

# The Early Childhood Education and Care sector’sperspective on the Early Childhood Studies graduate and the Early Childhood Graduate Practitioner Competencies

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Executive summary

This report focuses on a research project funded by the Early Childhood Studies Degrees Network into the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) sector’s perception of students on placement, graduates in the workforce and the Early Childhood Graduate Practitioner Competencies (ECGPCs). 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 is sufficient to work with young children, which contrasts with other age phases of education where a graduate level qualification is required. Our research aims were: to explore the ECEC sector’s perspectives of which kind of skills ECS graduates need to have; and to ascertain how to embed these skills in the ECS degrees. We focused on the following outcomes: to consider what a graduate ‘looks like’ and, what ECS degrees offer to the sector; to identify implications for the teaching of ECS degrees and the inclusion of Early Childhood Graduate Practitioner Competencies within ECS degree programmes; to inform HEIs delivering ECS degrees to refine/tailor their offer to current and prospective students, in order to provide degree programmes which have better routes into employment; and, to open up an ongoing dialogue between the ECEC sector and HEI’s offering this vocational component of ECS degrees. We took a mixed methodological approach and conducted a survey that included quantitative and qualitative questions (number of participants 105) and qualitative semi-structured interviews (number of participants 16).

They key findings and recommendations are:

**Students on placement**

* There were a number of key areas that the sector felt that HEI’s should include in their ECS degrees. HEI’s may decide to review their provision in light of these findings and the revision to the benchmark statements.
* There were also suggestions about how students might be prepared for placement (e.g. an understanding of daily tasks) and the attitudes and dispositions that benefit students on placement.
* Some settings felt the assessments for placement could be more linked to practice e.g. taking a more practical form than an academic approach. This could allow students to link knowledge to practice.

**Graduates in the workforce**

* Those settings that employed graduates were able to know the important link between knowledge and professional practice. This research highlighted that reflective practice was an important component of the role where graduates knew the ‘why’ as well as the ‘how’. These were demonstrated in the skills and competencies highlighted in the report and link to the previous research evidence that highlights what graduates bring to the sector and how they have the potential to increase the life chances of young children. HEI’s can consider these comments when they develop and deliver their ECS and Foundation Degrees.
* Many settings were experiencing sufficiency challenges linked to government funding and parents’ fees. This impacts the ability to pay graduates a wage commensurate with their knowledge and experience. The impact of this is that graduates leave the sector and seek employment elsewhere or undertake Initial Teacher Training. Along with others, our recommendation is that the DfE should revisit the funding levels offered to ECEC settings and align these with those offered to compulsory education to ensure there is pay parity, and in order to retain staff that are having a positive impact in supporting the life chances of children.
* There is still an issue about the two different modes of education and training when entering the sector. Participants reported that in some cases there was a divide between those who had undertaken a vocational course and those who had undertaken a degree course. The idea of how the novice professional becomes an expert in their role is important as no graduate (regardless of their degree) is a fully formed employee post-graduation. Some settings acknowledged this and noted that it was their role to support practice development. Perhaps the DfE could consider supporting and funding an extended induction period similar to the Early Career Teacher year that is required for those completing Qualified Teacher Status. We realise this suggestion could be problematic due to the different nature of funding between non-compulsory and compulsory education but DfE financial support might mitigate against this.

**Knowledge of the ECGPCs**

* The ECGPCs are not well known in the sector. More work could be undertaken by both the ECSDN and HEI’s that deliver placements to raise this awareness and understanding.
* The ECGPCs are no longer explicitly mentioned on the DfE qualification checker (DfE, 2022a) and there remains some confusion about whether ECS degree students are classed as ‘full and relevant’. The ECSDN might want to lobby the DfE to ensure that they provide further clarity on this matter on the qualification checker and pathway link (DfE, 2022b).

Glossary

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Appropriate to early years practice | The qualification covers childcare and child development for the 0 to 5 age range (DfE. 2022). |
| Childcare | This has become the catch-all term for Early Childhood Education and Care in England. It became the common term of usage after the publication of the More Great Childcare report (DfE, 2013). |
| Childminder | Childminders offer professional home-from-home ECEC, looking after small groups of children of different ages and from different families. |
| Childminder agencies | Childminder agencies (CMAs) register childminders and help them with training, business support, advice and finding parents. Parents can use childminder agencies to find a childminder. It is not mandatory for childminders to be part of a CMA. |
| Compulsory provision | Children must start full-time education once they reach compulsory school age. This is on 31 December, 31 March or 31 August following their fifth birthday - whichever comes first. In the UK children join the Reception Year (YR) which follows the Early Years Foundation Stage (DfE, 2021). Once the child starts Year 1 the curriculum changes to the National Curriculum (DfE, 2014). |
| Department for Education (DfE) | DfE is a ministerial department responsible for children's services and education, including early years, schools, higher and further education policy, apprenticeships and wider skills in England. |
| Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) | All forms of education for children under school-age. |
| Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) sector | In this report the definition of the sector in this context includes Private, Voluntary and Independent settings, Maintained Nursery Schools, Children’s Centres, Nurseries attached to a School, Reception Classes, and Special Educational Needs Schools. |
| Early Childhood Studies (ECS) | “Early childhood studies is an established discipline focusing on the holistic development of infants and young children from conception to the age of eight. Early childhood studies draws upon research and professional practice from health, education, social work, psychology, sociology, philosophy, history, cultural studies, legal studies, politics, economics and neuroscience. Early Childhood Studies degrees enable graduates to progress to a wide range of professional roles” (QAA, 2022a. p2). |
| Early Childhood Studies Graduate (workforce) | “Over the last three decades, graduates have contributed to the development of early childhood policy and research. Its graduate workforce has taken on management and leadership roles and many are employed in a wide range of associate professions in education, health and social work; and/or are continuing with postgraduate studies. In whatever capacity they work, ECS graduates’ breadth of knowledge means they are well placed to advocate for babies and young children, their families and the early childhood professions. They facilitate the right of children to actively participate in their world, recognising each child and all children’s uniqueness. Their knowledge enables them to advocate for young children’s needs, voice, rights, development and learning while celebrating diversity and promoting inclusion.” (QAA, 2022a, p. 2). |
| Early Childhood Studies Degrees Network (ECSDN) | A network of educators offering BA (Hons) Early Childhood Studies degrees. Formed in 1993 its aims are: to continue to campaign for a high status early childhood graduate profession; to provide a critical perspective on and a forum for the advancement of appropriate early years policies, initiatives and legislation; to develop graduate and postgraduate level education, training and research in the field of Early Childhood Studies; to favour equalities and oppose discrimination. The website address is: <https://www.ecsdn.org/>  |
| Early Childhood Graduate Practitioner Competencies (ECGPCs) | Optional study route alongside the Early Childhood degree programmes. Students who achieve the Early Childhood Graduate Practitioner competencies meet nine competencies through a combination of assessed observations during their 80 days of practice, work-based tasks and academic assessment. Students who have graduated since July 2019 are classed as having a full and relevant qualification as long as they meet the criteria on the DfE website (see DfE, 2022a) |
| Further Education (FE) College (also known as College) | Further Education is offered to students aged over 16 at colleges of Further Education, through work-based learning, or adult and community learning. The majority of level 2 and level 3 ECS apprenticeships are delivered in colleges. Some are accredited to deliver both higher level apprenticeships and ECS degrees via a Foundation Degree (run over 2 years at level 4 and level 5) with a one year BA top up (level 6). |
| Full and relevant Early Childhood Studies (ECS) degrees | Early Childhood Studies (ECS) degrees that include: 1) an element of mentored and assessed performance in an early childhood setting; 2) graduate holds a suitable level 2 literacy and numeracy qualifications; 3) graduated from an institution listed as a member of the Early Childhood Studies Degree Network (ECSDN) (DfE, 2022a, DfE, 2022b). |
| Government funding | As of 21.4.2022 some 2-year-olds (subject to certain conditions) and all 3 to 4-year-olds in England can get 570 free hours per year. It is usually taken as 15 hours a week for 38 weeks of the year, but you can choose to take fewer hours over more weeks (see <https://www.gov.uk/get-childcare>)  |
| Graduate level qualification | Defined as a level 6 qualification and includes, for example, a degree with honours - for example bachelor of the arts (BA) Hons, bachelor of science (BSc) Hons, ordinary degree without honours or degree apprenticeship (with an exit assessment at level 6). |
| Higher Education Institution (HEI) | Higher education institution (HEI) is a term from the Further and Higher Education Act 1992. This includes: a UK university; a higher education corporation; an institution designated as eligible to receive support from funds administered by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE).  |
| Level 3 vocational qualification | A singular vocational (Extended Diploma) qualification – this qualification is equivalent to 3 A Levels or Extended Certificates, e.g. CACHE level 3 Diploma for the Early Years Workforce (Early Years Educator). |
| Level 4, 5 and 6 | These represent the three years of an undergraduate degree in the UK. See <https://www.gov.uk/what-different-qualification-levels-mean/list-of-qualification-levels> for further information. |
| Local Authority (LA) setting (also known as Maintained Nursery Schools) | Local Authority or Maintained Nursery Schools were originally set up in deprived areas. All maintained nursery schools are funded by the Local Authority and are required to employ a headteacher and qualified teachers.  |
| Non-compulsory provision | Before children reach compulsory school age they can attend pre-school provision (see definition). This may have some element of Government Funding attached (see definition) with any difference in funding met by the parents/carers. |
| Ofsted | Ofsted is the Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills. They inspect services providing education and skills for learners of all ages. They also inspect and regulate services that care for children and young people. Ofsted is a non-ministerial department. See <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/ofsted> for more information. |
| Ofsted Early Years Inspection Framework  | Ofsted guidance on inspecting registered early years and childcare providers under the education inspection framework. See <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/early-years-inspection-handbook-eif> for more information. |
| Pre-school provision | Approved childcare that is eligible for Government funding needs to be registered with Ofsted and be either: a childminder; a nanny; a playscheme; a nursery (private, voluntary or independent); a club; a childminder or nanny with a registered childminder agency or childcare agency; a school; home care worker working for a registered home care agency. See <https://www.gov.uk/get-childcare> for more information. |
| Private, voluntary and Independent (PVI settings | These are ECEC settings that are: privately owned (individual or as part of a nursery chain); voluntary e.g. established on a charitable (not for profit) basis with a voluntary management committee; and independent where settings are attached to an independent school. |

1.0 Introduction

This research focuses on the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) sector’s perception of the impact Early Childhood Studies (ECS) graduates make both in the workforce and on practice placement. 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 (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2008; Sylva et al., 2010; Bonetti & Blanden, 2020; Early Years Commission, 2021; The Sutton Trust, 2021; Archer & Oppenheim, 2021). However, despite the breadth of research evidence, there has been limited appetite for policy makers to reflect the wider need for graduates in non-compulsory provision (DfE, 2021). Policy mandates that a level 3 vocational accreditation is sufficient to work with young children (DfE, 2021), which contrasts with other age phases of education where a graduate level qualification is required (Hevey, 2013).

There has been a long standing debate about the lack of qualitative and quantitative research evidence informed policy-making in ECEC (Archer, 2020); this needs to be seen in tandem with Government funding (DfE, 2022a; DfE, 2022b) that is provided to the sector. The issue of funding is contentious as many settings have noted that the ‘free’ early years entitlement does not cover their hourly cost of supporting young children's learning and development (Lloyd & Penn, 2014; Social Mobility Commission, 2020; Swindells, 2021). Historically, due to the nature of qualification development (Miller, 2008), there are mixed perceptions of the benefits and value of certain qualifications in the sector where there is still a binary between skills/experience vs. theoretical knowledge discourses in ECEC. Currently the majority of practitioners follow a novice-expert model where experience of practice is gained as part of their vocational and professional development (Wenger, 1998; 2009). Set against this backdrop, there have been challenges faced by graduates entering the sector as there is a perception that graduates may have the academic knowledge but not the practical skills to successfully become part of the workforce (Mezirow, 1997; Molla & Nolan, 2019). In fact, workforce reform had been challenged by the sector as Payler and Locke’s (2013) research highlighted that “rather than raising the status of early years it risked replacing an experienced workforce, who had achieved their positions of authority after years of practice through an apprenticeship model of training, with less experienced staff” (p.133). This has been compounded by debates that surround pay, terms and conditions, with practitioners earning lower salaries than those working in compulsory education (Social Mobility Commission, 2020), the result of which has impacts for young children and sustainability of settings as qualified staff leave the workforce (Hardy et al., 2022).

The development of ‘full and relevant’ ECS degrees has provided opportunities for graduates to enter the ECEC workforce (DfE, 2022a; DfE, 2022b). Some of these degrees have included an equivalent of the NVQ3 Early Years Educator which highlights content appropriate to early years practice (DfE, 2019). Higher Education Institutions (HEI’s) offering ECS degrees have been keen to develop a graduate (level 6) practice accreditation to keep pace with research findings (see Bury et al., 2020). The Early Childhood Graduate Practitioners Competencies (ECSDN, 2019) were developed as a mechanism to assess appropriate ECEC practice linked to research and theory. Initially the Early Childhood Graduate Practitioner Competencies were piloted by a number of institutions. The Competencies have become popular with HEI’s offering ECS degrees as they provide a connection with graduate employability and were developed to ensure the levels of practice that showed best outcomes for children could be maintained. The Early Childhood Graduate Practitioner Competencies assess students' leadership, critical and professional practice ability at level 6, but unfortunately graduates from ECS degrees are still seen as equivalent to level 3 practitioners (DfE, 2022a; DfE, 2002b). The Early Childhood Studies Degrees Network (ECSDN) has made steps to lobby the DfE to change their guidance but this has yet to be accepted (DfE, 2022a; DfE2022b).

Graduates are part of a wider continuum of supporting quality practice to provide the best life chances for children as “too few educators have degree level qualifications with the depth of knowledge, skills and understanding that such qualifications, at their best, can provide” (Nutbrown, 2021, p. 4). As Silberfeld and Mitchell highlighted, “during the past 20 years, there has been a significant shift in the climate of HE in the UK, with a much more explicit focus on degrees as preparation for employment” (2018, p. 2). The focus for this research is linked to the implementation of Early Childhood Graduate Practitioner Competencies in 2019 (ECSDN, 2019) where revisiting the ECEC sector perspective on graduate qualifications and expectations of graduates is essential. This research will provide a contemporary understanding of current perspectives and will explore if the view highlighted by Payler and Locke (2013) has changed as more graduates are on practice placements and become employed in the sector.

2.0 Context and Literature review

In England, ECEC provision is predominantly part of a neoliberal market model (Lloyd & Penn, 2014) and diversity in the sector is replicated in the different types of non-statutory/statutory provision. Based on a number of research studies (e.g., Siraj-Blatchford et al. 2008; Sylva et al. 2010), the then Labour government implemented a ‘professionalisation agenda’ in 1997 which saw the development of policy including a raft of vocational and academic qualifications developed to postgraduate level (Miller, 2008; Vandenbroeck et al., 2016). However, contemporary policy has not followed the earlier graduate-led aspirations where the required qualification to work in ECEC is a vocational accreditation at level 3, which is equivalent to exit-level secondary school certificates (DfE, 2021). The split between vocational and academic qualification requirements has been driven by different levels of funding between compulsory/non-compulsory provision which splits the need for ‘care’ and ‘education’ (Moss, 2017). Much of this split has arisen from the prevalence of human capital theory and ‘schoolification’ where ECEC prepares the child as a future worker (Moss, 2017; Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021). In addition, the combination of the workforce composition and the limited value placed on working with young children has contributed to deficit discourses applied to ECEC practitioners (Osgood, 2012; Fairchild, 2017). This is magnified as ECEC practitioners are predominantly female and have historically been framed as low-skilled with low pay doing ‘naturally’ women’s work, reproducing an overarching assumption that motherhood is a sufficient grounding to work with young children (Mikuska, 2020; Fairchild & Mikuska, 2021).

The ‘professionalisation agenda’ was the opportunity for ECEC practitioners to attain graduate level qualifications and many have taken this option since these qualifications were established (see Osgood et al., 2017). However, to make the situation more complex, ECEC practitioners still need to navigate public deficit perceptions of the value of early years work against a backdrop of statutory curricular frameworks, the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), where regulatory compliance may impact on practitioners’ agency (Moss, 2019; DfE, 2021). This has produced tensions where ECEC practitioners were encouraged to undertake training to become more professional at the same time as becoming exposed to regulatory expectations (DfE, 2021), which saw the devalorisation of ECEC practitioner judgement as it was juxtaposed against a potential of raised status with no additional pay reward or promotion (Fairchild, 2017). Although research has suggested that ECEC practitioners have attempted to overcome deficit notions of professional practice, this has not been reflected at a national level but consists of local or individual acts (see Osgood, 2012). There are also wider discourses concerning ECEC being a primary source of child care for women who want to re-enter the labour market (Swindells, 2021). This has been linked to Government reframing of ECEC as ‘childcare’ (DfE, 2013), coupled with the need for ECEC to be a driver of social mobility (Stewart & Waldfogel, 2017). These wider discourses have impacted the perception of ECEC as skilled work, where the term ‘childcare’ devalues the importance of the link between education and care and how this can provide long term positive benefits for children (Van Laere & Vandenbroek, 2018). The results of this have seen ECEC practitioners under pressure from the effects of policy and austerity, even though they find agentic ways to support children and families to deliver on Government requirements from the policy agenda (Bradbury et al., 2021; Kay et al., 2021).

ECS degrees in the UK have now been established for more than 20 years; however, gaining recognition for their value to the early childhood sector has proved challenging (Nutbrown, 2012; 2013). ECEC settings are required to have at least one practitioner with a level 3 qualification, but the need for a graduate qualification (i.e., level 6) has not been universally accepted, despite research evidence of the impact of graduate practitioners on the delivery of high-quality provision (e.g., Siraj-Blatchford et al. 2008; Sylva et al. 2010; Bonetti & Blanden, 2020; Early Years Commission, 2021; The Sutton Trust, 2021; Archer & Oppenheim, 2021; Nutbrown, 2021). All ECS degrees (including those at undergraduate and master’s level) need to be designed using the QAA Subject Benchmark Statements (QAA, 2022b) which are a marker of quality and currency with contemporary research into supporting young children and their families’ lives. These degrees include a blend of academic knowledge, reflective practice and professional practice skills with some offering placements to support the link between theory and practice (Brock, 2014; Trodd, 2016; QAA, 2022b).

Unfortunately, there still remains limited parity between ECEC practitioners and those who teach older age phases. For example, ECEC practitioners lack the status, recognition, and terms and conditions of those who hold ‘Qualified Teacher Status’ and predominantly work in compulsory schooling (Hevey, 2013; Bonetti, 2018). Interestingly, this lack of parity has not significantly impacted on recruitment to degree programmes even though this does not always manifest itself in ECEC graduates taking up employment in the sector (Bonetti 2018; Silberfeld & Mitchell, 2018). The implementation of the Early Childhood Graduate Practitioner Competencies (ECSDN, 2019) provided the potential to ensure that ECS degrees promote the flourishing of children throughout society. Taking into consideration the development of the 1997 ‘professionalisation agenda’ and the maturity and transformation of ECS degrees, now is the time to go back to the ECEC sector to update our understanding of the perspectives that are held about graduates employed in settings. With the increasing need to ensure graduates have the professional practice skills needed for employment post-graduation this research focused on the perspectives or graduates in the ECEC and will provide novel insights into the current understandings of graduates in the ECEC sector.

3.0 Methodology

A literature review was conducted including research studies, grey literature, policy texts and media coverage. This allowed us to explore and understand the issues linked to graduates and placement students in the sector and how these perspectives were formed by understandings of policy and expectations for professional practice. This review provided a background for the data collection phase and was used to construct the data collection tools and frame the composition of the research participants. Data were collected in two ways: 1) via an online survey for sector stakeholders; 2) targeted semi-structured interviews with a range of sector stakeholders.

 3.1 Research aims and objectives:

The research aims were:

* To explore the ECEC sector’s perspectives of which kind of skills ECS graduates need to have;
* To ascertain how to embed these skills in the ECS degrees.

To address the research aims, the focus was on the following objectives:

* To consider what a graduate ‘looks like’ and what ECS degrees offer to the sector;
* To identify implications for the teaching of ECS degrees and the inclusion of Early Childhood Graduate Practitioner Competencies within ECS degree programmes;
* To inform HEIs delivering ECS degrees to refine/tailor their offer to current and prospective students, in order to provide degree programmes which have better routes into employment;
* To open up an ongoing dialogue between the ECEC sector and HEI’s offering this vocational component of ECS degrees.

These aims and objectives were addressed were addressed through a mixed methodological approach that attempted to capture breadth as well as depth of ECEC practitioners’ perceptions of: 1) both ECS degrees, graduates, and students on placement; and 2) the Early Childhood Graduate Practitioner Competencies.

3.2 Ethical considerations and risk assessment:

Ethics was a key component for this project and was considered on the following levels:

1. the ethics of engaging with the ECEC sector with regards to the time participants had available;
2. the flexibility required in order to engage with participants to: not disrupt their work with children; be cognisant of their location and working patterns. This is particularly important as they may not easily be able to leave the classroom during the working day;
3. the ethics of (re)presentation of participants’ views and understanding;
4. adherence to institutional and educational research guidance and codes of ethics and conduct at an institutional and disciplinary level (BERA, 2018).

The framework for our research ethics was underpinned by the University of Portsmouth’s research ethics policy and the British Educational Research Associate (BERA, 2018) code of ethics. Prior to any data collection, favourable ethical approval was obtained from the University of Portsmouth Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences research ethics board (approval number FHSS 2021-014). Part of our ethical consideration included the fact that interview participants may be former, or current students whom the research team may have, or have had, direct contact through teaching. To mitigate against this, we worked as a project team to explore any potential bias which could arise from participation in this project and ensured that we were not teaching the participants or marking any assignments they had yet to hand in. Additionally, semi-structured interviews were not conducted by a member of the team who was the Course Leader/Programme Coordinator for the degrees the participants were studying at the same institution as the interviewer. We considered the potential sensitivity of the types of questions asked and the way they were phrased. This was key as the research was concerned with building on the positive aspects of professionalism and practice that ECS graduates can bring to the sector rather than focusing on any deficit views of graduates that may have been previously highlighted both anecdotally and in the literature (see Payler & Locke, 2013).

Furthermore, to address our own potential bias, we conducted regular reflexive team discussions addressing every phase of the project, such as when designing the survey. This was particularly important as we are all academics that have previously worked in the sector (appendix 1). Our aim was to ensure that the survey was jargon free and the questions asked were transparent and clear. The consent sheet and information sheet were built into the survey and it was designed to be easy and quick to complete (estimated time between 15 – 20 minutes) to minimise impact on the time on participants.

3.3 Samples

We were keen to engage with the breadth of the ECEC sector in England as we wanted to ensure that multiple voices were represented in the data. To do this we took a purposive approach to sampling for both the survey and semi-structured interviews. In total, 105 participants responded to the online questionnaire; we also had 16 participants for the semi-structured interviews with some of these expressing an interest during the completion of the survey.

3.4 Survey

The first part of the data collection was a survey which was delivered via a JISC survey platform. JISC was selected on recommendation from the University of Portsmouth Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences research ethics board as it is GDPR compliant and certified to ISO 27001 standard. The survey asked a range of demographic questions, closed and ranking questions and had sections of qualitative data collection for participants to make comments on relevant questions (see appendix 2). Before we released the survey we did a pilot run to ensure the questions were clear, and that the research aims were addressed (Mikuska, 2017). Once the team was satisfied with the questions, it was released on 16th April 2021 and closed on 31st July 2021. Initially the survey was advertised nationally via Twitter and by ECEC organisations e.g. CACHE, Early Education, Early Years Alliance, and the ECSDN network. As the results were being collated it became clear from the demographics of respondents that the research would benefit from more intersectional representation. To achieve this, direct contact was made with specific organisations, including the Early Years Black List, the Black Nursery Manager and Men in Early Years, to ask for the link to be shared with their relevant mailing lists. We provided the opportunity for those who completed the survey to take part in a semi-structured interview by adding their email address to the survey and 17 participants did so, although they did not all respond when re-contacted about the interviews.

In total, 24 questions were asked, including: those with yes/no answers; those with free text; and ranking questions where the three most and three least important aspects were ranked. These questions were linked to: graduates already employed in the sector; perceptions of students on placement in settings; and knowledge of the ECGPCs. In the initial project design our overall aim was for 50 responses to the survey, in the end 105 questionnaires were completed.

3.4.1 Participants’ background

Within the ECSDN research bid brief projects were asked to consider the ECEC sector, ECS undergraduates and graduates, and HEI’s delivering ECS degrees. Table 1 details the background information for those who participated in the survey:

**Table 1. Background details of survey participants**



3.4.2 Participants’ qualification level

For those participants who complete the JISC survey the following Table 2 shows their qualification level, and the sector in which they were currently employed. This includes all participants who provided these data:

**Table 2: Qualifications of survey participants**



This table also shows that in the Private, Voluntary and Independent (PVI) sector 78.3% of participants have level 3 or above qualification while in Local Authority (LA) settings this level is slightly higher with 80%. It is also evident that in comparison between PVI and the LA sector, there are no significant differences in regards to the qualification level of those from the PVI or LA sector that participated in the survey.

3.4.3 Participants’ experience of working in the sector

Table 3 shows the number of years participants had worked in the sector. To make a comparison between the PVI and LA participants it was necessary to remove one participant who had 40+ years of experience and one participant with less than 1 year of experience working in the ECEC sector. This then showed the average years of experience of those who participated was 16 years 4 months in the PVI sector, and 15 years 6 months in the LA sector. This is interesting as it highlights that the participants who completed the survey had substantial experiences working in the sector. We cannot provide evidence as to why this was the case but could assume that perhaps those who were managers and leaders were the primary participants in the survey.

**Table 3. Participants’ experience working in the sector**



3.5 Semi-structured interviews

During the Covid-19 pandemic many of the functions of academia were provided via online platforms such as Google Meet, Teams or Zoom (Lobe et al., 2020). At the time of data collection we were mindful of the social distancing requirements for ECEC workers who had been classified as key workers in daily contact with children. This being the case, we used Zoom or Teams as the tool to conduct the semi-structured interviews (Archibald et al., 2019; Gray et al., 2020). All Zoom and Teams calls were recorded (with participants' consent) and used an institutional account (either University of Portsmouth or University of Chichester). The use of Zoom and Teams allowed us to consider participants from a wider geographical boundary than we would have had using face to face. The target number was between 15 to 20 interviews, as using this range of interviews had the potential for rich data collection that should provide some certainty of data saturation (Bryman, 2012). With 12 interviews there is a chance of 92% saturation (Guest, et al., 2006), for 16 interviews this increases to 90% saturation (Namey, et al., 2016).

There were a number of participants who had left their contact details on the survey. Initially these people were contacted and, where they agreed, an interview was scheduled. In addition there were purposive approaches made to key stakeholders and interviews scheduled where appropriate. This resulted in 16 interviews being undertaken, which were sourced from the responses to the survey and also from purposive sampling from a range of key stakeholders and ECEC practitioners (see Table 4 for background details). The interviews were semi-structured (appendix 3) allowing for key questions to be asked, but also providing the flexibility to ask probing questions or to allow participants to set some of the agenda (Kvale, 1996). Interview times ranged from between 30 minutes and 1 hour and explored participants' perceptions of ECS degrees and graduates in their settings. We were mindful of issues with wi-fi and sound being compromised during the interviews and were able to mitigate against this by ensuring participants had a quiet space and used a headset where needed. All interviews were fully transcribed by a University of Portsmouth approved supplier and full transcripts were provided to the research team.

**Table 4: Background details of interview participants**



3.6 Data analysis process

3.6.1. Survey data

To analyse the survey responses, the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software was used. It enables users to obtain statistics ranging from simple descriptive numbers to complex analyses of multivariate matrices. It also gives an opportunity to modify existing variables and create new ones, for example ‘divide’ and ‘sort’ the qualification level and work place of those who participated. The use of SPSS provided robust reporting and visualisation of the data as well as reducing the chance of making errors in our calculations. In addition, a T-Test was used to check analysis of variance which shows a statistically significant result in the data examined (Knapp, 2017; Field, 2018). Answers to the qualitative questions from the survey were analysed using NVivo 12, computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (QDAS), which acts as a tool in assisting researchers to organise their data (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013).

3.6.2 Semi-structured interview data

The use of NVivo 12 software improved the transparency of the analysis process, and assisted the organisation of the data. It is important, however, to recognise that the value of using both manual and electronic tools in qualitative data analysis and management, rather than prioritising one method over another, allows the advantages of each method to be exploited.

We followed the suggestion of using quasi-statistics (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013) to count the frequency of recurring nodes in deciding which themes to analyse (Braun & Clarke, 2020). The most frequent themes were presented below. The choices of what to include, and how to structure and present the transcribed text, as Riessman stated, “may have serious implications for how a reader will understand the quote” (2008, p. 12). Therefore the numerous quotes included throughout the chapter are intended to expose and document the process that moves from discursive data to our conclusions.

4.0 Data Analysis

The data have been analysed to link to the original aims of the researcher which were:

* To consider what a graduate ‘looks like’ and what ECS degrees offer to the sector;
* To identify gaps in teaching for ECS degrees and to consider how the inclusion of Early Childhood Graduate Practitioner Competencies might enhance ECS degree programmes;
* To inform HEIs delivering ECS degrees to refine/tailor their offer to current and prospective students to provide degree programmes which have better routes into employment;
* To open up an ongoing dialogue between the ECEC sector and HEI’s offering this vocational component of ECS degrees.

4.1 Survey data findings and analysis

4.1.1 Undergraduate students on placement

These answer the following two aims: ‘To identify gaps in teaching for ECS degrees and to consider how the inclusion of Early Childhood Graduate Practitioner Competencies might enhance ECS degree programmes’ and ‘To inform HEIs delivering ECS degrees to refine/tailor their offer to current and prospective students, in order to provide degree programmes which have better routes into employment’.

In the survey we asked the question: What are the most, and least, important aspects of the role for undergraduate students to have? The list below highlights the ranking (from most to least important), given to the survey statements:

1. Developing effective communication skills with children (92.2%);
2. Developing pedagogical practice with children from birth to 7 years (84.4%);
3. Developing the skills to build and deliver a curriculum for children (55.8%);
4. Developing safeguarding knowledge and skills (51.6%);
5. Developing effective communication with colleagues and families (43.3%);
6. Developing leadership knowledge and skills (30.7%);
7. Developing knowledge and skills in working with children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (25%);
8. Developing skills in working with outside agencies (multi-agency working) (6%).

We were interested in this selection and can infer that perhaps the sector felt that those skills least important for students were the skills that senior leaders or managers in the setting would undertake. Interestingly the need to develop excellent professional practice with children was paramount. This also links to the areas which had more similar percentages of votes for the most/least important. Here safeguarding, developing a curriculum and working with colleagues and families were selected. This preference for graduates being proficient in points 1 and 3 (above) could be because the EYFS (DfE, 2021) indicates the need for practitioners to develop strong professional practice skills to ensure children's development and learning are maximised, therefore this becomes primary focus for graduates. There is also a connection between the revised QAA Subject Benchmark Statements for Early Childhood Studies degrees (QAA, 2022) which cover these eight key areas, therefore ECS degree provision already mirrors the key aspects the respondents felt graduates should have the most proficiency in.

The item we were most surprised with was the response to support children with SEND; however this could be due to the novice to expert model of practice development (Wenger, 1998; 2009) which is prevalent for those on vocational courses. Here placement students need to provide evidence of their experience before they are able to perform certain tasks. Interestingly this comment from one of the survey respondents highlights some of the challenges of the length of time spent on placement:

* *We have a rigorous process for not leaving practitioners by themselves if they have been with us for less than six weeks. We won't sign off on any lone working procedures, nappy changing, or sleep supervision skills until we know them and trust them after working with us for 6 weeks full time. Often placements aren't as long as this! We never want our students to feel like they don't count, but they don't count as adults to a ratio so we can't deploy them effectively for our own smooth running of the nursery.*

A possible solution to this is to consider how placement opportunities are structured to ensure students and settings both gain from the relationship. This might allow for students to sufficiently demonstrate the skills and competencies needed for working with children and allow for more to be achieved.

4.1.2 Graduates employed in the ECEC sector

This section is offered as a response to the aim ‘to consider what a graduate ‘looks like’ and what ECS degrees offer to the sector’. Respondents were asked: ‘What skills would you expect from an Early Childhood Studies Graduate working with children in the early years?’. In the survey, we asked: What are the most and least important aspects of the role for graduates to have? The list below highlights the ranking (from most to least important), given to the survey statements:

1. Professional Conduct and Role Modelling (90.2%);
2. Responsibility for pedagogical quality (83.1%);
3. Developing and supporting changes in practice (84.9%);
4. Innovation in practice (72.6%);
5. Taking a lead role in Safeguarding for children and families (37.3%);
6. Leading implementation of policies in practice (enacting policies) (31.1%);
7. Development of policies (policy design) (9.8%);
8. Public image and marketing of your setting for having a graduate leader (4%).

These points are illuminating as this alludes to an expectation that a graduate can make the necessary links between theory and practice and can take a role in developing pedagogical quality. It is pleasing to see that the sector has had a positive response to graduates in practice especially in light of the research that highlights there can be increases in quality practice for children when graduates are employed (e.g., Siraj-Blatchford et al. 2008; Sylva et al. 2010; Bonetti & Blanden, 2020; Early Years Commission, 2021; The Sutton Trust, 2021; Archer & Oppenheim, 2021; Nutbrown, 2021). Qualitative comments also highlighted some of the challenges of having a graduate employed in the setting:

* *Cost of wages as they need to be paid at a higher rate or it is difficult to attract good quality candidates.*
* *Graduates often are not as ready for the work-place role where we would expect or require them to be in a leadership or management role.*
* *Sometimes other professionals who have worked at the setting longer, or may not have the same level of qualifications do not appreciate the ideas of someone newer even though that person is an Early Childhood Graduate.*

These debates are not new; in fact we cover some of these in more detail below. These are also reflected in research and policy reports and can be linked to wider discourses on the value and status of working with young children (see Osgood, 2012; Fairchild, 2017; Moss, 2017; Roberts-Holmes & Moss, 2021; Swindells, 2021).

4.1.3 Frequency data for both students and graduate requirements

As part of our commitment to ‘open up an ongoing dialogue between the ECEC sector and HEI’s offering this vocational component of ECS degrees’ we were interested in the key features that those working in the sector felt were important for students and graduates. During this analysis we performed searches to highlight frequency of key words as this allowed for an understanding of the important areas that the respondents were interested in. We propose that the keywords that were identified by the SPSS programme are an important indicator of the skills and knowledge the ECEC sector expects from those who have achieved an ECS degree (or Foundation Degree and level 6 Top Up). These are the knowledge and skills that should underpin ECS degrees to support the needs of the sector:

* Clear understanding of child development theories, and behaviour management knowledge;
* Good understanding and knowledge of current relevant legislation;
* Clear and good communication skills with parents, children and staff;
* Business management skills;
* Knowledge of first aid and safeguarding issues;
* Critical thinker;
* Knowledge of how to observe, assess and plan;
* Patience;
* Empathy.

This list is not exhaustive but interestingly these areas have been highlighted in the revised QAA Subject Benchmark Statements for Early Childhood Studies degrees (QAA, 2022). They are also the primary focus of the ECGPCs (ECSDN, 2019; QAA, 2022). This is a positive message for HEI’s who are delivering, developing, and re-validating ECS degrees as a focus on the Benchmark Statements does indicate that the academic content of the degrees fits the needs of the sector. There also needs to be consideration of practical elements to the teaching and learning to ensure that students and graduates can develop their professional practice skills with young children, parents and staff. If placements are not offered then HEI’s may need to find creative ways to support students to achieve these professional practice skills as this will support future graduate employability.

4.1.4 Awareness of the ECGPCs

The data from the survey which focused the awareness of the ECGPCs is detailed in Table 5:

**Table 5: Awareness of the ECGPCs**



This demonstrates that of the 105 respondents 59% had not heard of the ECGPCs, with 28% aware of them and 13% may be aware of them but were not sure. The ECGPCs were released in 2019 and have been incorporated into degree programmes. There has been work completed by the ECSDN Executive to have the ECGPCs recognised by the DfE and this was achieved where those holding an ECS degree that has validated the ECGPCs could be classed as ‘full and relevant’ at level 3. In all cases degrees must be consistent with the QAA subject benchmark statement for ECS and include an element of assessed performance in an early years setting (DfE, 2022a; DfE2022b). At the time of data collection there had not been a significant push from ECSDN to make the sector aware of these new placement competencies. However, since this date, there has been a promotion in *Early Years Educator* to highlight the background to and importance of the ECGPCs. Table 5 data show that further awareness raising would be beneficial so that the ECEC sector is aware of the benefits of the ECGPCs, particularly in light of the findings from the frequency data for both students and graduate requirements.

4.2 Semi-structured interview data findings and analysis

4.2.1 Students on placement

These answer the following two aims: ‘To identify implications for the teaching of ECS degrees and the inclusion of Early Childhood Graduate Practitioner Competencies within ECS degree programmes’ and ‘To inform HEIs delivering ECS degrees to refine/tailor their offer to current and prospective students, in order to provide degree programmes which have better routes into employment’. Participant quotes included:

* *I mean, every Early Years Childhood Studies degree is run slightly differently from university to university, and universities can sign up for the graduate competencies. It now means that students have placement in their first, second, and third year…so there’s much more experience and so therefore the degree becomes far more applied and hopefully more relevant when they get out into that work setting wherever that might be.*
* *Early Childhood studies students can bring their learning into the setting and update staff on research they have come across regarding the sector. These students are often more motivated to engage with children and know to wait to be invited into children's play rather than intrude.*
* *Enthusiastic and willing to ‘have a go’ students, gain so much more. They should not worry so much about being perfect but understand that the situation is often the same each time it occurs.*
* *Having fresh eyes and ideas, being up to date with current knowledge and understanding of children and their development, having confidence to set up activities and carry out tasks when asked. Confident with the children and being a role model.*

These comments highlight the benefits to the sector of having undergraduates on placement. They show that for the student coming into the setting there can be a chance to question existing practice and also to develop innovations and bring in new or up to date ways of developing practice. Conversely, some of the comments highlight that the ways in which students approach colleagues to develop new practice is not always well received due to the perception that experience is just as important as knowledge (Payler & Locke, 2013). The key messages here are also around student dispositions and attitudes when they arrive at placement; being open and enthusiastic can enhance the learning experience for children staff and the placement student. One of the comments noted that the role of the placement was to refine and support professional practice skills which highlights the importance of students developing their knowledge that can then be applied on placement.

 Some participants felt that Universities could do more to prepare their students for placement and also provide assessments that are meaningful for work in the sector after graduation. Comments included:

* *It’s probably doing things [assessments] that you would do as a practitioner. So rather than writing a report, you’d actually do an activity plan or a reflective piece, or you know, a long observation, or some sort of note or something, so that actually, the placement then becomes more akin to what actually happens in the setting, with the assessment being based on that rather than another academic piece of work.*

This is an important point particularly to support student employability. If the assessments reflect actual practice situations then the link between knowledge and how to apply this in practice supports transition to employment. Work could also be done to prepare students for personal care and other daily routines that are an expected part of the role e.g. toileting, nappy changing, lunch routines etc. Preparation can also help when preparing students for developing their pedagogy or working and leading teams:

* *University expectations for placement activities don't always marry up to early years pedagogy and practice. Most universities will allow the student to adapt but some force elaborate sessions which children do not respond well to which greatly affects the confidence of the student. It can take some students some time to feel confident/adapt to leading a larger staff group.*

Other comments included the need to provide leadership and management capabilities for students and for them to understand how to run a business e.g. budgeting, time allocation, employing staff, funding streams. These comments are key as the majority of settings are PVI and having these kinds of business management skills is important.

 There are also challenges of having a student on placement. Sometimes this is because the student does not always gel with the staff team and relationships can break down. This can impact the students’ confidence but can also result in students leaving the placement early. Research has indicated the pressure that the sector is facing due to staffing, funding and sufficiency issues (Social Mobility Commission, 2020; Swindells, 2021; Hardy et al., 2022). This comment indicates some of these challenges:

* *Generally just the time factor, there is not always the time or the staff to be able to support these students in the best way possible…time to mentor students and fill in all the paperwork, as well as time to positively support their growth.*

These challenges also manifest in the parity of pay, terms and conditions for students once they have graduated. Participants suggested that some students who come to work in settings post-graduation cannot afford to stay in the settings longer term with their only option being to leave and work elsewhere. This phenomenon is also mirrored for graduates working in the sector (see 4.2.2.1).

4.2.2 Graduates employed in the sector

The following section responded to the aim ‘To consider what a graduate ‘looks like’ and what ECS degrees offer to the sector’. From the interview transcripts, we included quotes that are from an anonymised data set, and therefore participants could not be identified. A number of key themes emerged using NVivo 12. These were:

* Theme 1: Qualifications develop a strong knowledge base;
* Theme 2: Graduates skills, reflective practice and the ability to work with children, their families and staff;
* Theme 3: Qualifications and professional practice.

4.2.2.1 Theme 1: Qualifications develop a strong knowledge base

Within this theme there were a range of comments about the link between qualifications, knowledge and practice skills. It is important to revisit this link in light of Payler and Locke’s (2013) original research which highlighted that there were tensions in the sector about those who had degree knowledge and those whose knowledge base came from vocational training. The results from our research do indicate that there has been some movement in the ECEC sector’s perceptions of graduate knowledge and skills. In reality this should be expected due to the increase in the number of ECS degrees and graduates who have been working in the sector since ECS degrees’ inception 20 years ago (Silberfeld & Mitchell, 2018; Bonetti & Blanden, 2020; Early Years Commission, 2021; The Sutton Trust, 2021; Archer & Oppenheim, 2021; Nutbrown, 2021). Quotes from participants highlighted:

* *[Graduates have a] high level of knowledge and willingness to learn, because it’s something that I’ve come across sometimes is that they [nursery managers] see that you’ve got a level six or level seven and they somehow expect the experience to match the qualification... The knowledge element is very important, to know why we are doing things.*
* *It opens your mind-set, and you get a chance to kind of take in that theoretical knowledge and put that into practice but also as part of the degree you have to kind of reflect and you have to kind of take little snippets from here, there, and everywhere and build your own kind of philosophy around early years.*
* *Our graduates tend to be a little bit more, why are they doing that, and is it because of this, this, and this, shouldn’t we do that with them then because of this, and just that linking to other areas of life as their analysis, and therefore they do other things, more creative things for those children from that thought process.*
* *The more training you’ve had and the more in-depth your training has been, the more likely you are to pick up on something quickly and deal with it quickly and not leave children struggling for too long.*

There were also comments about the need to have the professional practice capacity as in some cases there were comparisons with the level 3 practice and how this is needed for graduates (see theme 3 below).

Overall what the data indicate is that ECS degree qualifications boost the individual’s knowledge base and that this is important as good professional practice needs to combine the ‘how you do things’ with the ‘why you do things’. This depth of knowledge can allow for graduates to build their own ECEC philosophies and connect with children, families and staff. In many cases participants noted that the higher levels of knowledge translated into graduates being more confident in relation to practice (Silberfeld & Mitchell, 2018; Bonetti & Blanden, 2020; Early Years Commission, 2021; The Sutton Trust, 2021; Archer & Oppenheim, 2021; Nutbrown, 2021). This was attributed to graduates being more open-minded in relation to theory and how this can be applied to support children’s development and learning. In fact, a number of the participants indicate that the graduates in their setting have more drive and understanding of children’s learning; this allowed for greater breadth in the ways they developed ideas and how these were then implemented to narrow the gaps in learning to benefit all children.

There were a number of challenges with graduates in the sector and these included comments about the longevity of service from graduates in the sector after they had gained their degree. These were linked to low pay and status concerns that have already been flagged in recent reports (Social Mobility Commission, 2020; Hardy et al., 2022). One of the biggest issues with retention is the impact of low pay and the draw for those with a degree to consider a move to Initial Teacher Training or other roles in or outside of the sector (Hevey, 2013; Bonetti, 2018). Some felt that staff with degrees used their time in the setting as a stepping stone to other jobs and linked this to low pay and limited promotion prospects.

4.2.2.2 Theme 2: Graduates’ skills, reflective practice and the ability to work with children, their families and staff.

Reflective practice is the cornerstone of any ECS degree programme (Brock, 2014; Trodd, 2016; QAA, 2022b). It has been used as a way for students to make tangible connections with theory and practice via thinking about possible critical incidents and the responses that are needed in these scenarios. Comments from participants included:

* *Reflective practice would be the most important thing, to understand the good practice, role modelling to other staff as well as to the children, mainly the ability to explain why they’re doing what they’re doing, and link that practice to theory. You know it’s that, I see the main difference between the people that we have who are graduates and the people who aren’t.*
* *[Graduates have] a really innate ability to be reflective… to be able to say, “That didn’t go well, actually. That was awful. I’m not going to do that again. Why didn’t that go well?”...Sometimes people are scared of having those conversations…when they’ve learned at a slightly higher level or a higher level, it does enable them to really sort of have those reflective skills which we all know is so important.*
* *For the graduates it’s that reflective thinking, it’s that knowing why they’re doing what they’re doing. The apprentices are really good on a day-to-day basis, you know, they get the job done, they know those children, they know how the routine works, all of it, but there’s definitely like a wall, they don’t go through that other side towards scaffolding learning to really…they know that child so well, but they don’t then take that on to really think what that child needs.*

 The comments in this theme are linked to those that discuss the importance of the knowledge base that degrees give practitioners. Being able to successfully reflect requires a level of self-awareness that can promote ways to understand positionality and self-improvement. This can leave practitioners feeling vulnerable, especially when they are questioning themself and their actions. However, part of degree programmes is the ability to develop a critically analytical approach to understanding theory and applying this to professional practice. Students are also provided with regular feedback and critique on their own understanding and encouraged to further develop and read widely (QAA, 2022b). These types of skills and dispositions produce a practitioner who can problem solve and analyse ways to develop their own, and others, professional practice (Brock, 2014; Trodd, 2016). It could be inferred that this higher level of understanding that is fostered in degree programmes translates to more critically reflective and reflexive practitioners and this is demonstrated in the quotes above. It is also important to recognise that professional practice skills do take time to fully develop and this will be explored in the final theme below.

4.2.2.3 Theme 3: Qualifications and professional practice

Working in ECEC requires application of knowledge to practice. As Nutbrown’s (2021) research indicated, graduates are part of a wider continuum of supporting quality practice to provide the best life chances for children. She highlighted that “too few educators have degree level qualifications with the depth of knowledge, skills and understanding that such qualifications, at their best, can provide” (Nutbrown, 2021, p. 4). Her comment is important to consider as it sits against a backdrop of the limited perceptions of ECEC as skilled work under the umbrella term of ‘childcare’ which can act to devalue the importance of the work that practitioners do (Van Laere & Vandenbroek, 2018). This is an important point as ECEC practitioners are under pressure from the effects of policy and austerity to deliver a school-ready child (Bradbury et al., 2021; Kay et al., 2021) and, even though research evidence has highlighted the positive impact of graduate practitioners on the delivery of high-quality professional practice (Siraj-Blatchford et al. 2008; Sylva et al. 2010; Bonetti & Blanden, 2020; Early Years Commission, 2021; The Sutton Trust, 2021; Archer & Oppenheim, 2021), there is no Government mandate for practitioners to hold qualifications higher than level 3 (DfE, 2021). This quote sums up some of the key benefits of the link between qualifications and professional practice:

* *What I am looking for is patience, a real passion and interest for early years because I think the sector is tough so you only stick at it if you really are passionate about it. It is about being an advocate for children really, being able to listen to their views and values, and being able to learn with them rather than teaching them from a top-down level, being involved in their play or as play partner we would say, and being able to have that practical skill. You have to have that flexible approach, everything isn’t pre-planned and use these spontaneous opportunities to extend children’s learning. Being open and a reflective practitioner is a really key one because again early years [practice and policy] changes so frequently, we’re never at a standstill, we always have to kind of keep moving, we always have to keep kind of adapting…*

Along with the quotes highlighted in theme 1 this indicates the important link between knowledge and professional practice. The knowledge base and theoretical underpinning this brings practitioners can have a significant impact on the development of their own, and others, professional practice. This in turn has an impact on children’s development, learning and wellbeing. The link between knowledge and practice highlights the importance of students having some kind of real-world experience, whether this be via practice placements, visits to ECEC settings or engagement with professional practice issues as part of lectures. Some students enter an ECS degree with a level 3 accreditation; this already provides a practice based which can be enhanced via the academic content of the degree.

A number of the participants noted that in some cases the link between theory and practice needed to be far stronger as some graduates, particularly those who had recently finished their degrees, needed further support to develop good professional practice skills. These included day to day tasks such as nappy changing, feeding and personal care alongside observation, assessment and planning and leading learning for both children and staff:

* *[Some of the graduates] I've dealt with…seem to find it difficult to put their theory into practice, good practical ability is sometimes lacking.*
* *… qualifications give a knowledge base, but good practical ability is sometimes lacking…*
* *We had a new member of staff, she had a degree, and she just didn’t even know too much about the EYFS or how to kind of apply that in practice or even really simple skills about kind of changing nappies, really practical skills, but for her it was quite an eye opener, and not necessarily again knowing how to apply that theoretical knowledge into the practice.*

The comments reflect the challenge for new graduates and the wider societal and policy expectation that degrees produce a ‘work-ready’ individual. It is important to acknowledge these comments as this research highlights that good professional practice is a key aspect of the role. However, there also needs to be an acknowledgement about what happens when level 3 trainees join settings and are trained ‘on the job’. The novice to expert model (Wenger, 1998; 2009) has been an accepted model of training for vocational qualifications hence the findings of Payler and Locke (2013) where there were tensions between perceptions of graduates and those with vocational training. Perhaps there needs to be a greater emphasis on supporting new graduates to develop their professional practice capabilities as this and other research has shown the value of having graduates in the workforce. This could take the form of an extended induction period similar to the Early Career Teacher year present with Qualified Teacher Status. We realise this suggestion could be problematic due to the different nature of funding between non-compulsory and compulsory education. However, there were comments about the ways in which practice placements can start this transition to work and enhance employability; this is demonstrated below:

* *[The ECGPCs) helps kind of build that bridge between the degree and kind of some of the practical competencies that we’d be looking for, for someone coming out into the workforce.*

We note that a significant part of the sector (as highlighted in the survey) were not aware of the ECGPCs. Those who were involved in the semi-structured interviews were sent a copy of the ECGPCs as part of the preparation. Comments by semi-structured interview participants did suggest that the ECGPCs could provide the ‘bridge’ between knowledge and professional practice. However, it was also acknowledged that when the manager is the only graduate in the setting mentoring and supporting a student can be more challenging. In light of these findings HEI’s could consider creative ways to support their students to engage with the ECGPCs and practice placements (where available) to provide a smoother transition to employment. Conversely ECEC settings could consider how to support and induct new graduates to ensure that they have opportunities to develop the link between the knowledge base from their qualification and good professional practice (Siraj-Blatchford et al. 2008; Sylva et al. 2010; Bonetti & Blanden, 2020; Bradbury et al., 2021; Early Years Commission, 2021; Kay et al., 2021; The Sutton Trust, 2021; Archer & Oppenheim, 2021).

5.0 Main Findings

When we started to design this research we were motivated by our role in delivering a range of higher education qualifications and also our previous roles in the sector. In this section we highlight the main findings from both the survey and semi-structured interviews.

5.1 Students on placement

This section links to the aims ‘To identify gaps in teaching for ECS degrees and to consider how the inclusion of Early Childhood Graduate Practitioner Competencies might enhance ECS degree programmes’ and ‘To inform HEIs delivering ECS degrees to refine/tailor their offer to current and prospective students, in order to provide degree programmes which have better routes into employment’. It became clear, as described in 4.1.1, that there were a number of key skills that students needed to have when on placement. These were developing their pedagogical practice and being able to communicate effectively with children. In addition to this, there should be an understanding of safeguarding, communicating with colleagues and parents, and considering ways to develop an effective curriculum. The qualitative comments also highlight that student dispositions were more important than advanced practice skills whilst on placement. If students approach this positively, with an open mind and a desire to develop themselves, they are more likely to gain from the placement experience. This also ensured that students who approached placements with a positive outlook were motivated and were more welcome in the setting, as opposed to those who did not gel with staff teams and did not complete their placement. Some settings felt there could be more support and preparation for students going on placement, including them developing some of the day to day skills e.g. toileting, nappy changing, setting up activities. There were also challenges from staff teams where a more qualified but less experienced placement student wanted to make changes to practise. However, there are ways that these incidents could be overcome with better preparation for students and HEI’s building relationships with settings to ensure that expectations are met.

5.2 Graduates in the workforce

This section links to the aim ‘To consider what a graduate ‘looks like’ and ‘what ECS degrees offer to the sector’. Both sets of data focused on the link between qualifications, knowledge and professional practice. This way in which graduates were able to make links between theory and practice was reflected in the key roles they demonstrated in settings e.g. professional conduct and role modelling, innovating and supporting excellent practice and being responsible for pedagogical quality. Theme 1 from the qualitative data highlighted that graduates understood ‘why’ certain practices were important and not just ‘how’ certain practices were important. This was reflected in the creative approach and the critical thinking applied to situations. In some cases the theory: practice link was instrumental in ensuring that those children who were struggling and needed the most help were able to access this. Theme 2 highlighted how important reflective practice was for graduates. Being reflective and reflexive allowed for graduates to develop a higher level of self-awareness which leads on to a greater understanding of positionality and practice self-improvement. Reflective practice also allowed for a critical and analytical approach to problem solving which had both short and long term benefits for children's development and learning. Theme 3 reiterated the importance of the link between knowledge and practice and how this not only helped the graduate but also impacted on other staff and children. New graduates did need to refine and further develop their practice skills particularly around day to day tasks, but some noted that this was part of the setting's responsibility.

 Some of the challenges of employing graduates were structural. The debates that surround pay and progression are well rehearsed in the research literature and this is reflected in what some settings experience. There is a sufficiency challenge of retaining graduates where pay is low and progression limited, especially where settings are smaller and part of the PVI sector. There were also issues surfacing that Payler and Locke (2013) explored in their research where new graduates were not always well received by staff teams as they were perceived as not ‘work ready’ enough. Payler and Locke’s research highlighted that the rationale for these perspectives was linked to a preference for practitioners who had followed and more vocational model of ‘on the job’ training. However, comments in this research countered Payler and Locke’s findings as some participants noted that the setting had a responsibility to strengthen the link between knowledge and practice as part of their commitment to employing graduates.

5.3 Opening up a dialogue

We want to thank the participants in this study for their time and feedback. It has been important to start the process of ‘opening up an ongoing dialogue between the ECEC sector and HEIs offering this vocational component of ECS degrees’. In doing this we hope there will be more opportunities to collaborate with the ECEC sector refine and develop the degrees that are on offer. Ultimately both the sector and HEI’s have the same goal - to ensure that staff are knowledgeable and well prepared to work with young children. This will ensure that young children have the best possible opportunities and that what happens in their early years supports their life-long development.

6.0 Recommendations for policy and practice

From the analysis of the data there are a number of key recommendations for both policy and practice.

6.1 Students on placement

* There were a number of key areas that the sector felt that HEI’s should include in their ECS degrees (see comments in 4.1.1 and 4.1.3). These areas have been highlighted in the revised QAA Subject Benchmark Statements for Early Childhood Studies degrees (QAA, 2022). They are also the primary focus of the ECGPCs (ECSDN, 2019; QAA, 2022). HEI’s may decide to review their provision in light of these findings and the revision to the benchmark statements.
* There were also suggestions about how students might be prepared for placement (e.g. an understanding of daily tasks) and the attitudes and dispositions that benefit students on placement (see comments in 4.1.1 and 4.2.1).
* Some settings felt that the assessments for placement could be more linked to practice e.g. taking a more practical form that an academic approach. This could allow students to link knowledge to practice.

6.2 Graduates in the workforce

* Those settings that employed graduates were able to know the important link between knowledge and professional practice (see 4.2.2). This research highlighted that reflective practice was an important component of the role where graduates knew the ‘why’ as well as the ‘how’. These were demonstrated in the skills and competencies highlighted in 4.1.2 and link to the previous research evidence that highlights what graduates bring to the sector and how they have the potential to increase the life chances of young children (e.g., Siraj-Blatchford et al. 2008; Sylva et al. 2010; Bonetti & Blanden, 2020; Early Years Commission, 2021; The Sutton Trust, 2021; Archer & Oppenheim, 2021; Nutbrown, 2021). HEI’s can consider these comments when they develop and deliver their ECS and Foundation Degrees.
* Many settings were experiencing sufficiency challenges linked to government funding and parents’ fees (Social Mobility Commission, 2020; Swindells, 2021; Hardy et al., 2022). This impacts the ability to pay graduates a wage commensurate with their knowledge and experience. The impact of this is that graduates leave the sector and seek employment elsewhere or undertake Initial Teacher Training. Along with others, our recommendation is that the DfE revisit the funding level’s offered to ECEC settings and align these with those offered to compulsory education to ensure there is pay parity and to retain staff that are having a positive impact in supporting the life chances of children.
* There is still an issue about the two different modes of education and training when entering the sector. Participants reported that in some cases there was a divide between those who had undertaken a vocational course and those who had undertaken a degree course (see 4.1.2 and 4.2.2). The idea of how the novice professional becomes an expert in their role is important as no graduate (regardless of their degree) is a fully formed employee post-graduation. Some settings acknowledged this and noted that it was their role to support practice development. Perhaps the DfE could consider supporting and funding an extended induction period similar to the Early Career Teacher year present with Qualified Teacher Status. We realise this suggestion could be problematic due to the different nature of funding between non-compulsory and compulsory education but DfE financial support might mitigate against this.

6.3 Knowledge of the ECGPCs

* The ECGPCs are not well known in the sector (see 4.1.3). More work could be undertaken by both the ECSDN and HEI’s that deliver placements to raise this awareness and understanding.
* The ECGPCs are no longer explicitly mentioned on the DfE qualifications checker (DfE, 2022a) and there remains some confusion about whether ECS degree students are classed as ‘full and relevant’. The ECSDN might want to lobby the DfE to ensure that they provide further clarity on this matter on the qualifications checker and pathway link (DfE, 2022b).

7.0 Recommendations for research

This research has been a snapshot of the current perception of a small number of ECEC practitioners and cannot be said to speak for the wider sector. Further research could extend the numbers of participants and look at regional variations. There could be target groups and links to particular places and types of ECEC settings that cater for children and families from a range of demographics. These could then target specific locations and provide solutions for local needs. There could also be more research into the much needed dialogue between HEIs and the ECEC sector; this will help to develop deeper understandings and partnerships that have the end goal of supporting practitioner development and the life chances for young children. In addition, there are possibilities for further research into the benefits and challenges of implementing effective ECGPC mentoring strategies between HEIs and sector-based mentors. This may offer key insights into the effective shaping of ECS degrees in response to sector requirements.

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We would like to thank the Executive Committee of the Early Childhood Studies Degrees Network for awarding us this funding. Our proposed research was designed to engage with key ECEC sector stakeholders to explore their understandings and thoughts about both the Early Childhood Studies graduate and students in placement. We hope the recommendations for practice policy and research will have an impact on the future direction of the sector. This research would not have been possible without the ECEC participants, the 105 questionnaire respondents and 16 interviewees who gave freely of their time and we thank them for their participation. This research would not have been completed without support from our respective institutions, University of Portsmouth and University of Chichester who allowed us the time to complete this project.

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