**Paradigm Shift in Qualitative Inquiry: Impact of Higher Education on students studying Early Childhood Studies (ECS) Degree in SE England and Isle of Wight** (10)

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Early Childhood Education and Care in England is provided for young children between the ages of birth to five years. Over the past fifteen years successive government policy has focussed on professional qualifications for those who care for young children, and the impact these have on children’s development and learning. This presentation focuses on the findings of two research projects. One was funded by the Early Childhood Studies Degrees Network and one was funded by the University of Chichester. Both projects explored perspectives of: a new undergraduate degree pathway which included the study of the Early Childhood Graduate Practitioner Competencies (ECGPCs); and, the impact of Higher Education on students studying the Early Childhood Studies (ECS) degree programmes. Previous research has already highlighted the benefits of a graduate workforce and its impact on the provision of high-quality education and care which achieves the best outcomes for young children. However, there has been limited appetite for policy makers to reflect the wider need for graduates in non-compulsory provision. Policy mandates that a level 3 vocational accreditation (equivalent to high- school leaving certificates/qualifications) is sufficient to work with young children (DfE, 2021), which contrasts with other age phases of education where a graduate level qualification is required (Mikuska, 2021).

The original aims of these projects were to find out what an early childhood studies graduate ‘looked like’ and what degrees in the sector offer employers. It also set out to evaluate the impact of the Graduate Practitioner Competences (ECSDN, 2019), a new path to validate the profession, offered by Higher Education providers. Research took the form of a mixed methodological approach which consisted of a survey that included quantitative and qualitative questions (number of participants 105), qualitative semi-structured interviews (number of participants 16) and five focus groups with early childhood studies undergraduates (total number of participants 26). Findings pointed to an appreciation of the skills and abilities of early childhood graduates by nursery managers but, once embarked on Higher Education programmes, Early Childhood Education and Care practitioners tended to look to extend their personal development and their careers beyond the nursery setting (Fairchild et al., 2022). The participants used their degrees to move away from the role of early childhood practitioner and into more ‘professional’ positions such as teaching and social work. It was not possible to evaluate the impact of Graduate Practitioner Competences, because the participants had little knowledge of this initiative.

As a result, findings constitute a paradigm shift in two ways: firstly, students begin to see the opportunities available to them and look for career development and progression to other careers; and secondly, the research took a different direction to that first anticipated. It began to focus not on the impact of Higher Education on practitioners in nursery settings, but on the perceived benefits to practitioners in terms of career progression.

**Key words**: Graduate Progression; Qualitative Study; Paradigm Shift, Higher Education

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