



Australian Children's
Education & Care
Quality Authority™

Quality ratings by socio-economic status of areas

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Contents

Overview	4
Background	7
Socio-economic status and developmental outcomes	7
The impact of high quality children's education and care	7
Quality and availability of children's education and care	8
Key findings	9
Profile of children's education and care services	9
Quality of children's education and care services	10
Implications	11
Equity of access to high quality children's education and care services	11
Existing resources and support, and progress to date in improving quality	11
Detailed findings	12
Profile of children's education and care services	12
Quality of children's education and care services	18
References	29
Appendix A: Methodology	32



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ACECQA acknowledges the Gadigal peoples of the Eora Nation, the Traditional Custodians of the lands on which ACECQA is located. We recognise the unique status of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples as the First Australians, including their role in the education and care of children. We pay our respects to the past, present and emerging Traditional Custodians of country throughout Australia.

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List of figures

Figure 1: The quality rating system	5
Figure 2: Proportion of approved services by jurisdiction and SEIFA quintile	12
Figure 3: Proportion of approved services by service type and SEIFA quintile	13
Figure 4: Proportion of approved services by provider management type and SEIFA quintile	14
Figure 5: Proportion of approved services by remoteness classification and SEIFA quintile	15
Figure 6: Proportion of approved services by provider size and SEIFA quintile	15
Figure 7: Approved number of centre-based service places by SEIFA quintile	16
Figure 8: Proportion of approved centre-based services with either a physical environment or staffing waiver by SEIFA quintile	17
Figure 9: Overall quality ratings by SEIFA quintile	18
Figure 10: Reassessment outcomes (overall quality rating changes) by SEIFA quintile	27

List of tables

Table 1: Distribution of approved services by SEIFA quintile	12
Table 2: Proportion of services rated Working Towards NQS and Exceeding NQS by service type and the most disadvantaged and advantaged areas	19
Table 3: Proportion of services rated Working Towards NQS and Exceeding NQS by provider management type and the most disadvantaged and advantaged areas	20
Table 4: Proportion of services rated Working Towards NQS and Exceeding NQS by remoteness classification and the most disadvantaged and advantaged areas	21
Table 5: Proportion of services rated Working Towards NQS and Exceeding NQS by quality areas and the most disadvantaged and advantaged areas	22
Table 6: Largest difference between SEIFA quintiles 1 and 5 in the proportion of services rated Working Towards NQS for each service type	23
Table 7: Largest difference between SEIFA quintiles 1 and 5 in the proportion of services rated Exceeding NQS for each service type	24
Table 8: Largest difference between SEIFA quintiles 1 and 5 in the proportion of services rated Working Towards NQS for each provider management type	25
Table 9: Largest difference between SEIFA quintiles 1 and 5 in the proportion of services rated Exceeding NQS for each provider management type	26
Table 10: Proportion of services with a higher or lower rating after reassessment by quality areas in the most disadvantaged and advantaged areas	28

Overview

This occasional paper is the seventh in a series on the National Quality Framework (NQF). It explores the quality of children's education and care services based on the socio-economic status of the area in which they are situated. The Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA)¹ Index of Relative Socio-Economic Advantage and Disadvantage (IRSAD) is used by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) to classify services by the level of relative socio-economic advantage and disadvantage of their local area. This paper uses SEIFA as a proxy measure to identify services that are more or less likely to educate and care for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The NQF represents a nationwide commitment to quality education and care for our youngest citizens. More than 1.3 million children in Australia attend education and care services, including long day care, outside school hours care, preschools/kindergartens and family day care services. Ensuring their health, safety and wellbeing is the first and foremost objective of the NQF. Other important objectives include improving their educational and developmental outcomes, and promoting continuous improvement in the quality of services.

Equity, inclusion and diversity are guiding principles of the NQF. Children from more disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to experience developmental vulnerability than children from less disadvantaged backgrounds. If developmental vulnerability is not addressed early in life, it becomes more challenging and expensive to address later. The research literature strongly suggests that children from disadvantaged backgrounds receive the greatest benefits from attending high quality education and care. Beyond promoting social inclusion and equity, quality education and care yields higher returns for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, and the accrued benefit is greater than the cost of early interventions.

Governments regulate more than 16,000 services under the NQF, with individual children attending services for anywhere from a handful of irregular hours to more than 50 hours every week.

Making the decision to use an education and care service, and choosing which service to use, can be a stressful and emotive experience, particularly for new parents and families who have recently moved to Australia.

The NQF provides assurance and guidance to parents and carers. The *Education and Care Services National Law* and National Regulations govern the minimum standards and requirements that all providers of regulated services must meet in order to operate. There is also a National Quality Standard (NQS) used by all state and territory governments to quality assess and rate services.

1 SEIFA is an Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) product that ranks areas according to socio-economic advantage and disadvantage based on census data. Variables used include household income, education, employment, occupation, housing and other indicators of advantage and disadvantage. The published ACECQA Snapshot only reports SEIFA for centre-based services, while this research project includes family day care services.

The quality rating system

Under the NQS, a service's overall quality rating is based on:

- 40 elements, which are assessed as Met or Not Met
- 15 standards, which are rated on the four point scale below
- Seven quality areas, which are also rated on the four point scale below.

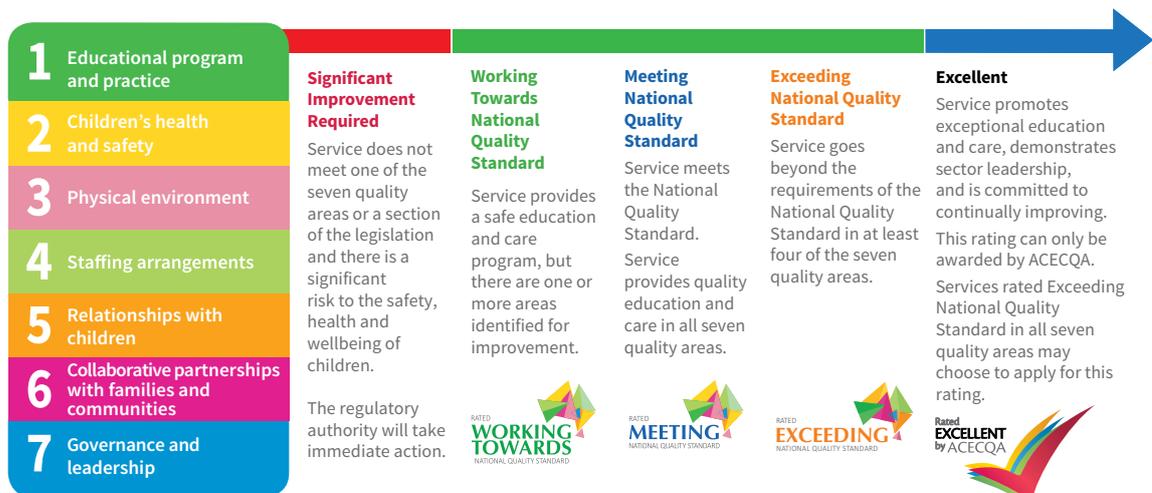
Standards, quality areas and the overall quality rating are assessed on a four point scale (see **Figure 1**):

- Exceeding NQS
- Meeting NQS
- Working Towards NQS
- Significant Improvement Required.

In addition, a provider with a service that has an overall rating of Exceeding NQS, as well as a rating of Exceeding NQS in all seven quality areas, may choose to apply to ACECQA to be assessed for the Excellent rating.

As at 31 March 2020, 80% of children's education and care services approved under the NQF are rated Meeting or Exceeding NQS, up from 61% six years ago, 69% four years ago and 77% two years ago.

Figure 1: The quality rating system



This paper begins by highlighting contemporary research about the association between socio-economic status and developmental outcomes, and the impact of high quality education and care on children from more disadvantaged backgrounds. It then outlines the quality and availability of education and care in low socio-economic status areas, analysing service quality ratings and reassessment results. The paper also examines differences across service and provider management types, and remoteness classifications.

The detailed analysis suggests that there are differences in the overall quality ratings of education and care services located in high and low socio-economic status areas. Services in relatively disadvantaged areas are slightly more likely to be rated Working Towards NQS and notably less likely to be rated Exceeding NQS than those in relatively advantaged areas.

Services in the most disadvantaged areas typically find Quality Area 1 (Educational program and practice), Quality Area 4 (Staffing arrangements), and Quality Area 7 (Governance and leadership) more challenging than those in the most advantaged areas.

Unless otherwise stated, this paper draws on quality assessment and rating, reassessment and waivers data from the National Quality Agenda IT System (NQA ITS) as at 31 December 2019.

The six other [occasional papers](#) in this series are all available on ACECQA's [research and reports](#) webpage.

The two previous occasional papers examining educational program and practice (Quality Area 1), and governance and leadership (Quality Area 7) are of particular relevance, with these two quality areas featuring prominently in the findings of this paper.

A further relevant piece of [research](#), examining long day care services that had improved their overall quality rating, including their ratings for Quality Area 1 and Quality Area 7, is also available on ACECQA's research and reports webpage.

ACECQA's [NQF Annual Performance Reports](#) contain analysis examining educational program and practice, children from vulnerable and disadvantaged backgrounds, and the children's education and care sector workforce, including Quality Area 4 ratings.

Background

■ ■ ■ Socio-economic status and developmental outcomes

Socio-economic status relates to the social and economic position of an individual or group of individuals. It is considered as predictive of cognitive and socio-emotional development outcomes of children (Hackman & Farah, 2009). Hattie (2008) found a positive association between socio-economic status, and cognitive development and educational achievement, especially during the years prior to school and the early years of schooling.

International research found socio-economic status plays a critical role in children's early development, and contributes to their later success in life. Research in the United States suggests children from families of lower socio-economic status are at greater risk of poorer developmental outcomes (Duncan & Sojourner, 2013) in a range of areas including cognitive, social and emotional, and health outcomes than their more socio-economically advantaged peers (Cunha & Heckman, 2009).

Researchers have found similar patterns and results in many countries (Nicholson, Lucas, Berthelsen, & Wake, 2012). Research in Australia suggests that children from disadvantaged areas are more likely to leave early childhood education and care and start school earlier compared to their peers (Hanly et al., 2019) since parents might not be able to afford the ongoing cost (Suziedelyte & Zhu, 2015).

■ ■ ■ The impact of high quality children's education and care

There are many evidence-based benefits of high quality education and care. Two key interrelated components of high quality education and care, encompassed within the NQF, are:

- structural quality – indicators such as child-to-staff ratios and teacher and educator qualifications
- process quality – including learning and development opportunities available to children, and teacher and educator to child interactions.

Children will realise the benefits of education and care if educational programs are high quality (Blaxland, Adamson, & Skattebol, 2019; Torii et al., 2017).

High quality education and care can significantly enhance children's general developmental outcomes. It can also advance their cognitive, physical, emotional and social skills development (Trudgett & Grace, 2011).

Additionally, regular attendance at high quality services supports a successful transition to school and increases the likelihood of future academic and career success (Webster-Stratton, Jamila Reid, & Stoolmiller, 2008).

High quality education and care can reduce the gap in children's developmental outcomes and improve social equity, reducing subsequent expenditure on health, wellbeing and justice (Taggart, Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, & Siraj, 2015; Vandell, Belsky, Burchinal, Steinberg, & Vandergrift, 2010).

While all children benefit from high quality education and care, children from families of lower socio-economic status who attend high quality educational programs receive substantial benefits (Campbell & Ramey, 1994; Eadie, Stark, & Niklas, 2019; Schweinhart, 2007). Attending high quality programs can also close developmental gaps, which can translate into long term benefits (Duncan and Sojourner, 2013).

Quality and availability of children's education and care

International literature suggests that high quality education and care programs may be less likely to operate in lower socio-economic status areas (Dickens, Wollny, & Ireland, 2012; Small & Stark, 2005).

Australian research suggests children from low socio-economic status backgrounds receive lower quality education and care (Torii et al., 2017) and that there are fewer high quality services in the areas where children need it most (Cloney, Cleveland, Hattie, & Tayler, 2016). There are relatively fewer education and care places per resident child in lower socio-economic status areas (Cloney, 2016), which may present a barrier to families in these areas accessing high quality education and care.

Children from low socio-economic status backgrounds continue to be under-represented in education and care programs due to a number of other barriers including cost, a lack of awareness of available services and a limited understanding of the benefits (Baxter & Hand, 2013).

Key findings

■ ■ ■ Profile of children's education and care services

- While the proportion of long day care services remains relatively steady across all socio-economic areas, the proportion of preschools/kindergartens and family day care services increases as the level of socio-economic disadvantage increases. Conversely, the proportion of outside school hours care services decreases.
- The proportion of 'Private for profit' services decreases as the level of socio-economic disadvantage increases, while the proportion of 'Government' and 'Private not for profit' services increases.
- The proportion of services in disadvantaged areas increases in regional and remote Australia, and the size of services (as measured by the number of children a service is approved to educate and care for) decreases as the level of disadvantage increases.
- Services located in more disadvantaged areas are more likely to have a waiver relating to the staffing requirements of the NQF. Conversely, services located in more advantaged areas are more likely to have a physical environment waiver in place.
- Several aspects of the above profile are inter-related. For example:
 - outside school hours care services often cater for a large number of children, therefore the decrease in the proportion of these services in more disadvantaged areas influences the decrease in the size of services in those areas
 - preschools/kindergartens, particularly in some states and territories, are often 'Government' services, therefore the increase in the proportion of both in more disadvantaged areas aligns
 - services in disadvantaged areas are often located in regional and remote parts of Australia. Recruiting and retaining skilled and experienced educators and teachers in those parts can be an ongoing challenge, which influences the increase in the proportion of staffing waivers
 - services in more advantaged areas are often located in densely populated parts of major cities. Meeting requirements relating to the amount and type of outdoor and indoor space can be a significant challenge for these services, which influences the increase in the proportion of physical environment waivers.

Quality of children's education and care services

- While there is only a relatively small difference in the proportion of services rated Working Towards NQS in the most and least disadvantaged areas, there is a marked difference in the proportion of services rated Exceeding NQS (see **Figure 1** for a summary of the quality rating system).
- Family day care services exhibit the greatest difference in the proportion of services rated Working Towards NQS across socio-economic areas, while preschools/ kindergartens exhibit the greatest difference in the proportion of services rated Exceeding NQS.
- 'Catholic and Independent schools' exhibit the greatest difference in both the proportion of services rated Working Towards NQS and Exceeding NQS across socio-economic areas.
- It should be noted that these two findings may be influenced by the differing numbers of services within each service and provider management type. There are relatively few family day care services compared to other service types, as well as relatively few 'Catholic and Independent schools' compared to other provider management types, which can lead to volatility in comparisons.
- The quality of services in the most advantaged areas of major cities is markedly higher than the quality of services in the most disadvantaged areas of those cities.
- Services in the most disadvantaged areas find the following three quality areas particularly challenging – educational program and practice, staffing arrangements, and governance and leadership.
- Services in the most disadvantaged areas are less likely to receive a higher quality rating and more likely to receive a lower quality rating after reassessment.

Implications

Equity of access to high quality children's education and care services

Because of the increased benefit of high quality education and care for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, the goal should be to not only eliminate the difference between the proportion of services rated Working Towards NQS, but also the difference between the proportion of services rated Exceeding NQS across socio-economic areas.

All children deserve high quality education and care, and all service providers are expected to strive for continuous quality improvement to deliver positive educational and developmental outcomes for children, regardless of their socio-economic background.

A wealth of domestic and international research suggests that high quality education and care will result in significant ongoing benefits for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Service providers can play a vital role in providing additional resources and focussed support to raise the quality of services operating in the most disadvantaged areas of Australia.

Existing resources and support, and progress to date in improving quality

State and territory regulatory authorities, ACECQA, peak bodies and associations, and sector support agencies have in place a range of initiatives to guide and support providers, service leaders, educational leaders, teachers and educators to improve their service quality, and to meet and exceed the requirements of the NQS.

A wide range of resources and support materials are available to explain the elements and standards underpinning the seven quality areas of the NQS. Many resources are available on the ACECQA website, including the [Meeting the NQS](#) page, [We Hear You](#) blog and [Research and Reports](#) page.

These resources are regularly updated and enhanced. Most recently, in May 2020 ACECQA published findings from a [quality improvement research project](#) and a supporting [information sheet](#) with practical ideas for approved providers, service leaders, teachers and educators to support continuous quality improvement.

Since the NQF was introduced at the start of 2012, Australia's children's education and care sector has made significant progress in improving service quality. With more than 16,000 services approved to operate under the NQF, and more than 7,000 approved providers, a commitment to continuous quality improvement has been evident across the sector. Ensuring that this commitment is sustained and ongoing is particularly important for children attending services in the most disadvantaged areas of the country.

Detailed findings

Profile of children's education and care services

Table 1 shows that, as at 31 December 2019, there was a fairly even distribution of approved services across the five SEIFA quintiles. SEIFA quintile 1 (most disadvantaged) had the highest (23%) proportion of approved services, while SEIFA quintile 5 (most advantaged) had the lowest (18%).

Table 1: Distribution of approved services by SEIFA quintile

SEIFA	Number of approved services	Proportion of approved services
SEIFA Quintile 1 (most disadvantaged)	3576	23%
SEIFA Quintile 2	3214	21%
SEIFA Quintile 3	3019	19%
SEIFA Quintile 4	2993	19%
SEIFA Quintile 5 (most advantaged)	2790	18%
Total	15,592	100%

The proportion of services in each SEIFA quintile differs between jurisdictions (see **Figure 2**). Tasmania (60%), South Australia (53%), Queensland (51%) and New South Wales (45%) had the largest proportion of services in SEIFA quintiles 1 and 2 (the two most disadvantaged quintiles), while the Australian Capital Territory (71%), Western Australia (42%), Northern Territory (42%) and Victoria (40%) had the highest proportion of services in SEIFA quintiles 4 and 5 (the two most advantaged quintiles).

Figure 2: Proportion of approved services by jurisdiction and SEIFA quintile

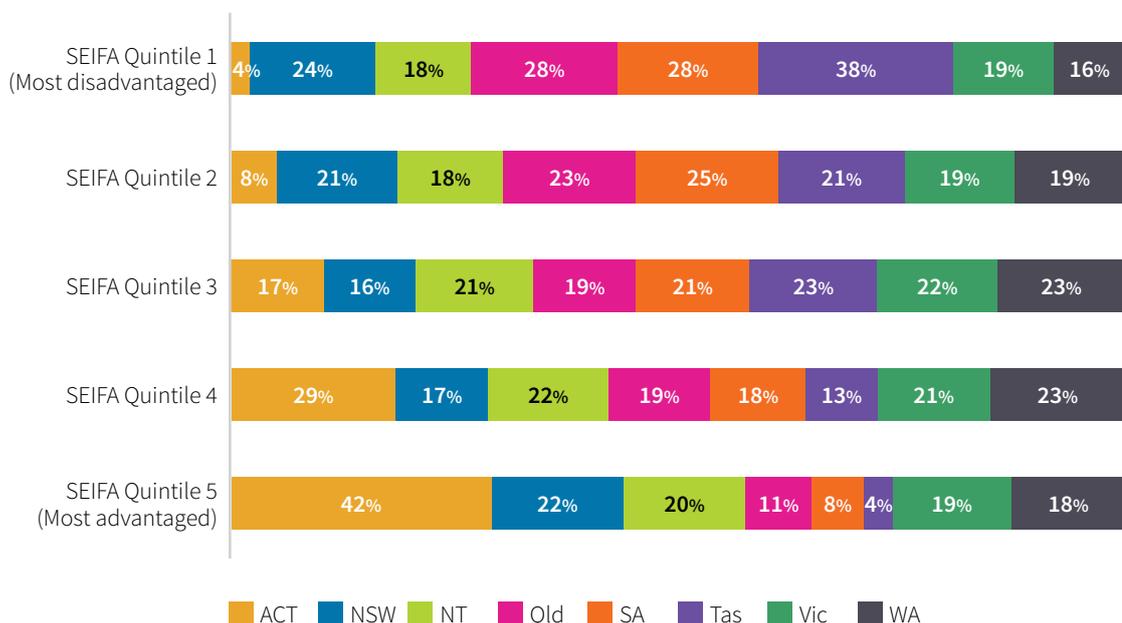


Figure 3 shows that almost all SEIFA quintiles had the same proportion of long day care services. The proportion of preschools/kindergartens and family day care services in each SEIFA quintile increased with the level of relative socio-economic disadvantage.

SEIFA quintile 1 (most disadvantaged) had the largest proportion of preschools/kindergartens (24%) and family day care services (6%), while SEIFA quintile 5 (most advantaged) had the smallest (18% and 1% respectively). Conversely, the proportion of outside school hours care services decreased with the level of relative socio-economic disadvantage. SEIFA quintile 5 (most advantaged) had the largest proportion of outside school hours care services (34%), while SEIFA quintile 1 (most disadvantaged) had the smallest (20%).

Figure 3: Proportion of approved services by service type and SEIFA quintile

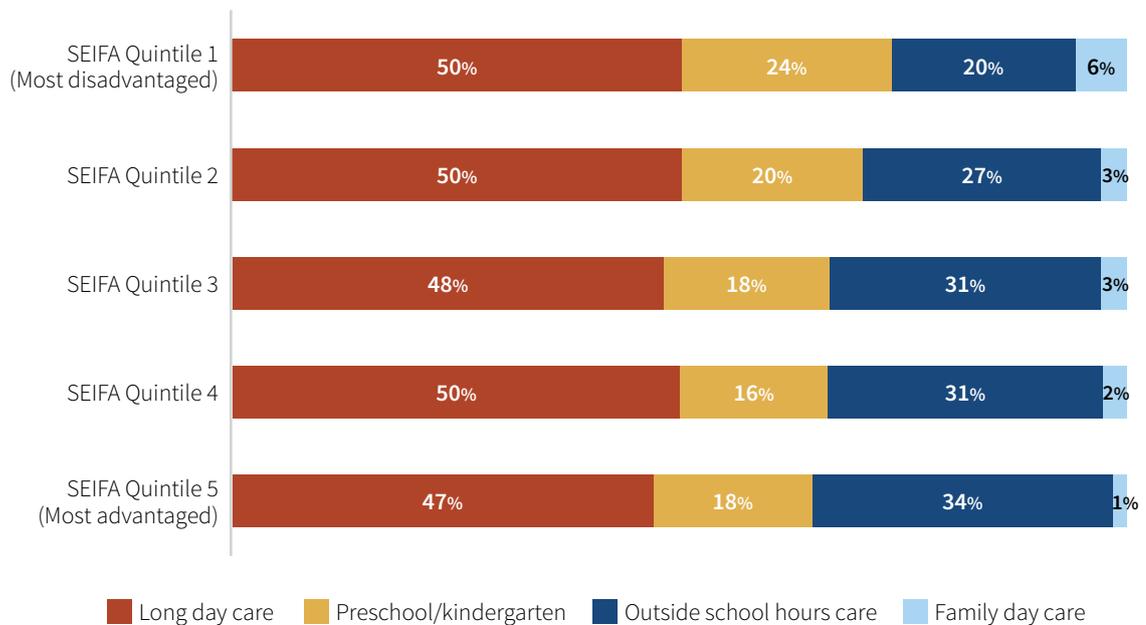
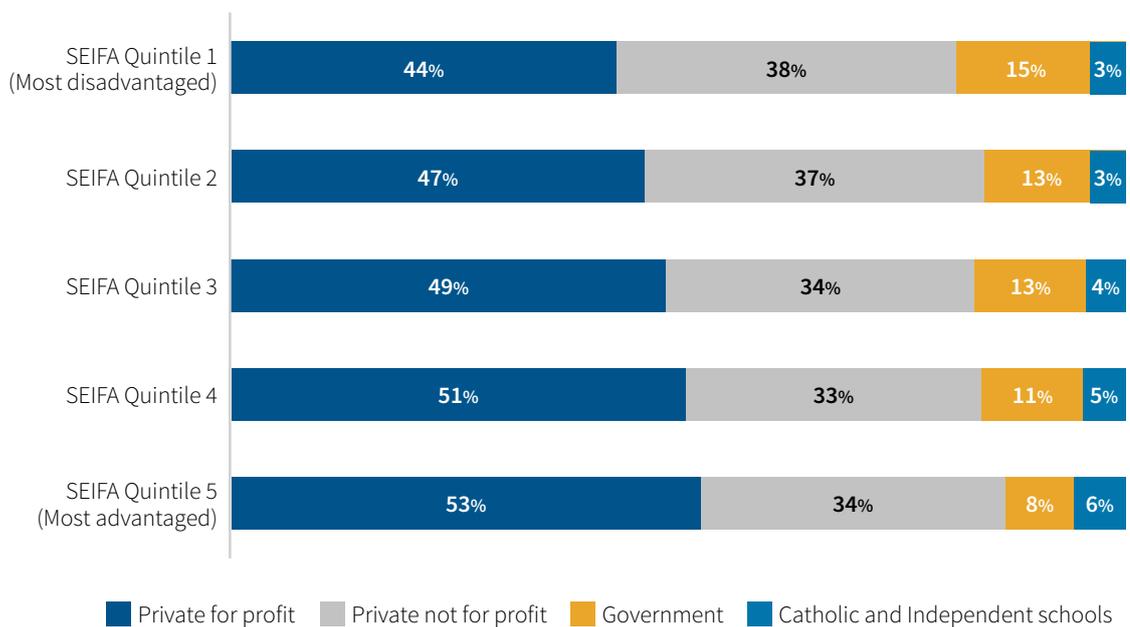


Figure 4 shows the proportion of approved services operated by different provider management types in each SEIFA quintile. The proportion of 'Private for profit' services decreased as the level of relative socio-economic disadvantage increased. SEIFA quintile 5 (most advantaged) had the largest proportion (53%) of 'Private for profit' services, while SEIFA quintile 1 had the smallest (44%), a difference of nine percentage points (the largest percentage point difference between quintiles relating to a provider management type). Similarly, the proportion of services operated by 'Catholic and Independent schools' decreased with the level of relative socio-economic disadvantage (from 6% in SEIFA quintile 5 to 3% in SEIFA quintile 1).

Conversely, the proportion of services operated by 'Private not for profit' organisations increased with the level of relative socio-economic disadvantage (from 34% in SEIFA quintile 5 to 38% in SEIFA quintile 1). The same was true for services managed by 'Government' providers (from 8% in SEIFA quintile 5 to 15% in SEIFA quintile 1).

Some service types are predominantly operated by a particular provider management type. For example, half of preschools/kindergartens are managed by 'Government' providers, while two-thirds of long day care services are managed by 'Private for profit' providers. This likely contributes to why a greater proportion of particular service types may be located in a specific socio-economic area.

Figure 4: Proportion of approved services by provider management type and SEIFA quintile



Analysing services using the Australian Remoteness Index for Areas (ARIA+)² shows that the vast majority of services in SEIFA quintile 5 (most advantaged) were situated in 'Major Cities of Australia' (91%), compared to just over half of services (55%) in SEIFA quintile 1 (most disadvantaged). As the level of relative socio-economic disadvantage increased, so too did the proportion of services in 'Inner Regional Australia', 'Outer Regional Australia', and 'Remote and Very Remote Australia' (see **Figure 5**). Accordingly, 'Inner Regional Australia' (27%), 'Outer Regional Australia' (14%), and 'Remote and Very Remote Australia' (4%) had the largest proportion of services in SEIFA quintile 1 (most disadvantaged).

2 The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Remoteness Structure uses the Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia (ARIA+) to develop a standard classification and index of remoteness, based on road distances between populated localities and general Service Centres (not Early Childhood Education and Care services). The index can be used in policy development, implementation and evaluation to assist in targeting of programs to the various regions of Australia.

Figure 5: Proportion of approved services by remoteness classification³ and SEIFA quintile

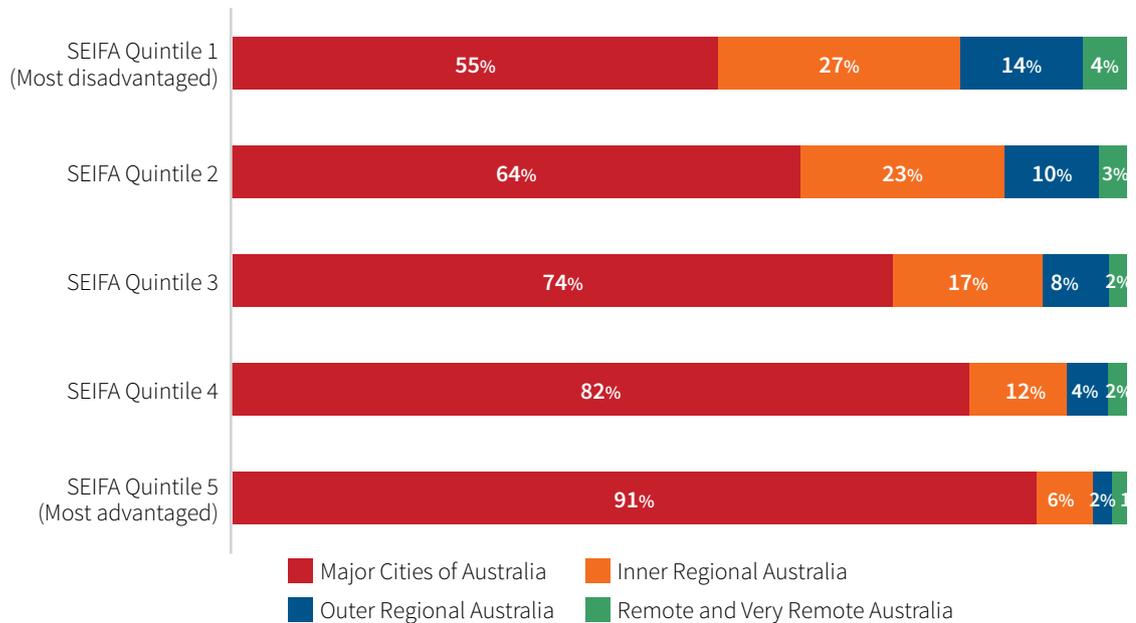
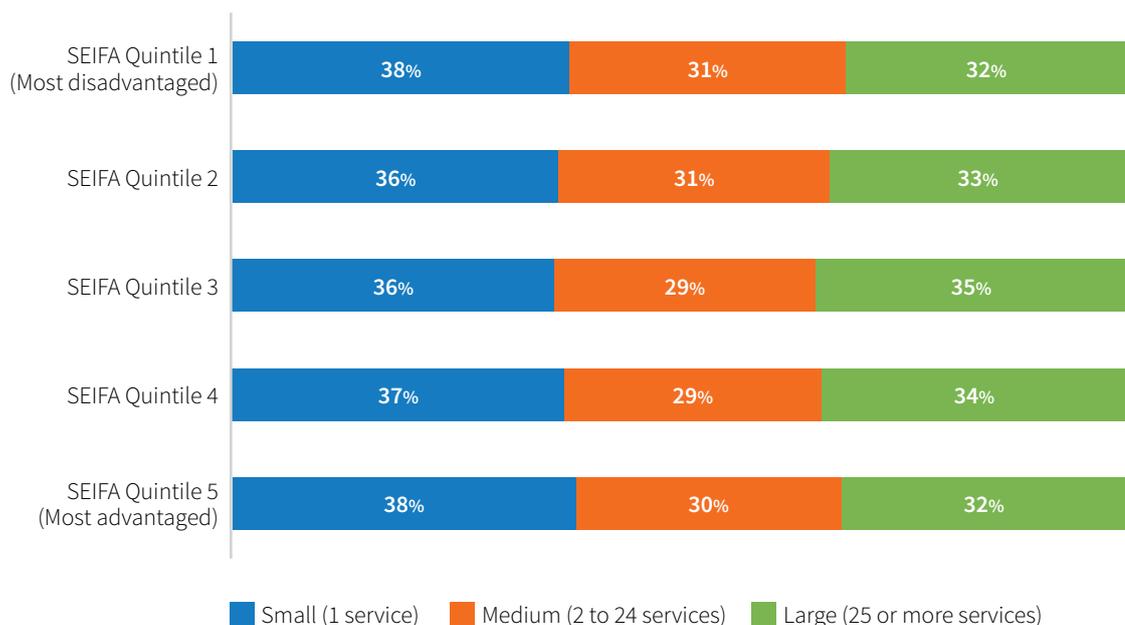


Figure 6 shows the proportion of services in each SEIFA quintile by the size of their provider (measured by the number of services managed by the provider). The distribution of services by provider size was fairly even across all SEIFA quintiles.

Figure 6: Proportion of approved services by provider size and SEIFA quintile



³ ARIA+ classifications of 'Remote Australia' and 'Very Remote Australia' have been combined into one classification 'Remote and Very Remote Australia' due to small numbers of approved services in both classifications.

Figure 7 shows that more advantaged areas had more services with larger numbers of approved places compared to those located in more disadvantaged areas.

For example, SEIFA quintiles 4 and 5 (the two most advantaged quintiles) had the largest proportion of services (30% and 29% respectively) approved to educate and care for more than 80 children, while SEIFA quintile 1 (most disadvantaged) had the smallest (15%). Conversely, SEIFA quintile 1 had the largest proportion of services with 6 to 24 approved places (11%) and 25 to 59 approved places (51%).

Figure 7: Approved number of centre-based service places by SEIFA quintile^{4,5}

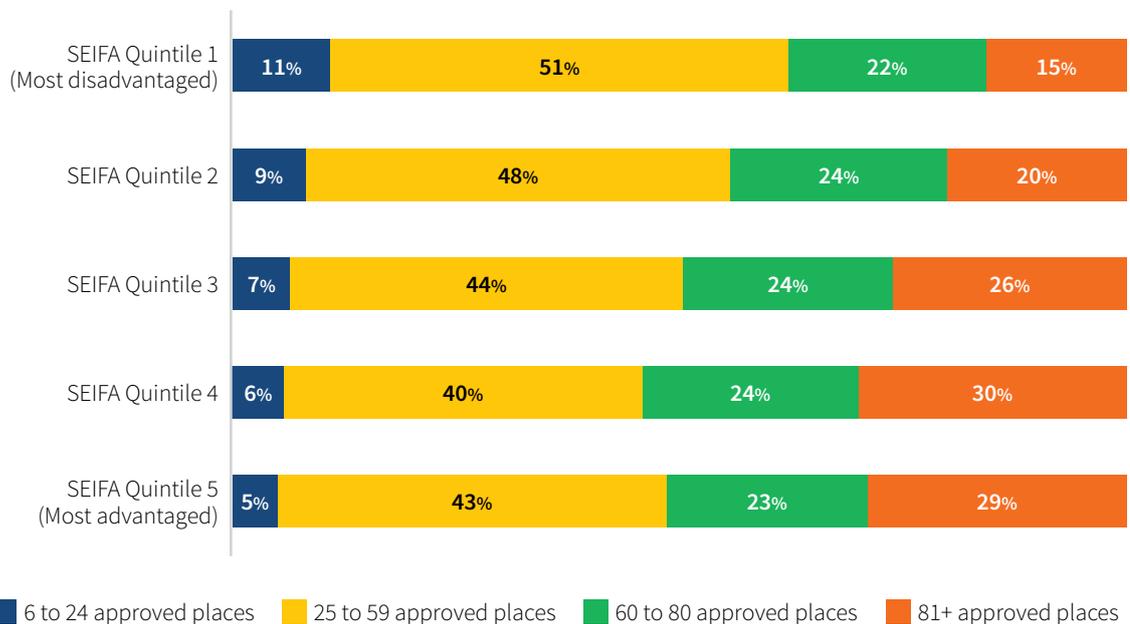


Figure 8 shows the proportion of approved centre-based services in each SEIFA quintile with either a physical environment or staffing waiver.

SEIFA quintile 1 (most disadvantaged) had the largest proportion of services with a staffing waiver (5.5%), while SEIFA quintile 5 (most advantaged) had the smallest (4.1%). This is likely to partly reflect the larger proportion of services in SEIFA quintile 1 (most disadvantaged) being situated in regional and remote areas. Difficulty in recruiting and retaining adequate numbers of skilled staff often increases with remoteness.

In contrast, SEIFA quintile 5 (most advantaged) had the largest proportion of services with a physical environment waiver (3.8%), while SEIFA quintile 1 (most disadvantaged) had the smallest (1.7%). This may reflect the fact that services in SEIFA quintile 5 (most advantaged) are concentrated in 'Major Cities of Australia', with associated issues around meeting physical space requirements.

⁴ The number of approved places is not the same as the actual number of children in attendance at a centre-based care service. Therefore, approved places is a proxy for the number of children.

⁵ Approved place categories are based on the requirement size categories for early childhood teachers in Division 5 of the National Regulations.

Figure 8: Proportion of approved centre-based services with either a physical environment or staffing waiver by SEIFA quintile



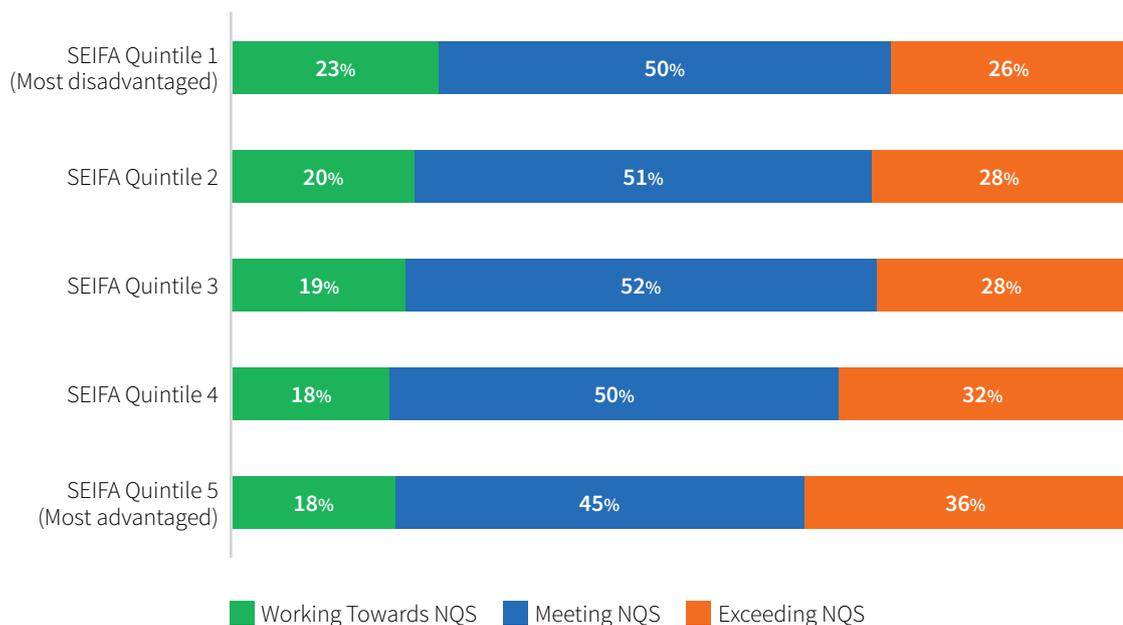
Quality of children's education and care services

Overall quality ratings

Comparing overall quality ratings across the SEIFA quintiles, the proportion of services rated Working Towards NQS increased with the level of relative socio-economic disadvantage. Almost a quarter (23%) of services in SEIFA quintile 1 (most disadvantaged) had an overall rating of Working Towards NQS, compared to less than a fifth (18%) of services in SEIFA quintile 5 (most advantaged) (**Figure 9**).

There was a more pronounced difference in overall ratings between SEIFA quintiles 1 and 5 in the proportion of services rated Exceeding NQS, with 36% of services in SEIFA quintile 5 (most advantaged) rated Exceeding NQS, compared to 26% in SEIFA quintile 1 (most disadvantaged).

Figure 9: Overall quality ratings by SEIFA quintile



Service type

A similar pattern was found when comparing overall quality ratings of services by SEIFA quintile and service type. The proportion of services rated Working Towards NQS increased with the level of relative socio-economic disadvantage while the proportion of services rated Exceeding NQS decreased for all service types.

The difference between SEIFA quintile 1 (most disadvantaged) and SEIFA quintile 5 (most advantaged) in the proportion of services with an overall quality rating of Working Towards NQS was small for all service types except family day care (see **Table 2**). When considering this finding, it should be noted that there are fewer family day care services compared to other service types, which can contribute to larger percentage point differences between SEIFA quintiles.

There was a more pronounced difference in overall ratings between SEIFA quintiles 1 and 5 in the proportion of services rated Exceeding NQS. Preschools/kindergartens had the largest proportional difference (22 percentage points).

Table 2: Proportion of services rated Working Towards NQS and Exceeding NQS by service type and the most disadvantaged and advantaged areas

Service type		SEIFA quintile 1 (most disadvantaged)	SEIFA quintile 5 (most advantaged)	Percentage point difference
Long day care	Working Towards NQS	23%	18%	5
	Exceeding NQS	22%	35%	13
Preschool/ Kindergarten	Working Towards NQS	9%	4%	5
	Exceeding NQS	50%	72%	22
Outside school hours care	Working Towards NQS	32%	26%	6
	Exceeding NQS	10%	17%	7
Family day care	Working Towards NQS	53%	33%	20
	Exceeding NQS	13%	27%	14

Provider management type

The pattern of overall quality ratings of services by SEIFA quintile and provider management type was similar to service type. The proportion of services rated Working Towards NQS increased while the proportion of services rated Exceeding NQS decreased with the level of relative socio-economic disadvantage for all provider management types (see **Table 3**).

Services with a provider management type of 'Catholic and Independent schools' displayed the largest difference (10 percentage points) between SEIFA quintile 1 (most disadvantaged) and SEIFA quintile 5 (most advantaged) in the proportion of services rated Working Towards NQS. 'Private for profit' services had the second largest proportional difference (9 percentage points).

Services managed by 'Catholic and Independent schools' also displayed the largest difference (26 percentage points) between SEIFA quintile 1 (most disadvantaged) and SEIFA quintile 5 (most advantaged) in the proportion of services rated Exceeding NQS. Services managed by 'Government' had the second largest proportional difference (15 percentage points).

It is important to note that 'Catholic and Independent schools' and 'Government' providers manage a relatively small number of services compared to other provider management types, which can contribute to larger percentage point differences between SEIFA quintiles.

Table 3: Proportion of services rated Working Towards NQS and Exceeding NQS by provider management type⁶ and the most disadvantaged and advantaged areas

Provider management type		SEIFA quintile 1 (most disadvantaged)	SEIFA quintile 5 (most advantaged)	Percentage point difference ⁷
Private for profit	Working Towards NQS	33%	23%	9
	Exceeding NQS	13%	23%	10
Private not for profit	Working Towards NQS	16%	14%	2
	Exceeding NQS	34%	45%	11
Government	Working Towards NQS	16%	10%	6
	Exceeding NQS	43%	58%	15
Catholic and Independent schools	Working Towards NQS	24%	14%	10
	Exceeding NQS	32%	59%	26

Remoteness classification

Table 4 shows a clear trend of higher quality services in the most advantaged areas of major cities compared to the most disadvantaged areas.

'Major Cities of Australia' had the largest difference in the proportion of services rated Working Towards NQS (six percentage points) as well as Exceeding NQS (11 percentage points) between SEIFA quintile 1 (most disadvantaged) and SEIFA quintile 5 (most advantaged).

Differences in all other geographic areas were much more modest, with only 'Outer Regional Australia' showing a difference of more than two percentage points for one of the two comparisons, a five percentage point difference in the proportion of services rated Exceeding NQS between SEIFA quintile 1 (most disadvantaged) and SEIFA quintile 5 (most advantaged).

⁶ 'Private not for profit community managed' and 'Private not for profit other organisations' have been combined as 'Private not for profit' for analysis purposes. Similarly, 'State/Territory and Local Government managed' and 'State/Territory government schools' have been combined as 'Government', and 'Catholic schools' and 'Independent schools' have been combined as 'Catholic and Independent schools'.

⁷ The subtractions may be different to the displayed percentage point difference due to rounding.

Table 4: Proportion of services rated Working Towards NQS and Exceeding NQS by remoteness classification⁸ and the most disadvantaged and advantaged areas

Geographical remoteness		SEIFA quintile 1 (most disadvantaged)	SEIFA quintile 5 (most advantaged)	Percentage point difference ⁹
Major Cities of Australia	Working Towards NQS	24%	18%	6
	Exceeding NQS	26%	37%	11
Inner Regional Australia	Working Towards NQS	20%	20%	1
	Exceeding NQS	27%	28%	1
Outer Regional Australia	Working Towards NQS	24%	22%	2
	Exceeding NQS	27%	22%	5
Remote and Very Remote Australia	Working Towards NQS	27%	25%	2
	Exceeding NQS	18%	19%	1

8 ARIA+ classifications of 'Remote Australia' and 'Very Remote Australia' have been combined into one classification 'Remote and Very Remote Australia' due to small numbers of approved services in both classifications.

9 The subtractions may be different to the displayed percentage point difference due to rounding.

Quality area ratings

Table 5 shows that SEIFA quintile 1 (most disadvantaged) tended to have a larger proportion of services rated Working Towards NQS and a smaller proportion rated Exceeding NQS for all quality areas of the NQS compared to those in SEIFA quintile 5 (most advantaged).

The largest difference (four percentage points) between SEIFA quintile 1 (most disadvantaged) and SEIFA quintile 5 (most advantaged) in the proportion of services rated Working Towards NQS was for Quality Area 7 (Governance and leadership). While the largest difference (11 percentage points) in the proportion of services rated Exceeding NQS was for Quality Area 4 (Staffing arrangements). This may be linked to the relatively high proportion of services in SEIFA quintile 1 situated in 'Inner Regional Australia', 'Outer Regional Australia', and 'Remote and Very Remote Australia' areas, which often experience ongoing difficulties in recruiting and retaining highly qualified and experienced staff.

Table 5: Proportion of services rated Working Towards NQS and Exceeding NQS by quality areas and the most disadvantaged and advantaged areas

Quality area		SEIFA quintile 1 (most disadvantaged)	SEIFA quintile 5 (most advantaged)	Percentage point difference ¹⁰
QA1 (Educational program and practice)	Working Towards NQS	17%	14%	3
	Exceeding NQS	23%	33%	10
QA2 (Children's health and safety)	Working Towards NQS	15%	12%	3
	Exceeding NQS	18%	24%	6
QA3 (Physical environment)	Working Towards NQS	12%	8%	3
	Exceeding NQS	22%	30%	7
QA4 (Staffing arrangements)	Working Towards NQS	7%	5%	3
	Exceeding NQS	24%	34%	11
QA5 (Relationships with children)	Working Towards NQS	5%	4%	1
	Exceeding NQS	32%	39%	8
QA6 (Collaborative partnerships with families and communities)	Working Towards NQS	6%	7%	0
	Exceeding NQS	35%	39%	4
QA7 (Governance and leadership)	Working Towards NQS	16%	12%	4
	Exceeding NQS	25%	32%	7

¹⁰ The subtractions may be different to the displayed percentage point difference due to rounding.

Service type

Table 6 shows the quality areas that displayed the largest difference between SEIFA quintile 1 (most disadvantaged) and SEIFA quintile 5 (most advantaged) in the proportion of services rated Working Towards NQS for each service type.

Quality Area 7 (Governance and leadership) features for three of the four service types, while by far the largest difference for any service type is the 21 percentage point difference in the proportion of family day care services in SEIFA quintile 1 (most disadvantaged) rated Working Towards NQS for Quality Area 1 (Educational program and practice) compared to SEIFA quintile 5 (most advantaged).

Table 6: Largest difference between SEIFA quintiles 1 and 5 in the proportion of services rated Working Towards NQS for each service type

Service type	Quality area	SEIFA quintile 1 (most disadvantaged)	SEIFA quintile 5 (most advantaged)	Percentage point difference ¹¹
Long day care	QA7 (Governance and leadership)	15%	10%	5
Preschool/ Kindergarten	QA2 (Children's health and safety)	7%	3%	4
	QA7 (Governance and leadership)	6%	2%	4
Outside school hours care	QA7 (Governance and leadership)	23%	19%	5
Family day care	QA1 (Educational program and practice)	48%	27%	21

Table 7 shows the quality areas that displayed the largest difference between SEIFA quintile 1 (most disadvantaged) and SEIFA quintile 5 (most advantaged) in the proportion of services rated Exceeding NQS for each service type.

Quality Area 4 (Staffing arrangements) features for three of the four service types, with the largest difference (23 percentage points) relating to preschools/kindergartens.

For family day care services, the largest percentage point difference was for the proportion of services in SEIFA quintile 1 (most disadvantaged) rated Exceeding NQS for Quality Area 7 (Governance and leadership) compared to SEIFA quintile 5 (most advantaged).

¹¹ The subtractions may be different to the displayed percentage point difference due to rounding.

Table 7: Largest difference between SEIFA quintiles 1 and 5 in the proportion of services rated Exceeding NQS for each service type

Service type	Quality area	SEIFA quintile 1 (most disadvantaged)	SEIFA quintile 5 (most advantaged)	Percentage point difference ¹²
Long day care	QA1 (Educational program and practice)	19%	31%	12
	QA4 (Staffing arrangements)	20%	32%	12
Preschool/ Kindergarten	QA4 (Staffing arrangements)	44%	67%	23
Outside school hours care	QA4 (Staffing arrangements)	11%	19%	8
Family day care	QA7 (Governance and leadership)	19%	37%	17

Provider management type

Table 8 shows the quality areas that displayed the largest difference between SEIFA quintile 1 (most disadvantaged) and SEIFA quintile 5 (most advantaged) in the proportion of services rated Working Towards NQS for each provider management type.

All of the largest differences relate to two quality areas – Quality Area 1 (Educational program and practice) and Quality Area 7 (Governance and leadership). Compared to other provider management types, ‘Private for profit’ services and ‘Catholic and Independent schools’ displayed the largest percentage point differences between SEIFA quintiles 1 (most disadvantaged) and 5 (most advantaged) in the proportion of services rated Working Towards NQS.

¹² The subtractions may be different to the displayed percentage point difference due to rounding.

Table 8: Largest difference between SEIFA quintiles 1 and 5 in the proportion of services rated Working Towards NQS for each provider management type¹³

Provider management type	Quality area	SEIFA quintile 1 (most disadvantaged)	SEIFA quintile 5 (most advantaged)	Percentage point difference
Private for profit	QA1 (Educational program and practice)	26%	18%	8
	QA7 (Governance and leadership)	22%	14%	8
Private not for profit	QA7 (Governance and leadership)	12%	9%	3
Government	QA1 (Educational program and practice)	12%	6%	6
Catholic and Independent schools	QA1 (Educational program and practice)	18%	10%	8

Table 9 shows the quality areas that displayed the largest difference between SEIFA quintile 1 (most disadvantaged) and SEIFA quintile 5 (most advantaged) in the proportion of services rated Exceeding NQS for each provider management type.

Of all provider management types, 'Catholic and Independent schools' had the largest difference (30 percentage points) between SEIFA quintile 1 (most disadvantaged) and SEIFA quintile 5 (most advantaged) in the proportion of services rated Exceeding NQS for Quality Area 3 (Physical environment) and Quality Area 4 (Staffing arrangements).

¹³ 'Private not for profit community managed' and 'Private not for profit other organisations' have been combined as 'Private not for profit' for analysis purposes. Similarly, 'State/Territory and Local Government managed' and 'State/Territory government schools' have been combined as 'Government', and 'Catholic schools' and 'Independent schools' have been combined as 'Catholic and Independent schools'.

Table 9: Largest difference between SEIFA quintiles 1 and 5 in the proportion of services rated Exceeding NQS for each provider management type¹⁴

Provider management type	Quality area	SEIFA quintile 1 (most disadvantaged)	SEIFA quintile 5 (most advantaged)	Percentage point difference
Private for profit	QA4 (Staffing arrangements)	12%	23%	11
Private not for profit	QA1 (Educational program and practice)	29%	42%	13
	QA4 (Staffing arrangements)	30%	43%	13
Government	QA4 (Staffing arrangements)	39%	52%	13
	QA5 (Relationships with children)	51%	64%	13
Catholic and Independent schools	QA3 (Physical environment)	26%	56%	30
	QA4 (Staffing arrangements)	25%	55%	30

¹⁴ 'Private not for profit community managed' and 'Private not for profit other organisations' have been combined as 'Private not for profit' for analysis purposes. Similarly, 'State/Territory and Local Government managed' and 'State/Territory government schools' have been combined as 'Government', and 'Catholic schools' and 'Independent schools' have been combined as 'Catholic and Independent schools'.

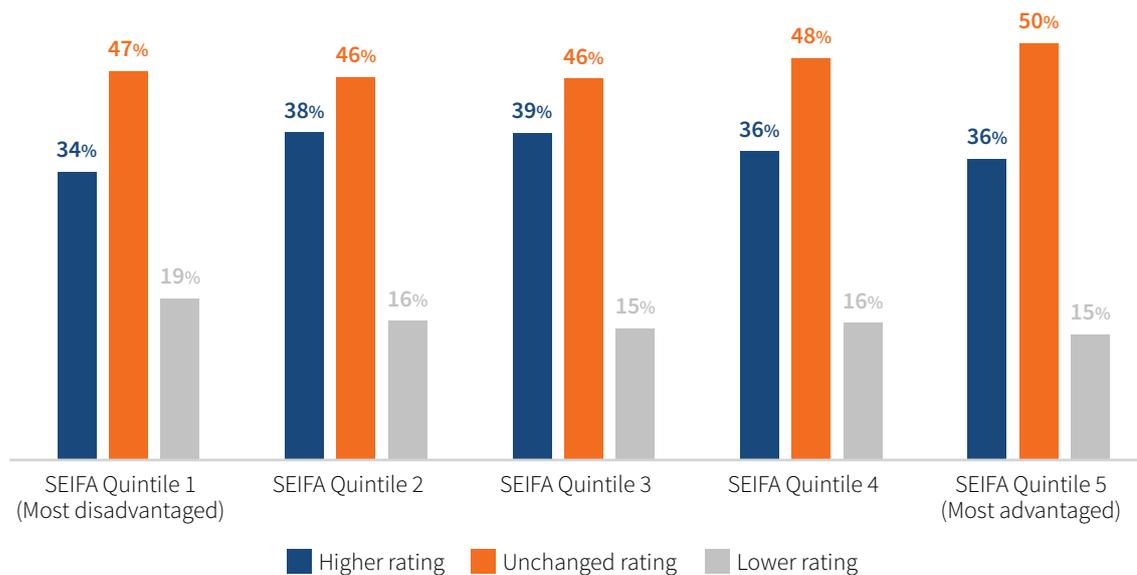
Overall quality rating reassessments

Promoting continuous improvement in the provision of quality education and care services is one of the primary [objectives of the NQF](#). Quality reassessment and ratings is a way of checking and measuring service quality improvement.

As at 31 December 2019, more than 9000 reassessments of education and care services had been undertaken by state and territory regulatory authorities.

Figure 10 compares quality improvement trends between services in relatively advantaged and disadvantaged areas. SEIFA quintile 1 (most disadvantaged) had the smallest proportion (34%) of services that received a higher overall quality rating after reassessment, as well as the largest proportion (19%) of services that received a lower overall quality rating after reassessment.

Figure 10: Reassessment outcomes (overall quality rating changes) by SEIFA quintile



Quality area rating reassessments

Table 10 shows that SEIFA quintile 1 (most disadvantaged) had a smaller proportion of services that received a higher quality rating as well as a larger proportion of services that received a lower quality rating compared to SEIFA quintile 5 (most advantaged) for Quality Area 1 (Educational program and practice), Quality Area 4 (Staffing arrangements), Quality Area 6 (Collaborative partnerships with families and communities) and Quality Area 7 (Governance and leadership).

The largest difference (four percentage points) was for Quality Area 7 (Governance and leadership) when comparing the proportion of services in SEIFA quintiles 1 (most disadvantaged) and 5 (most advantaged) that received a lower quality rating after reassessment.

Table 10: Proportion of services with a higher or lower rating after reassessment by quality areas in the most disadvantaged and advantaged areas

Quality area		SEIFA quintile 1 (most disadvantaged)	SEIFA quintile 5 (most advantaged)	Percentage point difference ¹⁵
QA1 (Educational program and practice)	Higher rating	30%	32%	1
	Lower rating	18%	15%	3
QA2 (Children's health and safety)	Higher rating	25%	27%	2
	Lower rating	19%	20%	1
QA3 (Physical environment)	Higher rating	27%	28%	0
	Lower rating	14%	14%	0
QA4 (Staffing arrangements)	Higher rating	19%	20%	2
	Lower rating	18%	15%	2
QA5 (Relationships with children)	Higher rating	23%	21%	1
	Lower rating	19%	21%	1
QA6 (Collaborative partnerships with families and communities)	Higher rating	23%	24%	1
	Lower rating	17%	16%	1
QA7 (Governance and leadership)	Higher rating	26%	27%	1
	Lower rating	22%	19%	4

¹⁵ The subtractions may be different to the displayed percentage point difference due to rounding.

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Appendix A: Methodology

Data collection and analysis

This paper used quality assessment and rating data extracted from the National Quality Agenda IT System (NQA ITS) as at 31 December 2019 and the data was analysed using Microsoft Excel 2013.

Note: To correctly identify the SEIFA ranking of a service, the service requires a valid geocode. As at 31 December 2019, 97.6% (15,592) of education and care services had a valid geocode and could therefore be matched with a SEIFA quintile. Of these 15,592 education and care services, 14,666 had been quality assessed and rated. In relation to the reassessment analysis, 9026 services had been reassessed and had a valid geocode at the time of data extraction.

Limitations

- Analysis in the research project is limited to data that is available in the NQA ITS. Therefore, other relevant data sets, such as population data, are not included in the analysis.
- Under the NQF, all educators working in education and care services are required to meet the minimum [qualification requirements](#). Similarly, all approved services are required to meet the relevant minimum [educator to child ratios](#). Educator qualifications and educator to staff ratio information is not captured in the NQA ITS (and instances where these requirements are exceeded are not recorded). Thus, qualifications and ratios are excluded from the analysis.
- Measures of disadvantage, as analysed in this paper, are limited to the SEIFA classification of the area in which an education and care service is located. This paper does not specifically analyse the effect of spatial disadvantage, for example the effect of concentrated areas of disadvantage.
- Children may attend education and care services outside of their local areas and the socio-economic characteristics of the area in which their service is located may differ from their socio-economic characteristics of the area in which they live.
- There are relatively few services in remote and very remote areas, which makes analysis of this variable by SEIFA quintile problematic.
- Service quality is measured by NQS rating at a point in time. The assessment and rating may have been conducted a number of years prior to the data being extracted from the NQA ITS.

■ ■ ■ Out of scope

Standard and element level analysis

A revised version of the NQS commenced on 1 February 2018. The number of standards in the NQS reduced from 18 to 15, and the number of elements reduced from 58 to 40. Although there is a high degree of congruence between the 2012 NQS and 2018 NQS, they are only directly comparable at the overall and quality area level.

Therefore, analysis at the standard and element level is only possible for services assessed and rated after 1 February 2018 under the 2018 NQS.

Access and attendance

The literature indicates that children from disadvantaged backgrounds (including children from lower SES backgrounds) are less likely to access education and care than other children (Baxter & Hand, 2013; Gilley, Tayler, Niklas, & Cloney, 2015; Harrison et al., 2010).

A range of barriers may hinder access, including families' ability to afford early childhood education and care programs (Bainbridge, Meyers, Tanaka, & Waldfogel, 2005; Liu & Anderson, 2012), and a lower availability of high quality programs in low-income and disadvantaged areas (Cloney, Cleveland, Hattie, & Tayler, 2016). Furthermore, children from lower SES backgrounds who access early childhood education and care programs often attend for fewer hours than their more advantaged peers (Gilley et al., 2015; Harrison et al., 2010).

This research project focuses exclusively on the quality of services, using quality ratings against the National Quality Standard as a measure of quality. Future research using linked datasets could analyse the profile of children attending high and low quality services, the types of care they access and the duration they attend per week.

Children's outcomes

The project does not examine the impact of the quality of education and care on children's educational and developmental outcomes. Future linking of attendance and NQF datasets with data relating to children's developmental vulnerability (e.g. Australian Early Development Census data) and academic achievement (e.g. NAPLAN) may provide the opportunity for such analysis.

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