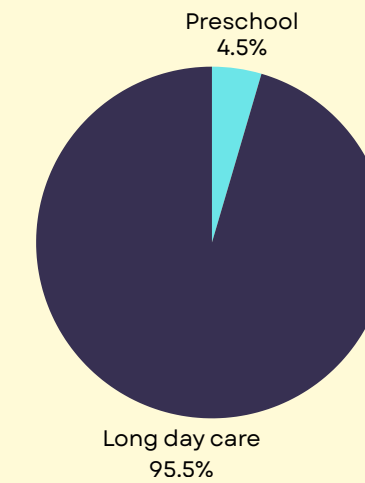


NQAITS Quarterly Data Splits, Q3 2025

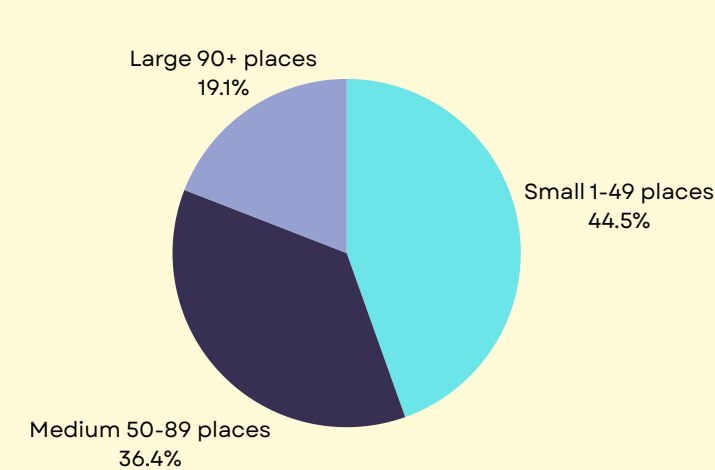
Provider Type



Service Type



Service Size



29% are located in the most disadvantaged areas (SEIFA 1).
53% are located in SEIFA areas 1 - 3.

Around 30 - 35 of these centres are in what could be regarded as childcare "deserts." Areas in remote / very remote / outer regional areas or regional towns, peri-urban or outer-suburban growth areas with known supply pressures.

5 things that government could do

1

Provide sustained, transparent funding for wages and conditions

Move beyond short-term measures and commit to long-term, predictable funding that delivers competitive wages and supports improved employment conditions (such as non-contact time and paid professional learning). Stable funding is critical to reducing turnover, reliance on casual staff and ongoing workforce churn.

2

Strengthen workforce stability requirements and incentives

Use funding and policy levers to encourage secure employment arrangements, including incentives for permanent roles and internal relief pools, and disincentives for excessive casualisation. This could include balanced scorecard reporting requirements on employment mix and targeted support for services transitioning to more stable staffing models.

3

Reform the use and oversight of staffing waivers

Ensure staffing waivers remain exceptional and time-limited, with stronger accountability where waivers are used repeatedly. This includes clearer escalation pathways, closer monitoring of services with persistent waivers, and targeted workforce support to help services return to compliance rather than normalising non-compliance.

4

Target intensive support to services persistently rated Working Towards

Identify services that remain rated Working Towards across multiple assessment cycles and provide place-based, tailored support, including workforce coaching, leadership development, and access to experienced mentors. Persistent quality issues are often closely linked to workforce instability and require coordinated, intentional intervention.

5

Improve career pathways, leadership capability and retention

Invest in qualifications completions, support for graduate teachers and educators, career progression, funded study pathways, and leadership development and career pathways for experienced educators and centre leaders. Strong leadership and visible career pathways are critical drivers of retention, supporting early-career educators who are most at risk of leaving, while also valuing and retaining experienced educators whose expertise is essential to mentoring others and sustaining high-quality practice.

More policy options

1

Retain and grow capability where it matters most

Fund a targeted Retention and Mentoring bundle for services with high churn, vacancies, waivers, or Working Towards ratings. Pair novice educators with trained mentors, provide paid time for induction and planning, and require a simple quality improvement plan.

Policy mechanism

- Targeted grants and procurement conditions for retention bundles in hotspot services.
- Mentor training and release time embedded in funding.
- Data informed triage using vacancy, waiver and NQS status thresholds

2

Reduce structural reliance on casuals and waivers through pooled relief and fair work settings

Establish regional educator and early childhood teacher relief pools with fair work settings, plus transparency rules on agency use and incentives for multi employer or enterprise agreements.

Policy mechanism

- Funded regional relief pools administered by trusted intermediaries with guaranteed hours and portability.
- Public reporting of agency reliance and waiver prevalence by region.
- Bonus loading for services adopting registered agreements that stabilise hours and progression

3

Quality Lift and Assessment Backlog Blitz

Run a time-bound "Quality Lift" program that pairs intensive coaching with fast-tracked reassessments for persistently low-rated and overdue services, with conditions that reduce reliance on unstable, inconsistent staffing.

Policy mechanism

- Regulatory triage: publish a risk-based backlog list and service cohorts.
- Funded improvement sprints (8–12 weeks) with coaching, release time, and micro-PD tied to reassessment windows.
- Conditional supports: bonus payments for reducing waivers/agency reliance before reassessment.

We need to invest in an early childhood sector
that keeps the same, well-supported adults
with the same children, more of the time.

A system built on relationships.



the
FrontProject