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Engaging stakeholders to inform policy developments in early childhood education and outside school hours care

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The application of engagement strategies to ensure democracy of decisions is increasingly valued and adopted by governments to ensure trust in the process and ownership of the outcome. This paper describes the approach and methods used to engage early childhood education and care (ECEC) and outside school hours care (OSHC) stakeholders in the contemporizing and updating of Australia's national Approved Learning Frameworks (ALFs): *Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* (EYLF) and *My Time Our Place: Framework for School Age Care* (MTO). Theoretical underpinnings of a robust stakeholder engagement strategy ensured a range of methods were developed to communicate with and encourage participation by the diversity of stakeholders who are invested in ECEC and OSHC in Australia – broadly defined as approved providers, teachers, educators, families, children and young people, regulatory authorities and other professionals who provide support and advice. A mixed-method, sequential 3-Stage design was developed to gather the insights, responses, and perspectives of stakeholders who provided, worked in, used, attended, or supported ECEC and/or OSHC settings. Stakeholder feedback included survey ratings and written comments, focus group and panel discussions, educator documentation and video-diaries, and the writings, talking, and drawings of children and young people. Evaluation methods focus on the number, diversity, and depth of stakeholder responses. In conclusion, we reflect on the usefulness, benefits, limitations, and effectiveness of our approach to participatory engagement to inform government policy development and decision making.

KEYWORDS

education and care, stakeholder engagement, policy, early childhood, participation, multi-method, outside school hours care

1 Introduction

Australian National Law requires licensed providers of education and care, better known as 'approved providers', to ensure that a program is delivered to all children being educated and cared for by the setting that is based on and delivered in accordance with an Approved Learning Framework (ALF) ([Australian Government Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009](https://www.education.gov.au/australian-government-department-of-education-employment-and-workplace-relations)). There are two national ALFs legislated under the Australian

National Quality Framework (NQF) (Australian Government Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009, 2011) for the education and care of children and young people:

- Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (EYLF) – for young children from birth to 5 years (Australian Government Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009)
- My Time, Our Place: Framework for School Age Care in Australia (MTO) – for school age children (Australian Government Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2011).

Recognizing the importance of the ALFs remaining contemporary and relevant to ECEC and OSHC settings, in 2021, the State, Territory, Australian Government and Commonwealth Education Ministers commissioned a review and update of the two ALFs. The purpose of the update was to strengthen their contribution to the objectives of the National Quality Framework and their value to the ECEC and OSHC sectors by ensuring greater alignment of the frameworks with current education and care programs, international practice, and research evidence. The update also sought to improve consistency across the two ALFs and, where appropriate, align them with Australian school curriculum requirements, and related areas of policy and practice. To achieve this purpose a national consortium, led by six key writers, was engaged by Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA), who are the national body who works with all State/Territory governments, to undertake a comprehensive investigation to identify the aspects of the ALFs that would benefit from refinement. Underpinning the investigative review and update was a robust stakeholder engagement strategy.

2 Why stakeholder engagement is important for policy initiatives and informed decision making

The adoption of participatory approaches in early years policy initiatives and decisions is increasingly viewed as a democratic right necessary for legitimizing policy making at local and national levels (Commission of the European Union, 2001; Gramberger, 2001; Lloyd, 2014). Participatory cycles of involvement resist linear models of policy implementation to support inclusivity (Commission of the European Union, 2001) and active citizenry (Barnes et al., 2007). The International Association for Public Participation (2015), p. 2 is "recognised as the International standard for public participation and practice" for community and stakeholder engagement and responds to the growing shift from governments and policy groups to engage with stakeholders in developing policies or new program initiatives. The association has developed a model - *IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum* (International Association for Public Participation, 2019) which supports organizations to involve stakeholders "affected by a decision to have a say in the decision-making process" (2015, 3). IAP2 argues acknowledging context-responsive engagement strategies means moving beyond one-dimensional methods of expert delivery of a question (s), to consider community motivations for engagement (internal or external), how responsibility is dispersed, and the nature of communications as contributions to impact outcomes (International

Association for Public Participation, 2015). Another model - the International Finance Corporation's (IFC), Good Stakeholder Engagement (International Finance Cooperation, 2007) model, is a sustainable stakeholder engagement framework with planning and implementing tools and approaches focused on building relationships and communication with community stakeholders to ensure issues are identified, information is shared, and consultation processes integrated. This model supports the formation of partnerships, stakeholder feedback, and reporting across the project, as well as the management of processes, timelines, and progress (International Finance Cooperation, 2007). Researchers in the health sector, such as Bird et al. (2021) note drawing on diverse perspectives serves to enhance creative solutions and innovative ideas as multiple sides of the same issue are brought to the fore. Therefore, engagement strategies and analysis must keep in mind differing community needs, ideas, and expectations to ensure interpretations and recommendations are reflective of all voices (Bird et al., 2021).

While there are emerging stakeholder engagements occurring in ECEC research (e.g., see Irvine and Farrell, 2013; Degotardi et al., 2019; Waniganayake et al., 2019) this is limited in OSHC research. Dissemination of the benefits of these collaborations are also rare but the few available studies that have documented this process, provide crucial insights into political forces impacting processes of co-production and dissemination. Beginning with the Australian-based study of Caldis (2014) involving Australian Geography Teachers Association (AGTA), the extent of the AGTA's influence on development of the Foundation to Year 10 geography curriculum was analyzed. While the influence of this professional body was felt, "the increasingly political nature of curriculum development" meant that as a negotiated document, final decision-making rested within the "political jurisdiction" of "each state and territory" (Caldis, 2014, p. 58). Similarly, the England-based research of Lloyd (2014) and that of Vasconcelos (2013) conducted in Portugal provide crucial insights into political forces impacting processes of co-production and dissemination. Beginning with Lloyd, participatory models of engagement introduced by the Department for Education (2013) were found to be problematic, with inconsistent co-production in published early years policy (Department for Education, 2013) and the top-down withdrawal of ministerial political support creating a lack of stakeholder input (Lloyd, 2014, p. 134). Lloyd (2014) argues this resulted in diminishing sector enthusiasm to participate in future policy development and public skepticism of policy proposal benefits (Jozwiak, as cited in Lloyd, 2014).

Looking at the work of Vasconcelos (2013), stakeholder participation via the National Council for Education (CNE) was sought in the drafting of 11 recommendations in 2011 for improving educational quality aligned with OECD (2006) Starting Strong II principles for children aged birth-three. While the public statement presented by CNE was met with overwhelming approval, change to a conservative government meant public dissemination of the public statement did not occur (Vasconcelos, 2013). While the politics of policy co-production to date appear somewhat disheartening from a stakeholder perspective, Lloyd (2014), p. 135 notes that despite political 'blockers' put in place to limit the strength and power of co-production, evidence suggests engagement in the process has itself "generated greater awareness among the early years sector of the power and potential of an alternative group-based influencing mechanism." Likewise, Caldis (2014), p. 58 offers some hope in

acknowledging the importance of bodies such as the AGTA contributing to curriculum development processes despite ultimate responsibility resting in the political domain.

Other researchers such as Degotardi et al. (2022) posit that engagement processes that allow for multidisciplinary voices empower stakeholders and provide avenues of communication sometimes not offered to families, young people, and children from diverse backgrounds. Effective stakeholder engagement brings together context responsive “strategies and processes” (Rogers et al., 2022, p. 1133) with purpose based on shared interest, change action, place specific concerns, shared practice and activities, or collective response to an external circumstance (Millington, 2010). Co-designed approaches with the end user involvement are also critical (Bird et al., 2021).

2.1 Engagement approach for the ALFs Update project

Adapting strategies and processes from International Finance Cooperation (2007) and International Association for Public Participation (2019) models to reflect ECEC and OSHC contexts, as well as the documented studies outlined above the engagement processes identified (see principles 1–8 below) guided the research approach and design of the ALFs Update project. These principles served to strengthen communication networks, collegiality, and engagement in the ECEC and OSHC sector by striving for positive outcomes for children and young people, and other stakeholders. The engagement process actively sought the views and advice of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples across all stages. The ALFs Update stakeholder engagement approach was values-based and guided by the following eight principles:

1. Inclusion – To maximize engagement with individuals, settings and organizations involved in or with an interest in the provision of high quality, inclusive ECEC and OSHC settings across all jurisdictions tailored and targeted strategies were adopted to encourage and facilitate diverse stakeholder perspectives.
2. Respect – In recognition and respect for diversity in education and care and the broader community, we sought to encourage and facilitate diverse perspectives to inform the ALF updates, with a view to supporting better decision-making.
3. Accessibility – Commitment to providing open access to user-friendly information and consultation tools to enable diverse stakeholder engagement.
4. Ethical collection and use of data to ensure all methods, collection and use of data were guided by the principles of the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2018a), the Ethical conduct in research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and Communities: Guidelines for Researchers and Stakeholders (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2018b) and the Early Childhood Australia Code of Ethics (Early Childhood Australia, 2016).
5. Positive and strengths-based approach – Our engagement approach was underpinned by a positive and strengths-based

view of the two ALFs, a shared purpose in ensuring their ongoing currency and relevance within diverse Australian ECEC and OSHC settings and communities.

6. Timeliness – Our communication and engagement strategies were embedded from the beginning of the project and integrated across all three stages of the project to allow multiple opportunities for stakeholders to review information and to reflect, consider and share their perspectives.
7. Transparency – Engagement with stakeholders in dialog connected policy, research, and practice to support informed feedback and decision-making.
8. Collegiality and collaboration – At the heart of the project, collegiality and collaboration underpinned all communication and engagement activities. Stakeholder input was valued and considered.

3 Stakeholder engagement approach and research design

The ALFs are generally highly regarded in Australia and, increasingly, as exemplars of good policy practice internationally (Barblett et al., 2021). It was important when refreshing these national frameworks that stakeholders were engaged to garner a wide range of perspectives from different user interface points. This encompassed insights from those who used the ALFs in their program and planning, voices of children and young people attending settings, views of families who utilise the settings and community members with connections to the sector and/or settings. Within the context of the 2021 National Quality Framework (NQF) ALFs Update project, ‘engagement’ meant that stakeholders can play a meaningful role in informing policy decision-making through the provision of proactive, timely and user-friendly information and multiple opportunities to voice their opinions throughout the three Stages of the project.

The Stakeholder Engagement Strategy informed a coordinated, timely and focused sequence of diverse engagement activities designed to inform and facilitate two-way communication about the ALFs Update, and to encourage and enable the participation of a wide diversity of stakeholders. The objectives of the stakeholder engagement strategy were to:

- communicate and build sector awareness of the ALFs Update project, including the purpose, scope and value of the project, and ways for stakeholders to have input into the policy decision-making process.
- gather authentic contextualized data from the ECEC and OSHC sector to inform the updates of the two ALFs.
- enable children and young people to have a voice in determining changes and updates to the ALFs.
- critically evaluate stakeholder feedback informed by contemporary research and practice.
- consult with the governments’ ALFs update steering committee and ACECQA.
- facilitate a dialog with the ECEC and OSHC sector that supports stakeholder understanding of proposed changes and a shared sense of ownership of the final approved updated ALFs.

A participatory approach to facilitating stakeholder engagement was adopted, including universal and targeted strategies and a mix of open-ended and focused engagement tools to identify gaps in the ALFs and invite new ideas. The project progressed through a sequence of three Stages. In Stage 1, the six lead writers (Hadley, Harrison, Irvine, Barblett, Cartmel and Bobongie-Harris) developed a set of online surveys for families, educators, other professionals, and approved providers to ascertain the strengths, gaps, and silences of the two frameworks and priorities for updating. In addition, online focus groups with state/territory policy and regulatory officers were held, and multi-modal methods were developed to gather children and young people’s voices. In Stage 2 a discussion paper with 20 recommendations for updating the ALFs, based on the analysis of Stage 1 data and a review of international literature and curriculum frameworks (Barblett et al., 2021), was developed and circulated. Stakeholder feedback on the 20 recommended areas was gathered through online surveys, written submissions, methods to gather children’s voices, and a series of Delphi panel discussions with invited representatives of sector stakeholders. In Stage 3 drawing on the consolidated analysis of Stages 1 and 2, the six lead writers who buddied with six practitioners wrote the draft updates for the EYLF and MTOP. These documents were piloted in 16 ECEC and OSHC settings across Australia. Feedback from the participating leaders, teachers, educators, and children were gathered through weekly video-diaries, pedagogical documentation and focus groups, and analyzed using qualitative methods to inform the evaluation of the updated EYLF and MTOP. This paper describes and reflects on the methods, approaches and strategies used in all stages to engage with stakeholders and gather feedback from them to inform the updates.

Table 1 outlines the engagement approach for the 2021 NQF ALFs Update project. Our strategy was informed by several engagement models including the International Association for Public Participation (2019) and International Finance Cooperation (2007). The mapping in this table shows that while the level of engagement with particular stakeholders varied, overall, the engagement included all five categories: Notify; Confer; Engage; Work together; and Enable informed decision making, which are discussed next. The goal of the

engagement was to obtain stakeholder feedback on analysis, alternatives, and decisions.

Stakeholders were informed, listened to, and received acknowledgement of their perspectives and contributions. In the next section, we outline how this was enacted for each engagement strategy category.

3.1 Notify

In this category the purpose was to provide balanced and objective information and disseminate widely with all stakeholders in the sector. This was achieved through a designated website and key presentations to stakeholder groups.

3.1.1 Website and email distribution list across all stages

Lee-Geiller and Lee (2019), p. 208 argue that a “website should facilitate democratic processes involving not only information sharing and delivery of better public services, but also deliberation and coproduction.” To both disseminate information and engage stakeholders in the consultation process across all three Stages the website provided clear entry points for ECEC and OSHC for family members and communities, educators and approved providers, and other stakeholder organizations. The website was designed to ensure inclusion, respect for and accessibility of diverse perspectives, as well as feedback loops that demonstrated how stakeholder engagement had informed the updates being made. The updates on each stage of the project were provided on the website, which included videos for the stakeholders, as well as animations pitched at children and young people. This information was also disseminated via an extensive email distribution list which included services and providers, regulatory authorities, teacher regulatory authorities and curriculum bodies, peak bodies (national, state and territory, large/medium service providers, unions, child and family organizations, and other key groups). Bespoke social media communication was also used to attract stakeholders to the website. ACECQA distributed these media

TABLE 1 2021 NQF ALFs update engagement strategy.

	Notify	Confer	Engage	Work together	Enable informed decision making
Components to engagement strategy	Deliver transparent and objective information to assist understanding of the problem, strengths and weaknesses and potential resolutions	Collect feedback on the problem, strengths and weaknesses and potential resolutions	Work with stakeholders to ensure their feedback and potential resolutions are comprehended and reflected upon	Collaborate with stakeholders on the decisions including alternative resolutions	Empower stakeholders with final decision-making and resolutions
ALFs methods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Website and email distribution (Stage 1, 2, 3) Presentations to key organizations and stakeholders (Stage 1 & 2) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Literature review (Stage 1) Authorized Officer focus groups (Stage 1) Surveys (stage 1 & 2) Stakeholder submissions (Stage 2) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Delphi Panels (Stage 2) Pilot sites (Stage 3) Focus groups (Stage 3) Children and young people (Stage 1, 2, 3) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consortium members and practice buddies (Stage 1, 2, 3) ACECQA and Steering Committee (Stage 1, 2, 3) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Discussion paper for stakeholders (Stage 2) Final report to Steering Committee (Stage 3)

communications through their networks as well. Ensuring there were feedback loops provided regular progress updates and a rationale for the recommended updates to build shared understanding of the decision-making process and shared ownership and transparency of the project outcomes and updated ALFs.

3.1.2 Presentations to key organizations and stakeholders in stages 1 and 2

These presentations occurred via key stakeholder meetings and conference or symposium presentations by consortia members which both advertised the project, disseminated the findings from the Stages so that stakeholders could engage with the process to ensure they felt informed and included throughout the 15-month project.

3.2 Confer

Conferring with all stakeholders was seen as critical in obtaining their input and feedback throughout all Stages of the project. We employed four key strategies to reach this objective.

3.2.1 Literature review in stage 1

The purpose of the literature review was to provide a concise review of contemporary Australian and international literature, empirical evidence and ECEC and OHSC curricula to identify potential areas for updating the ALFs. The literature review (Barblett et al., 2021) was disseminated widely as part of the Accessibility and Transparency principle and notify strategy, adding strength to the analyses emerging from the surveys and other sources of data informing the Stakeholder Discussion Paper for Stage 2.

3.2.2 Regulatory officers (RO) focus groups in stage 1

These are the people in each jurisdiction who assess ECEC and OHSC settings in relation to the NQF. Focus groups were conducted with the ROs to glean insights on areas for updating the EYLF and MTOP based on their interaction with services through the Assessment and Rating process, concentrating on QA1 Educational Program and Practices for ECEC and OHSC settings. The focus group framework was informed by findings from the recent National Quality Improvement project (Harrison et al., 2023). The focus groups were designed to capture the “what,” “who” and “how” in relation to the current strengths and priorities for updating in the ALFs which then informed the Stage 2 Stakeholder Discussion Paper.

3.2.3 Surveys in stages 1 and 2

Addressing the principles of inclusion and accessibility the surveys provided an easy to understand method for gathering feedback from a wide and diverse range of stakeholders. These included family members, educators and approved providers, and other stakeholder organizations, Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and Australian South Sea Islander peoples and communities, culturally and linguistically diverse families and communities and families with children with additional needs. Survey 1 focused on strengths or concerns regarding the current frameworks, and suggestions for additions or changes to the EYLF and MTOP, including top priorities for the future. Using the analysis of the data from Phase 1, survey 2 used a series of reflective questions, using

rated scales and open-ended comments, to gather responses to components of the stakeholder discussion paper which would guide the updates to be piloted in Stage 3. The surveys were translated into five community languages to engage culturally and linguistically diverse families and communities. The surveys were designed to collect demographic information on the participants, and characteristics of the ECEC and OHSC settings the participants worked in, provided, or used. This allowed for fine-grained as well as broad-brush analyses of the quantitative and qualitative data.

3.2.4 Stakeholder submissions in stage 2

In stage 2 stakeholders had the option to submit a written submission which provided an opportunity for stakeholders to present their responses and rationale for their views as a more formal written response. This option was used by individuals and organizations, with many responding to particular recommendations within the discussion paper. This approach related to the engagement principles of Inclusion; Accessibility; Timeliness; and Collegiality and collaboration.

3.3 Engage

Engaging directly with stakeholders was seen to be a critical component of the engagement principle of Collegiality and collaboration to ensure their aspirations were understood and considered. There were four key strategies we implemented for this stage of the engagement strategy.

3.3.1 Delphi panels in stage 2

Based on an adapted Delphi panel model (Crisp et al., 1997; Green, 2014), these panels brought together a purposeful mix of people with experience, expertise, and leadership in ECEC and OHSC curriculum, pedagogy, and practice to consider the Stage 2 consultation outcomes. These panels provided a communication structure for critical examination of stakeholder feedback to generate prepared and supported decisions. This strategy is linked specifically to the engagement principles of Inclusion; Respect; Transparency; and Collegiality and collaboration.

3.3.2 Pilot sites in stage 3

Analysis and synthesis of sector feedback on the recommended changes and improvements described in the Stakeholder discussion paper (Stage 2) resulted in draft recommendations for the pilot and methods for testing these Updates. To test these proposed updates of the EYLF and MTOP we worked with 16 ECEC and OHSC settings across all jurisdictions in Australia. This strategy linked to all eight engagement principles.

3.3.3 Focus groups in stage 3

At the completion of the 6-week pilot we conducted focus groups with the educators in these 16 sites to elicit high level practitioner informed feedback on the efficacy of the changes and improvements in the ALF Updates. These focus groups provided insights and advice on the implementation processes and challenges for educators, children, and families which informed recommendations in the final report for the States, Territories, and the Australian Government.

3.3.4 Children and young people in all stages

Respecting children and young people as informed contributors to the updating of the ALFs, we sought to uphold their right (Article 12, UN CROC) to participate in decision-making that affects their lives. The methods used to gather children's voices have been described elsewhere (see: Barblett et al., 2022; Cartmel et al., 2023) but it included engagement with children and young people of all ages (1–12 yrs), Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and Australian South Sea Islander children, children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds; and children with additional needs.

3.4 Work together

To ensure that updates were informed by the sector it was critical that we partnered with stakeholders in each aspect of the decision making. This happened across all three Stages and included two key strategies to achieve this. These strategies linked specifically to the engagement principles of Inclusion; Respect; Transparency; and Collegiality and collaboration.

3.4.1 Consortium members

A large group of 42 people that represented all jurisdictions and included both EYLF and MTOP experts formed the consortium. The consortium comprised six lead writers who were buddied with six practitioners, transdisciplinary and consortium expert groups, lead educators and their teams in 16 pilot sites. This group facilitated targeted engagement with diverse stakeholders across all three stages and supported the evaluation of all evidence (research and practice) to inform the final recommendations for updating the EYF and MTOP. The six practice buddies worked closely with the six key writers to write the updates to both frameworks. The approach taken is supported by researcher such as Farrell et al. (2021), p. 2 who argue 'research-practice partnerships' provide opportunities for "locally driven, collaborative approaches to research in support of educational equity."

3.4.2 ACECQA and steering committee

ACECQA appointed a Project Manager who was a key conduit between the six key writers and the ALFS Steering Committee. This position facilitated a collegial and collaborative relationship, whereby ACECQA liaised with ECEC and OSHC government representatives from every state and territory alongside the federal departments that assisted with the final decision-making process by - the education ministers for the relevant state, territory, and commonwealth government departments. The meetings were planned across the 15-month project and the Project Manager and lead Chief Investigator (first author) also met weekly to facilitate the engagement strategy.

3.5 Enable informed decision making

This part of the engagement strategy was about placing the final decision-making in the hands of stakeholders, linking with the Collegiality and collaboration principle. There were two key strategies implemented to achieve this.

3.5.1 Discussion paper in stage 2

The Discussion Paper identified current strengths as well as 20 opportunities for clarification, expansion and updating the ALFs. To

gather targeted feedback and enable informed decision making from a diverse range of stakeholders there were two Discussion Papers to ensure content was accessible (Principle 3). Firstly, a more detailed paper for educators and stakeholders working in ECEC and OSHC services identifying current strengths as well as 20 opportunities for clarification, expansion and updating the ALFs. The other was an abridged version for families that outlined 13 opportunities for clarification, expansion and updating. The two Discussion Papers ensured all stakeholders were able to provide feedback on what the updates should include. These were then tested in Stage 3 – pilot sites.

3.5.2 Final report and updated ALFs submitted to steering committee in Stage 3

To inform the Steering Committee and the Education Ministers the final report included the findings of Stage 3, the updated EYLF and MTOP, and a recommended implementation plan for the sector. This report enabled the key government stakeholders to make an informed decision about the final updates to the EYLF and MTOP.

3.6 Ethical considerations

In terms of ethical approvals these were granted by the University Ethics Committees that the researchers worked at (52021991827988 and 20210009395). Across all three Stages explanations about consent were explained and for children and young people, assent as well. All responses were de-identified.

4 Evaluating the effectiveness of our approach

Our evaluation of the effectiveness of engagement with stakeholders was based on the results of three strategies – (1) Notify, (2) Confer, and (3) Engage, which together were the vehicles for strategies (4) Work together, and (5) Enable informed decision making. Our evaluation methods focused on the number, diversity, and depth of stakeholder responses which are outlined next.

4.1 Notify

Two communication strategies were evaluated by their reach and response rates from stakeholders.

4.1.1 Direct email, social media, media, newsletters

In Stage 1, the Chief Investigators and Consortium Members sent personal emails to over 230 stakeholders from ECEC, OSHC, peak bodies, unions and child and family organizations and used their Twitter accounts and Facebook sites to promote the ALFs Update website.¹ Twitter postings were re-tweeted by recipients, resulting in 10,800 unique hits to the ALFs Update website in the early weeks of

1 <https://www.mq.edu.au/faculty-of-arts/departments-and-schools/macquarie-school-of-education/our-research/research-groups/approved-learning-frameworks-update>

the project (13/06/2021–4/07/2021). Users of the website were from every capital city in Australia (Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide, Hobart, Canberra, Perth, Brisbane, Darwin) as well as many regional towns. A total of 280 people registered their email through the ALFs website to receive future updates. Website FAQs were a key feature, with 188 unique page views and an 185% increase in traffic. Website users represented a diverse age range, with the majority being females aged 25–34 (see Figure 1).

In Stage 2, emails were sent to 280 contacts who had registered on the website for updates on the project. An additional 230 stakeholders from ECEC, OSHC, peak bodies, unions and child and family organizations were emailed personally by the six key writers and Consortium Members. Twitter and Facebook were utilized to promote the ALFs Update Discussion Paper and invite stakeholders to provide feedback via surveys and/or submissions. Newsletters and articles announcing the launch of the Discussion Paper were published by ACECQA, Departments of Education, and stakeholder organizations; e.g., <https://thesector.com.au/2021/08/30/approved-learning-frameworks-update-project-seeks-stakeholder-feedback-for-stage-2/>. These efforts generated 13,700 unique page views of the ALFs website during the Stage 2 feedback period (22/08/2021–19/09/2021) with an increase in traffic of 761.9% over the 4-week period. A further 243 people registered their email through the ALFs website, to receive future updates. Users of the website came from every capital city and many regional towns. The demographic distribution of Stage 2 users was similar to the distribution for Stage 1.

4.1.2 Presentations to key organizations and stakeholders

The six key writers received many invitations to present on the ALFs Update project from peak bodies and ECEC and OSHC organizations. In Stage 1 and Stage 2, the six key writers gave 22 face-to-face and online conference and symposium presentations that reached over 4,500 participants. These presentations not only provided information about the Updates and the ways in which stakeholders could engage and offer feedback, they were also an opportunity for stakeholders to share and discuss their opinions on the Updates and the recommendations outlined in the Discussion Paper.

The effectiveness of these notification strategies was further evidenced by unsolicited emails and verbal feedback from organizations and individuals who commented on how inclusive

(Principle 1) our approach was and offered their support in disseminating information about the project (Principle 8).

4.2 Confer

Four data collection strategies were evaluated by their reach and response rates from stakeholders.

4.2.1 Focus groups

In Stage 1, a total of 27 Regulatory Officers, early education advisers and other policy colleagues participated in three online focus groups with representation from the eight state and territories and the federal Australian Government. Drawing on their experience of the National Quality Standard assessment and rating process, the aim was to elicit their unique insights on strengths, gaps, challenges, and priorities for updating in both ALFs. These focus groups were facilitated by two members of the research team, using a loose framework of semi-structured questions to engage participants in a professional conversation.

4.2.2 Surveys

In Stage 1, the online surveys were accessed by a total of 3,496 ECEC and OSHC service providers, educators, families, and other professionals who provided ratings on the importance for their work, or their children of the EYLF and MTOP vision, principles, practices, and learning outcomes. They also rated the usefulness and their overall satisfaction with the current frameworks, and were invited to provide written comments to explain their ratings or respond to questions about priorities for change or other suggestions. Responses represented views of stakeholders from all states and territories, and all types of ECEC and OSHC services (See Figure 2).

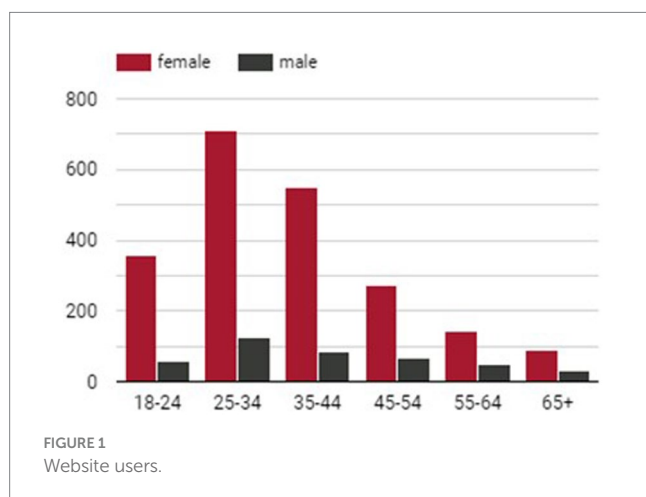
The Stage 2 surveys invited feedback on 20 recommendations in the Discussion Paper for updating the ALFs and were accessed by 2,637 stakeholders. The survey for approved providers (AP), educators and other professionals who were directly or indirectly involved in the provision of ECEC or OSHC services was completed by 1,623 participants. The survey for families who use ECEC and/or OSHC services was completed by 310 participants. Participants were representative of all types of ECEC/OSHC services, including Family Day Care (FDC), Child and Family Services (CFS) and other services, and all states and territories (see Table 2).

4.2.3 Submissions

A total of 65 written submissions were received, with representation from every Australian state and territory. Submissions were received from ECEC and OSHC, Peak Bodies, Registered Training Organizations (RTO), Individual/Stand-alone Services, Large Provider Organizations, Universities and/or academic teams, as well as from individuals. The distribution is summarized in Table 3, and identifies feedback received from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (ATSI) stakeholders. Note that individual submissions could refer to a combination of service types.

4.2.4 Children and young people

Engagement with children and young people was facilitated in Stage 1 by the 11 Consortium practice buddies and practitioner leaders who worked in ECEC and OSHC settings. A total of 102 children from



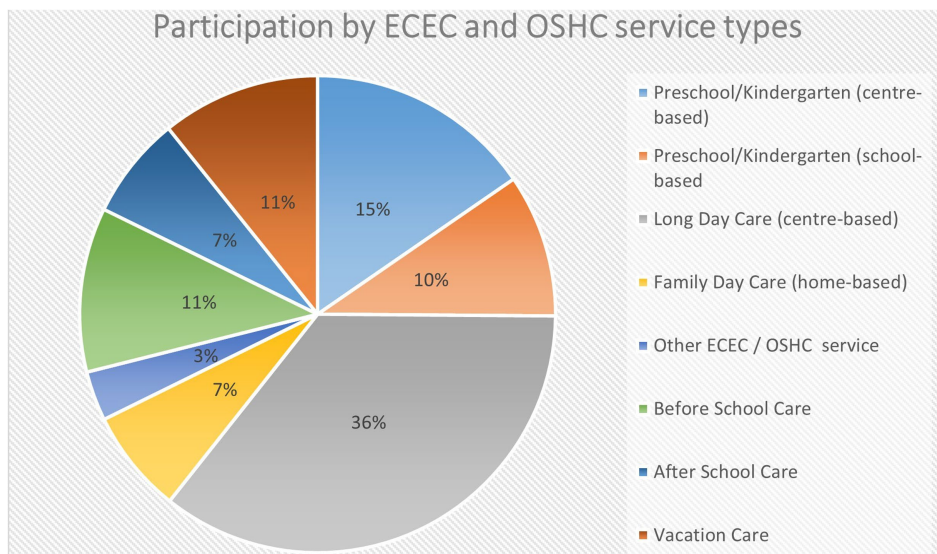


FIGURE 2 Stage 1 survey.

TABLE 2 Stage 2 survey participation by service type and state/territory jurisdiction.

	AP/educator/other professionals					Families			
	TOTAL	ECEC services	OSHC services	ECEC & OSHC		TOTAL	ECEC services	OSHC services	ECEC & OSHC
				FDC/CFS	Other				
Australian Capital Territory	90	69	13	7	1	15	10	2	3
New South Wales	718	445	186	72	15	164	63	83	18
Northern Territory	36	17	5	10	4	6	3	2	1
Queensland	227	113	76	29	9	86	61	18	7
South Australia	78	44	22	10	2	5	2	2	1
Tasmania	30	12	6	11	1	1	0	0	1
Victoria	302	205	59	30	8	29	24	3	2
Western Australia	97	76	15	5	1	4	3	1	0
Multiple jurisdictions	45	19	10	15	1				
TOTAL	1,623	1,000	392	189	42	310	166	110	33

ECEC settings, including preschool/kindergarten, long day care centers, and FDC homes, and 51 children/young people attending an OSHC setting contributed their perspectives. In Stage 2, children and young people from these 11 settings along with ECEC and OSHC settings across Australia were invited to participate. Participation was facilitated by their familiar educators, who were invited to view an animated video on the ALFs Update website that gave detailed instructions for collecting the children and young people’s voices.² A total of 506 children and

young people from ECEC and OSHC settings contributed their perspectives across the three stages, which included responses from children and young people who identify as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. The distribution of responses by jurisdiction is shown in Figure 3.

4.3 Engage

Three strategies were employed to engage and work directly with stakeholders: Delphi Panel Discussions, Piloting the updated ALFs, and Focus Groups.

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QZ0T9PQ33-g>

TABLE 3 Stage 2 written submissions by service type and state/territory jurisdiction*.

State / territory	ECEC services	OSHC services	Peak bodies	RTO	Stand-alone services	Large provider organization	Other	ATSI	Total per jurisdiction
Australian Capital Territory	3	1	0	1	2	0	1	0	4
New South Wales	21	17	3	5	11	6	5	3	30
Queensland	4	1	0	2	2	1	0	0	5
South Australia	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Tasmania	2	2	1	0	1	1	0	0	2
Victoria	3	1	2	2	0	0	0	1	5
West Australia	4	3	2	1	0	1	2	0	6
Northern Territory	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
Federal / multiple jurisdictions	9	6	3	1	0	1	5	1	10
Not specified	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
TOTAL = 65	49	33	11	12	17	11	13	6	65

*Individual submissions could refer to a mix of service types; also, ATSI representation is independent of the other columns.

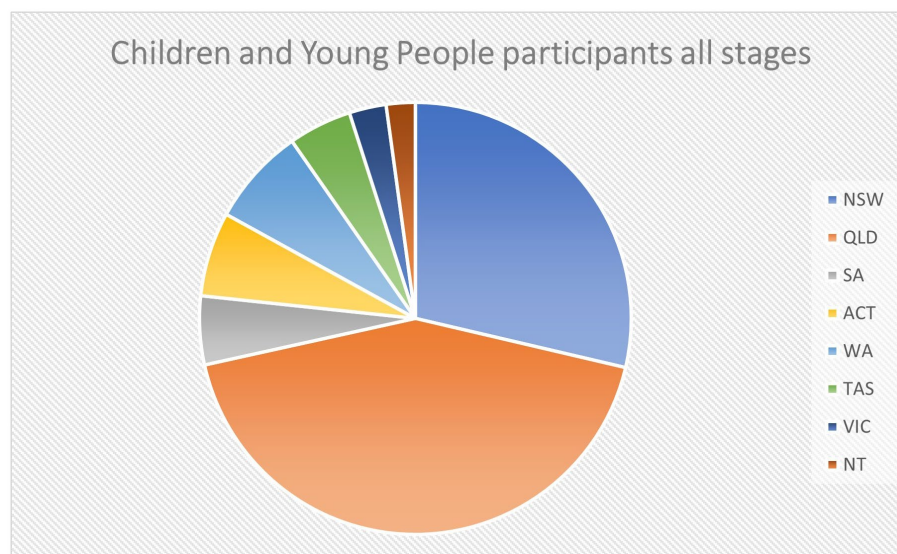


FIGURE 3 Children and Young people participants all stages.

4.3.1 Delphi panel discussions in stage 2

Stage 2 held two rounds of Delphi Panel discussions. The first round involved 146 participants over five panels, each with a purposeful mix of ECEC and OSHC researchers, practitioners, and professionals from diverse contexts (e.g., policy, peak bodies, unions) and locations (metropolitan, regional, rural) across state and territory jurisdictions. Key areas that were explored in the discussions were: critical reflection; embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

perspectives, learning outcomes related to children’s identity, and accessible professional language.

The second round was held with the six key writers and Consortium members (discipline experts, lead researchers and practitioners) to collaboratively reflect on Stage 2 feedback, including key themes emerging from the first round of Delphi Panels. Discussions concentrated on priorities that emerged in the analysis of Stage 2 surveys, submissions, and children/young people’s

TABLE 4 Service characteristics of Pilot Settings.

Type of Provider	State/Territory	Location	ATSI	CALD	Disability	Type
Not-for-profit	ACT	Metro	Yes	Yes	Yes	LDC
Not-for-profit	NSW	Metro	No	Yes	Yes	LDC
Not-for-profit	NSW	Metro	No	Yes	Yes	LDC
Not-for-profit	NSW	Regional	Yes	Yes	Yes	Kindergarten/ Preschool (standalone)
Not-for-profit	NT	Remote	Yes	Yes	No	LDC/OSHC
Not-for-profit	QLD	Regional	Yes	Yes	Yes	OSHC
Not-for-profit	QLD	Remote	Yes	Yes	Yes	OSHC
Not-for-profit	QLD	Remote	Yes	Yes	Yes	Kindergarten/ Preschool (standalone)
Not-for-profit	QLD	Metro	No	No	Yes	FDC
Not -for profit	SA	Metro	No	Yes	Yes	FDC/OSHC
For profit	SA	Metro	No	Yes	Yes	LDC
Government operated	TAS	Regional	Yes	Yes	Yes	Kindergarten in school
Not-for-profit	TAS	Regional	Yes	Yes	Yes	OSHC
Not-for-profit	VIC	Metro	Yes	Yes	Yes	Kindergarten/ Preschool (standalone)
For profit	VIC	Regional	No	Yes	No	LDC
Government operated	WA	Metro	No	Yes	Yes	Kindergarten in school

perspectives, giving particular attention to those areas where the proposed changes were considered more complex and/or where there were differences in views.

4.3.2 Pilot sites in stage 3

The Stage 3 pilot invited educators and educational leaders from 12 ECEC, 2 OSHC and 2 ECEC/OSHC settings to engage with the recommended updates to the EYLF and MTOP. The pilot settings included 11 lead practitioners who were members of the ALF Consortium and four settings that were purposely selected to strengthen the diversity of the pilot. Table 4 outlines the distribution of the 16 sites according to type of service (LDC – long day care, kindergarten/preschool, FDC – family day care, OSHC); provider management type (private for profit, not for profit, government operated); Jurisdiction; geographic location (metropolitan, regional, remote); cultural context (ATSI – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and CALD – culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds); and the provision of services for children with a disability.

A total of 115 educators and educational leaders participated in the 6-week pilot, and collectively provided 277 examples of their curriculum documentation, 91 video diaries, and 191 examples of documentation produced with or by the children and young people in their setting.

4.3.3 Focus groups (stage 3)

At the conclusion of the pilot, the six lead writers hosted 11 online focus group discussions to provide a forum for participants to share their views and experiences of using the updated EYLF/MTOP. The

80 participants included AP, educational and setting leaders, early childhood teachers and ECEC educators, FDC educators and OSHC educators.

5 Discussion and conclusion

This article has outlined a conceptual model for engaging stakeholders in updating and/or informing policy documents. Updating the ALFs was both a top-down and bottom-up endeavor. The Australian Government funded this policy update but also required the winning tender to have a clear engagement strategy that gathered diverse stakeholders' perspectives on what should be included in the ALF updates. The approach we took aligned with Farrell et al. (2021), p. iv assertion that research practice partnerships should be "intentionally organized to connect diverse forms of expertise and shift power relations in the research endeavor to ensure that all partners have a say in the joint work." For example the traffic to the ALFs update website, built specifically for this project, and the number of responses gathered across the three Stages illustrate the effectiveness of applying a systematic engagement strategy. Also having a consortium of experts and practitioner buddies who worked closely with the key writers and reviewed all changes made to the updated Frameworks ensured that all expertise was valued.

The eight principles and five categories that guided this strategy (outlined earlier in the paper) ensured that all activities were designed by the consortium to be inclusive, respectful, accessible, ethical, strengths based, timely, transparent, collegial, and collaborative.

Applying these eight principles across the five categories of notifying, conferring, engaging, working together led to informed decision making on updating the ALFs. This approach ensured context-responsive strategies to garner and motivate engagement from a diverse range of stakeholders which is recommended by [International Association for Public Participation's \(2015\) Quality Assurance Standard for Community and Stakeholder Engagement](#). For instance, in relation to inclusivity all videos included closed captioning and an Auslan interpreter to ensure those with a hearing or vision impairment could access the information. Another example included the family surveys being transcribed into five community languages (Arabic, Chinese, Hindi, Korean and Vietnamese) to reflect the diversity of the Australian population. These were translated and fed into the updates. Another example includes the six lead writers operating as 'boundary spanners' whereby they navigated multiple spaces within the sector to facilitate connections, engagement and feedback. [Farrell et al. \(2022\)](#), p. 198 argues operating across boundaries can "foster social networks, improve communication pathways" to facilitate learnings. Boundary practices ([Farrell et al., 2022](#)) were also enacted whereby the lead writers engaged with practitioners, peak bodies and ECEC and OSHC organizations. Fundamental to the design of this project was the inclusion of the six practitioners who acted as writing buddies to the six lead writers. This was another example of boundary crossing to reduce the research-practice divide.

The participatory approach adopted by the consortium to engage diverse stakeholders was also a successful method. The high levels of engagement and buy in across all three Stages provided the consortium with both qualitative and quantitative data that informed the 20 recommended updates. Although this is an emerging approach, previous research has argued for this approach for democracy and to legitimize policy making by including both bottom up and top-down voices ([Commission of the European Union, 2001](#); [Gramberger, 2001](#); [Lloyd, 2014](#)). The support from stakeholders, both individuals and larger organizations across all stages of the project illustrates a sense of citizenship which [Barnes et al. \(2007\)](#) argue is essential. The final step, which was the category of enabling informed decision making, was curtailed due to the timeframe set by the Education Ministers who approved the final updated ALFs in December 2022 and released them to the sector in January 2023. However, the six key writers are committed to sharing and discussing the updates with stakeholders and also disseminating the findings through professional and peer reviewed journals.

Although policy shifts establish the need for a clear engagement strategy and robust approach to ensure empowerment, the socio-political contexts shaping policy-making can impact effectiveness ([Vasconcelos, 2013](#); [Caldis, 2014](#); [Lloyd, 2014](#)). As an emerging area of scholarship in the ECEC and OSHC context, this paper contributes to the growing body of stakeholder engagement research in early childhood policy. We argue the steps we developed for universal and targeted strategies, with the eight engagement principles and five strategies guiding the processes of this project provide a progressive evaluative framework of engagement. This paper contributes to conceptualizing the effectiveness of an impactful engagement strategy which could guide future researchers and ECEC and OSHC stakeholders in policy development and revisions. This approach could also be adopted for reviewing curriculum and pedagogical

documents within ECEC and OSHC organizations to ensure local and contextually driven policies and practices.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

FH, LH, LB, SI, JC, and FB-H contributed to conception, design of the study, analysis of the data, and engagement strategy. FH, LH, and LL wrote the first draft of the manuscript. All authors contributed to manuscript revision, read, and approved the submitted version.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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