

# Universal access to early childhood education: a quick guide

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This quick guide provides an overview of the national policy framework for the provision of [universal access to early childhood education](#) in Australia.

## Introduction

The imperative to provide universal access to early childhood education (ECE) is supported by a significant body of research that demonstrates the benefits of ECE for later life outcomes, particularly for disadvantaged children.

Prior to 2009, the provision of early childhood (preschool) education in Australia was the sole responsibility of state and territory governments. The only financial support from the Australian Government was [Supplementary Recurrent Assistance for Indigenous preschool education](#), which still continues.

The development of a national commitment to universal access to ECE for children in the year before full-time schooling began in 2006 when the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) [committed](#) to improving early childhood development outcomes as part of a collaborative national approach. COAG also [agreed](#) to undertake work to support families to improve childhood development outcomes in the first five years of a child's life. These commitments resulted in the development of a suite of interrelated national partnerships and other government initiatives designed to improve the provision of ECE and child care.

## Definition and terminology

ECE programs that fall within the scope of the universal access commitment are defined by the [National Partnership Agreement on Universal Access to Early Childhood Education](#) as:

A program delivered in the year before full-time schooling in a diversity of settings, including long day care centre based services, stand-alone preschools and preschools that are part of schools. The program is to provide structured, play-based early childhood education delivered in accordance with the Early Years Framework and the National Quality Standard and delivered by a qualified early childhood teacher.

In the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), New South Wales (NSW) and the Northern Territory (NT), ECE programs are called preschool. In Tasmania, Victoria and Western Australia (WA), they are known as kindergarten, in Queensland, they are known as kindergarten and Pre-Preparatory (Pre-Prep) and in South Australia (SA) they are known as preschool and kindergarten.

A key feature of ECE programs is that participation is not compulsory.

## Early childhood education national partnerships

There have been two national partnerships that have overseen the implementation of the national commitment to universal access to ECE for children in the year before full-time schooling.

## **National Partnership Agreement on Early Childhood Education, 2009 to 2013**

In November 2008, [COAG agreed](#) to the [National Partnership Agreement on Early Childhood Education](#) (NPAECE). The NPAECE committed the Australian and state and territory governments to universal access to an ECE (preschool) program for all children in the year before school:

The universal access commitment is that by 2013 every child will have access to a preschool program in the 12 months prior to full-time schooling. The preschool program is to be delivered by a four year university qualified early childhood teacher, in accordance with a national early years learning framework, for 15 hours a week, 40 weeks a year. It will be accessible across a National Partnership Agreement on Early Childhood Education diversity of settings, in a form that meets the needs of parents and in a manner that ensures cost does not present a barrier to access. Reasonable transitional arrangements—including potentially beyond 2013—are needed to implement the commitment to preschool program delivery by four year university qualified early childhood teachers, as agreed in the bilateral agreements.

Under the NPAECE, the Australian Government [provided \\$970 million over five years](#) for the implementation of the universal access initiative. Of this funding, \$950 million was provided to state and territory governments and the remainder allocated for data development and evaluation. This funding was provided in the [2008–09 Budget](#).

Each state and territory had its own [implementation plan](#) that took into account the different status and challenges of ECE provision in each jurisdiction at the NPAECE's onset.

The final achievements of the NPAECE have not yet been released. However, annual state and territory progress [reports](#) for 2009 to 2012 (except for the 2012 report for NSW), progress reports for [2010](#) and [2011](#) and the report of an [18 month review](#) of the NPAECE have been published.

## **National Partnership Agreement on Universal Access to Early Childhood Education, 2013–2015**

In 2013, COAG endorsed the second ECE national partnership, the [National Partnership Agreement on Universal Access to Early Childhood Education](#) (the NPAUAECE). The NPAUAECE expires 30 June 2015 but funding under this national partnership covers services only until 31 December 2014.

The ECE commitment is now:

... to maintaining Universal Access to quality early childhood education program(s) for all children in the year before full-time school for 600 hours per year, delivered by a degree qualified early childhood teacher who meets the National Quality Framework requirements with a focus on participation by vulnerable and disadvantaged children.

The NPAUAECE's targets include:

- 95 per cent of ECE programs delivered by a degree qualified early childhood teacher who meets the National Quality Framework requirements
- 95 per cent of children, including 95 per cent of Indigenous children and 95 per cent of vulnerable and disadvantaged children, enrolled in the year before full-time school in an ECE program available for 600 hours per year and
- a 90 per cent attendance rate for children enrolled in an ECE program.

Under the NPAUAECE, the Australian Government is providing \$655.6 million to the states and territories with another \$4.5 million for national early childhood data development, review and research activities. This funding was provided in the [2013–14 Budget](#).

[Implementation plans](#) for all jurisdictions, except for New South Wales and the Northern Territory, have been published.

A review of the NPAUAECE is scheduled to be completed by 30 June 2014 (per section 36 of the NPAUAECE).

## **Related early childhood national partnerships and national initiatives**

As noted above, the two ECE national partnerships are part of a suite of interrelated early childhood national partnerships and other national initiatives. The following is a brief description of these as they relate to the ECE national partnerships.

## ***Investing in the Early Years—A National Early Childhood Development Strategy***

In July 2009, COAG [agreed](#) to the [Investing in the Early Years—A National Early Childhood Development Strategy](#) and announced the implementation of the [Early Years Learning Framework](#) which underpins early childhood education.

## ***National Partnership Agreement on the National Quality Agenda for Early Childhood Education and Care***

In December 2009, COAG agreed to the [National Partnership Agreement on the National Quality Agenda for Early Childhood Education and Care](#). This national partnership included the [National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care](#) (the NQF).

Under the NQF, [by the start of 2014](#):

- long day care and preschool services providing care to less than 25 children (based on approved places) must have access to an early childhood teacher for at least 20 per cent of the time that the service provides education and care
- when long day care and preschool services are provided to 25 or more children on any given day, services must ensure that an early childhood teacher is in attendance for a minimum:
  - six hours on that day (for a service that operates for 50 or more hours per week) or
  - 60 per cent of the operating hours (for a service that operates for less than 50 hours per week).

Services may apply for [waivers](#) from these requirements.

## ***Early Years Workforce Strategy***

In September 2012, the Standing Council on School Education and Early Childhood released the [Early Years Workforce Strategy 2012–2016](#), which builds on Investing in the Early Years. Each state and territory government has an [action plan](#) to implement the Early Years Strategy.

In addition to the Early Years Strategy, the Australian Government has a number of [early childhood workforce initiatives](#) to support and train the ECE and child care workforce. These include a [HECS-HELP benefit](#) for ECE teachers working in areas of high need.

## ***Closing the Gap agreements***

The [National Indigenous Reform Agreement \(Closing the Gap\)](#), first agreed to by COAG in October 2008 and renewed in 2012, includes the target of ‘ensuring all Indigenous four years olds in remote communities have access to early childhood education within five years’.

In July 2009, COAG agreed to the [National Partnership Agreement on Indigenous Early Childhood Development](#). Under this national partnership, 38 [Children and Family Centres](#), providing early learning, child care and family support services for Indigenous families, will be established by June 2014. The National Partnership expires 30 June 2014.

## **Progress under the universal access to early childhood education national partnerships—statistics**

According to [information](#) on the COAG website, it was expected that ‘most’ states and territories would achieve the objective that ‘all children (in the year before full-time schooling) will be enrolled in an early childhood education program by 2013’.

The [Australian Bureau of Statistics](#) (ABS) and the Productivity Commission’s annual [Report on Government Services](#) (RoGS), publish statistics relating to ECE provision. These data sources provide enrolment and attendance data, including estimates of the number of children enrolled in, and attending in the year before full-time schooling, separate data for Indigenous and disadvantaged children and by remoteness category and data for preschool costs, hours attended, qualifications of preschool employees and ECE program setting. Expenditure data is provided by RoGS.

However, it is not possible from these sources to determine progress against all universal access targets. The ABS ECE data for all states and territories has only been published since 2012 and RoGS data does not provide comparable data for all states and territories over the entire period of the ECE national partnerships. The NPAUAECE’s review, or other national partnership progress reports, may provide information to enable meaningful comparisons to be made.

## Some key statistics

[ABS data](#) shows that in 2013:

- 288,052 children aged four or five years were enrolled in an ECE program. Of these children, 83.2 per cent were aged four years. An estimated 272,810 children were enrolled in the year before full-time schooling
  - 280,908 children aged four or five years attended an ECE program. An estimated 266,062 children attended in the year before full-time schooling
- (Note: the ABS does not provide the proportion of eligible children enrolled in, or attending ECE programs)
- all states and territories recorded the highest proportions of children enrolled in an ECE program in the 'enrolled 15 hours or more' range
  - 8,654 service providers delivered an ECE program, of which 4,283 (49.5 per cent) were a preschool (either stand-alone or part of a school) and 4,371 were long day care service providers
  - of the preschools, 43.4 per cent were government preschools. Government managed preschools were the predominant preschool types in the ACT, NT, SA, WA and Tasmania. In other states, government preschools were in the minority, comprising 18.2 per cent of preschools in NSW, 19.6 percent in Victoria and 21.2 percent in Queensland
  - of the 42,464 workers in the ECE sector, 27.8 per cent held a graduate four years and above qualification, 16.2 percent a Bachelor degree (three years or equivalent) and 45.5 per cent an Advanced Diploma, Diploma or Certificate level qualification.

## Government expenditure

[RoGS](#) shows that in 2012–13, total government expenditure on ECE services amounted to \$1.6 billion. Of this funding, \$447 million (28.2 percent) was provided by the Australian Government under the NPAECE. (Note: state and territory government expenditure includes expenditure on ECE services for children of all ages).

Australia's ECE expenditure has not compared favourably with that of other countries. The [latest data](#) from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) shows that, in 2010, Australia's government expenditure on pre-primary education (for children aged three years and older) amounted to 0.06 percent of Gross Domestic Product, compared to an OECD average of 0.47 per cent. Australia ranked second last of the 30 OECD countries for which data was available. Information to assess the impact of the universal access initiative on this data is not yet available.

## The future of universal access to early childhood education

With national partnership funding for universal access to ECE services finishing at the end of 2014 and the NPAUECE expiring on 30 June 2015, [lobbying](#) for further Australian Government funding has begun amid [further evidence](#) attesting to the benefits of ECE. [State governments](#) are amongst those calling for further funding—the [South Australian](#) and [Victorian](#) Governments have indicated that they may have to cut ECE services if national partnership funding is not extended.

The future of Australian Government funding for universal access to ECE is uncertain. A decision about future funding is likely to be dependent on the outcome of the required review of the NPAUECE which states that the results of the review will be used to 'enable a decision before the end of 2014 on service delivery and funding adequacy in 2015'. It appears that the Assistant Education Minister, Sussan Ley, [has offered](#) to bring forward the review, but not all states have provided the information necessary for this to occur.

It may also be the case that a decision about future funding will be dependent upon the outcome of the [Productivity Commission's Inquiry into Child Care and Early Childhood Learning](#).

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