



Guidelines for applicants - Excellent rating

Who are these guidelines for?

These guidelines are for services who wish to apply, or re-apply, for the Excellent rating.

Currently, services rated Exceeding NQS overall are eligible to apply for the Excellent rating. From 1 February 2018, only services rated Exceeding NQS in all seven quality can apply. (This change will come into effect later in Western Australia).

Why have an Excellent rating?

The Excellent rating is the highest rating under the National Quality Framework (NQF) and recognises services that have gone over and above to provide exceptional education and care, visionary leadership and a commitment to continuous improvement and comprehensive forward planning. Achieving an Excellent rating is recognition of a service's position as a leader in the education and care sector.

The Excellent rating is a unique feature of the NQF. The opportunity to be awarded the Excellent rating by ACECQA is only available to providers with a service performing above the requirements of the National Quality Standard.

The purpose of the Excellent rating is to:

- **celebrate** excellence in the delivery of education and care
- **engage and involve** families and the community in the profession's discussion about quality, and what is important in education and care
- **learn from and be inspired by** examples of highly accomplished practice, innovation and creativity in education and care
- **promote and reinforce the value** of education and care, and of the people who work in this sector
- **recognise** providers and educators who are champions of quality improvement.

What is the relevant law?

Section 134(2) of the Education and Care Services National Law gives ACECQA responsibility for awarding the highest rating of 'Excellent' to services under the NQF.

Sections 152 to 160 of the National Law set out ACECQA's role in determining a rating of 'Excellent'.

Regulation 71 of the Education and Care Services National Regulations sets out the process for an approved provider to apply.

The Excellent rating criteria

To be awarded the Excellent rating, you must show that your service meets three criteria:

1. *The service exemplifies and promotes exceptional education and care that improves outcomes for children and families across at least three of the following themes:*

- Collaborative partnerships with professional, community or research organisations
- Commitment to children that respects, reflects and celebrates culture and diversity, including place of origin
- Inclusive partnerships with children and families
- Positive workplace culture and organisational values
- Practice and environments that enhance children's learning and growth
- Sustained commitment to professional development and support of educators.

Your application must nominate at least three excellence themes, explain how each is supported and promoted through your service's practice, and demonstrate how those practices improve outcomes for the participating children and families.

2. *The service demonstrates leadership that contributes to the development of a community, a local area, or the wider education and care sector*

Leadership is about guiding, influencing and inspiring change. Leadership can be bold and far reaching, or subtle and local, and still be influential. Leadership occurs in many ways and takes different paths, from local networks to new technologies.

A service aspiring to an Excellent rating can be a leader in its community and/or the wider education and care sector. Your application must show how your service takes initiative to develop and model exceptional practice that improves outcomes for children and families, and is willingly shared to inspire and educate others.

3. *The service demonstrates commitment to sustained excellent practice through continuous improvement and comprehensive forward planning*

A service aspiring to an Excellent rating is not only exceptional across several practice themes; it embraces the responsibility of maintaining excellence and pursuing opportunities for further improvement.

Your application must show how your service will sustain exceptional practice and leadership, and continue to improve outcomes for children and families, over the three year rating period.

Is applying for the Excellent rating difficult?

While the Excellent rating is a very high bar, we try to make the application process as simple for you as possible. You will need to apply in writing, but your written application is only one way for us to gather information. We will also speak with you to make sure we have a good understanding of what you do at your service and why. We will also ask your regulatory authority for input, read your assessment and rating report and make other inquiries, for example we may look for information about your service online or conduct a site visit. If you are meeting the criteria, we want to find out!

Past applicants have commented that they have enjoyed the ability to engage in professional conversations with us about why they do what they do and have enjoyed having the opportunity to critically reflect with their educators, families, children and community about their service's practices and to celebrate their achievements.

Applying for the Excellent rating does not require you to create large amounts of documentation. Providing clear examples of how you meet the criteria is better.

How do I write an application for the Excellent rating?

You will need to write a statement that shows how your service meets the Excellent rating criteria. Your statement helps us learn about your service and to understand what you do and why you do what you do.

Your statement should give examples of your service's best practices, programs and partnerships. It should also briefly explain why you have implemented these practices, programs or partnerships, and what positive outcomes have been achieved.

There is no need to submit excessive evidence and supporting documentation, but if you have documents, photographs or footage that showcase what you do and why, please feel free to submit them. We will ask you for additional evidence if we need it.

Address the Excellent rating criteria, not the NQS or Approved Learning Frameworks

Being rated as Exceeding NQS tells us that your service has already gone beyond what is necessary to meet the NQS. For this reason, please focus on providing examples of how your service is exceptional (there is no need to explain how you meet and exceed the NQS and learning outcomes in the approved learning frameworks). Please also provide examples of how your service is a leader outside of the service, and show how you will continue to improve and plan for the future.

What do the criteria mean?

Criterion 1

Criterion 1 asks you to select at least three themes. You must demonstrate how your service is exceptional under each chosen theme and how outcomes have been improved for children and families.

To be exceptional, a service might implement unique, innovative or inspiring practices, programs and partnerships. Or, it might be that educators and staff are finely attuned to the particular and unique circumstances of the children and families who attend the service and adapt their practice to support and benefit these children and families.

They are able to clearly describe their practices and to explain what shapes and influences their practice. They reflect on their practices to see if they are working and seek advice and amend their practices to achieve better outcomes. Importantly, outcomes for the children and families who use the service are significantly improved because of the service's targeted practices, programs and partnerships.

We would like to hear specific examples of your exceptional practices, programs or partnerships. Tell us what you do, why you do it, what led you to do it and what outcomes for children and families have been achieved. If your practice has been influenced by any strengths, opportunities, characteristics, circumstances or needs within your community that you have identified, please tell us. Also tell us if your practice has been influenced in any other way.

Collaborative partnerships with professional, community or research organisations

Under this theme, we will be looking at whether you have formed genuine collaborations with other individuals and organisation to benefit the children and families that attend your service. Collaborative partnerships go beyond being just connections or relationships; both parties should be actively engaged to achieve mutually beneficial outcomes. Partnerships may be built to respond to the strengths, needs and priorities of the children and families which will result in improved outcomes for the children and families.

Commitment to children that respects, reflects and celebrates culture and diversity, including place of origin

Under this theme, we will be looking for practices, programs and partnerships that foster genuine inclusivity and understanding of diversity. We are interested in hearing about why you have committed to the practices, programs and partnerships you have and how they benefit the children and families attending your service. Examples may include how the service embeds families' cultures into the service's programs and practices, or shows that the service understands the community in which it operates and takes a multicultural approach to its practices, or shows that the service excels in the ways in which it respects, reflects and celebrates diversity in ability and needs.

Inclusive partnerships with children and families

Under this theme, we will look at whether children and families not only participate in the program, but partner with educators to make choices and decisions. Educators will allow children to initiate and lead their own learning and collaborate with educators and others in making decisions that affect them. Family's opinions will be sought when planning for their child's learning. In promoting inclusive partnerships with children and families, a service will demonstrate that educators enable children and families to make real choices and gain valuable insights from children and families.

Positive workplace culture and organisational values

Under this theme, we will be looking at whether there is a strong commitment to staff and that staff are enabled and encouraged to have equal and inclusive involvement at the service. We will be looking for examples of how all staff are aware of and contributing to unifying organisational values.

Hiring practices, employment conditions and staff supports will reflect the service's organisational values. The service's positive workplace culture and organisational values will result in an exceptional learning environment for children and families.

Practice and environments that enhance children's learning and growth

Under this theme, we will be looking at the service's practice and environments to see if they are exceptional and improve outcomes for children and families at the highest level. There may be examples of how the service has trialled, introduced or extended upon programs and practices to specifically target the interests, strengths, needs or circumstances of the children and families. There may be examples of how the service monitors and reflects on the impact its practices are having for children and families and how it makes adjustments to ensure outcomes are improved at the highest level. To enhance children's learning and growth, educators in a service must be aware of the capabilities and interests of the children they work with. Children are competent, capable learners when they are fully engaged and supported to participate in meaningful learning experiences that follow their interests. Practice and environments should be intentionally used in planned and spontaneous ways to extend on children's capabilities and interests to enhance learning and growth.

Sustained commitment to professional development and support of educators.

Under this theme, services might demonstrate how they have reflected upon the circumstances of the children and families and tailored professional development strategies for educators that respond to the interests, needs and circumstances of the children and families to ensure outcomes are improved at the highest level.

Professional development refers to the processes used to develop knowledge and skills in identified areas and assists staff in keeping up to date with emerging research and best practice. Staff within a service can engage in professional development through informal methods such as through in-depth discussions, sharing of ideas, reflecting critically on experiences, networking with other professionals, staff meetings and personal reading or through formal methods such as attending training, workshops, conferences or through mentoring. Supports for educators could include induction programs, systems of leadership or other supports that enable educators to thrive.

Criterion 2

Criterion 2 asks you to explain how your service has demonstrated leadership that has led to the development of a community, local area or the wider education and care sector. This is a different concept of leadership than under the NQS. Please only provide examples of how you extend your influence outside of your service and how the community, local area or sector has been developed because of what you do.

Remember, leading is more than just participating. We would like to hear how you are sharing your practice to inspire others, or how you are otherwise driving change. We would like to hear about any changes that are the direct result of your influence and input.

To meet this criterion, a service might consider analysing its practices and partnerships, and look for opportunities to share high quality examples more broadly, or otherwise make a difference in the community, local area or sector.

Criterion 3

Excellent services are champions of continuous improvement. We would like to hear how you will sustain your excellent practice through continuous improvement and comprehensive forward planning. Proving your Quality Improvement Plan (QIP) or strategic planning documents can be a simple way of addressing this criterion.

Choosing aspects of your service to write about

Take time to think about your service's practices, programs and partnerships; consider how they compare with other services and with current practice across the education and care sector, and consider any exceptional outcomes for children and families you have achieved.

Also consider feedback you may have received about your service from families, children, organisations, community members and other early childhood professionals.

Review your final assessment and rating report and consider which aspects of your service would be considered unique, inspiring, well above practice found in most services, or which allow you to achieve outstanding outcomes for children and families.

Once you have identified these practices, programs and partnerships, think about:

- 1. How and why these practices, programs or partnerships were developed*

Who initiated them? Why? How long has the service been engaged in these practices, programs or partnerships? Who do they benefit? How do they improve outcomes for the children and families who use your service? Do they develop the community, local area or sector?

- 2. Who and what these practices, programs or partnerships involve*

Do these practices involve specific educators? Do they involve children and families? Do they involve the wider community? What are these practices? How often do these practices occur?

- 3. How you reflect upon and improve these practices*

Do you reflect on these practices? How? How often? Who provides input on improving these practices? How do you know your practices, programs or partnerships are meeting their intended purpose?

Deciding whether to apply

You should apply if:

- your practice is unique, innovative or inspiring, and/or you are achieving outstanding outcomes for children and families
- you can clearly set out the reasons how and why you do what you do
- your influence extends beyond your service
- you are committed to continuous improvement.

If you find it difficult to address the criteria, it may not be the right time for you to apply. Remember, you can apply at any time if your overall rating is Exceeding NQS (noting from 1 February 2018 you will need to be rated Exceeding NQS in all seven quality areas to apply), but you can only apply once every three years. If you need some time to develop aspects of your practice, leadership or planning to meet the Excellent rating criteria, you should take that time before applying.

How do I make an application?

To make an application to ACECQA, you must:

- complete the application form
- attach your statement with examples showing how you meet each of the three criteria
- pay the required fee.

What if I am already rated Excellent?

If your service currently holds the Excellent rating and the rating is due to expire within 90 days you can re-apply for the Excellent rating. We will contact you to let you know when you can reapply. The reapplication process is the same as the application process. We are particularly interested in hearing about if your practices, programs and partnerships have changed since you were awarded the Excellent rating, why you have decided to do what you do now, and how the children and families that are currently attending your service are benefiting.

What is the application fee?

The National Law currently requires the application fee be paid before ACECQA can consider an application. An application is not complete until the fee has been paid. The fee is set by the National Regulations and varies according to the size of the service. It is not subject to GST.

The application fee for the Excellent rating is:

Centre-Based Service (Number of approved places)			Family Day Care Service (Number of family day care educators engaged by or registered with the service)		
less than 25	25-80	more than 80	less than 6	6-20	more than 20
\$219	\$438	\$658	\$219	\$438	\$658

The application fee must be paid in advance and can be paid by credit card, money order or bank cheque made payable to 'ACECQA'. From 1 February 2018 there will be no application fee for the Excellent rating. However, only services with Exceeding NQS for all seven quality areas will be eligible to apply. (This change will come into effect later in Western Australia).

How do I submit my application?

ACECQA prefers to receive applications electronically. If possible, please submit your application by email.

Completed applications can be sent to ACECQA:

By email: excellent@acecqa.gov.au

By post: Excellent rating
ACECQA
PO BOX A292
Sydney NSW 1235

What happens to my application?

We will email you to confirm your application has been received and will phone you to give you information about the application process and answer any questions you may have.

In most cases, we will organise a time to speak on the phone with you (and any key staff at your service you would like involved) about what you do and why you do what you do. We want this to be a friendly conversation that allows you to tell us all about the education and care your service delivers. We will let you know the topics we wish to discuss with you beforehand so that you feel prepared.

We will also contact your regulatory authority to seek their input and make other inquiries. We sometimes conduct site visits.

We will assess your service against the Excellent rating criteria and provide you with a written notice of the outcome of the application.

What information might ACECQA consider?

ACECQA must ask for, and take into account, advice from the relevant regulatory authority in making a decision about whether to award the Excellent rating. ACECQA may make other inquiries for the purposes of assessing the service, seek advice from people with expertise in the education and care sector, or take steps to verify the information provided in the application. We may also visit the service to undertake inquiries.

How long does the Excellent rating process take?

ACECQA must make a decision within 60 days after the application was received. This period may be extended by up to 30 days if ACECQA requests further information from the approved provider or makes any inquiries, or if the approved provider agrees to an extension.

It is important you ensure that someone is available to provide further information if ACECQA has any questions about your application. If your service will be closed for any period of time after you submit your application, please provide us with an out of hours contact number.

Please note the decision timeframe does not include the period between when ACECQA requests, and is provided with, information.

Will I receive information about the decision?

ACECQA will provide written notice to the approved provider and regulatory authority within 14 days of making its decision.

Applicants will receive written feedback detailing the reasons for the decision.

What will my service's final rating be?

If ACECQA awards a rating of 'Excellent', that becomes the overall rating for the service. The rating applies for three years, unless revoked. ACECQA does not automatically renew the Excellent rating for a service. To keep the Excellent rating, an approved provider will need to re-apply.

If ACECQA decides not to award a rating of 'Excellent', the service will continue to be rated at Exceeding NQS.

What happens if my service is rated Excellent?

Services awarded the Excellent rating will receive a certificate showing their Excellent rating. They will also receive branding to promote their status as an Excellent rated service.

Services receiving an Excellent rating may be promoted by ACECQA in its newsletters, media releases and website, and may be invited to be involved in ACECQA's conferences and other events to help promote excellence in education and care services.

Can I withdraw my application?

You may withdraw your application at any time before ACECQA makes a decision. However, your application fee will not be refunded.

Will the application remain confidential?

Information provided by a service will be handled in line with ACECQA's Privacy Policy. ACECQA may need to disclose personal information to some third parties, including regulatory authorities, to verify the information provided in the application.

ACECQA will publish the names of services and providers that receive the Excellent rating on its website.

Can the decision be appealed?

There is no review process for a decision about an application for the Excellent rating.

If you believe you have been unfairly treated by ACECQA, you may complain to the Education and Care Services Ombudsman. For more information, please visit:

www.necsombudsmanprivacy.edu.au

When can I re-apply?

A service can apply for the Excellent rating once every three years unless ACECQA decides otherwise. Providers wishing to make a second application within the three year timeframe should contact ACECQA. If your service currently holds the Excellent rating, you may re-apply 90 days before it is due to expire.

Can the Excellent rating be revoked?

ACECQA must revoke the Excellent rating if the service no longer meets the criteria or if the regulatory authority advises ACECQA that the overall rating level of the service is lower than Exceeding NQS.

Where can I get further information?

ACECQA is happy to discuss the application process with you. If you have questions, please contact us on 1300 422 327 or enquiries@acecqa.gov.au.