

Update on National Research into perceptions of Graduates and Undergraduate trainees in the Early Years sector

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The state of the sector

The clarity of the recently launched 'Early Childhood Road Map' (Thompson, et al., 2021) was welcomed with open arms by a sector that has been plagued by confusion around the complex multiplicity and appropriateness of qualifications designed to provide the best possible outcomes for children in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). The visual acuity of the road map provides setting managers and school leaders with a focussed beam of light to pierce through the fog of confusion left by successive governments and policy changes designed to protect and enhance the lives of children and families across the country. The palimpsest created by the multi-layered de- and re-regulation is a necessary evil in a sector that must adapt rapidly to societal changes and research findings, as well as new legislation and expectations designed to keep young children thriving. The confusion and resultant frustration in the ECEC sector is felt more acutely, perhaps, than in other sectors, because of the weight of accountability pressing on practitioners, managers, teachers, and all school staff to safeguard children and maintain exceptionally high standards of pedagogy for children in their formative years. Introspection into the sector's interpretation of what should be included in these qualifications, as well as perceived requirements for future generations of practitioners, has been rendered even more urgent given the turbulent context endured in recent years. Thankfully, we now have a highly progressive and meaningful set of QAA (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education) benchmark statements for Early Childhood Studies (ECS) degrees to support our collective adaptation to future challenges (QAA, 2022), as well as growing numbers of universities who offer placements implementing a new set of Early Childhood Graduate Practitioner Competencies (ECGPCs) designed to promote consistent vocational quality between degrees (ECSDN, 2019).

Co-producing national research

Shortly after the launch of the ECGPCs in 2019, the ECSDN launched a call for researchers to tender for a research project of specific relevance to the central mission of the network. A successful application led to a collaboration between subject experts at the University of Portsmouth and the University of Chichester who have now completed their analysis of a national survey into perceptions of graduate trainees, practitioners, and leaders in the sector, and a needs analysis compiled from an extensive series of interviews with early childhood setting managers, practitioners and graduates. The findings, it is hoped, will be helpful when shaping our collective understanding of what makes a degree in ECS worthwhile for students and, moreover, as impactful as possible for the effective provision of ECEC throughout England in these unprecedented times.

In 2019, the DfE determined that an appropriate Level 3 Early Years Educator accreditation, or equivalent, is of a sufficient standard to manage provision, and that a minimal Level 2 qualification is required for at least 50% of all staff (DfE, 2019; DfE, 2021). This contrasts with the requirements underpinning Primary and Secondary education, where a graduate level qualification is required (Hevey, 2013). Furthermore, current contexts highlight the importance of the levelling up agenda to help assure equal opportunities for all children and families (Mikuska et al., 2021). Our research into the value of graduate practitioners and leaders in the ECEC sector surfaces the viewpoints and experiences of setting managers and practitioners regarding what constitutes an effective professional environment for our youngest children. Assuring the reliability and meaningfulness of the interviews and national survey in parallel was of paramount importance to the inter-organisational research team, who were academics working in the Higher Education sector and biased by their investment and previous work in the sector, and the relevancy of ECS degrees. To achieve impartiality, the highest standards of ethical conduct were assured at all phases of the project. Guided by robust internal policies and internationally recognised ethical frameworks (BERA, 2018), the team were careful to bracket

their own views and interests throughout. By the end of the study, the team had conducted 16 extensive interviews with experienced staff from an array of ECEC backgrounds, and received 105 responses to a mixed-methods survey.

Research findings

The findings suggest that graduate professionals are regarded by settings as having expertise in understanding the underpinning purpose of specific practices designed to promote better outcomes for children and families. Participants consistently used phrases that emphasised 'why we do things' and the resultant ability to inform the setting's culture and policy by effectively implementing new practices and supporting colleagues by promoting reflexivity in practice and bringing innovation to the setting. In most cases, participants asserted that graduate-level knowledge, couple with their open-minded approach to reflection, made them more confident in practice, corroborating similar investigations into the relevancy of graduate leaders in the sector (Bonetti & Blanden, 2020; Early Years Commission, 2021; Archer & Oppenheim, 2021; Nutbrown, 2021).

Our findings also highlighted several destabilising factors and barriers to implementing a graduate-led workforce. Firstly, participants were acutely aware of the low pay in the sector that was incommensurate with graduate roles (Hardey et al., 2022). In a recent Guardian article it was reported that many early education professionals are forsaking their impassioned vocation for better paid work in supermarkets (Weale, 2022). Perceptions of limited prospects for promotion were compounded by a sector plagued by narratives of low-professional status and the unhelpful labelling of practitioners as merely babysitters. A significant proportion of survey respondents and interview participants reported that they had lost strong graduate leaders to other sectors, resulting in a destabilising effect for settings, children and families. Alarming, this political uncertainty and lack of focussed commitment to the sector is taking

place during unprecedented increases in the volume of children requiring additional support (HM Government, 2022). The volume and robustness of evidence gained over decades of research, it would seem, is still insufficient to assure that the sector is upheld by commensurate professional reputation and graduate-level skill; a theme that was echoed throughout our interviews with sector professionals.

Moving forward

Despite the array of robust pedagogical and economic arguments for providing our youngest children with environments and relationships fostered by highly trained professionals, little remedial action has been taken by the government so far. To the contrary, plans to increase the ratio of children to adults could be the final blow for a sector already on its knees (Leitch, 2022 cited by Siddique, 2022). Findings from this most recent study further exemplify the benefit of a graduate-led sector or, at the very least, a sector underpinned by staff given the professional status, commensurate remuneration and opportunities for growth that they truly deserve (Fairchild, 2017). Rationale and robust pedagogical and economic evidence, it would seem, are not sufficient drivers for implementing the radical policy changes needed to remedy these issues.

One of the challenges of upskilling the workforce is in the implementation of an effective professional skills framework to parallel that of other phases of education (Hevey, 2013) and in other countries where graduates are leading pedagogy and the early childhood workforce more broadly (Urban et al., 2012; Pascal et al., 2020). Our research corroborated and extended existing findings that undergraduate degrees provide effective ways to mobilise constructs of the professional self, hone practitioners' reflective ability when working with children and families and, help students to develop an understanding for the practical skills required for effective pedagogy. The launch of the ECGPCs (2019) offered a way to ensure a level of consistency across ECS degrees that offered

placements. The competencies were devised by sector professionals and academics and have been helpfully incorporated into the new QAA Benchmark statement. They encompass an array of crucial skills and knowledge based criteria to reflect the expertise required of early childhood pedagogues and leaders. The competencies require students to evidence their knowledge and skill in relation to children's rights, holistic development, effective pedagogy, tuning-in, safeguarding, inclusive practice, family partnerships, multi-professional working and reflective professional development (QAA, 2022).

Raising the profile of the Early Childhood Graduate Practitioner Competencies

Implicitly compatible with the revised QAA Benchmark Statement (QAA, 2022), the competencies provided clear assurances to the Department for Education that ECSDN member institutions can also provide "early childhood competencies demonstrating practice, skills and knowledge at level 6" (DfE, 2022, n.p.). However, there are still tensions in the DfE's application of levelness as although practice is rated at level 6 the graduate is seen as equivalent to a level 3 practitioner in the EYFS. Clearly there is still some way to go before more formal recognition, and commensurate remuneration, for level 6 practitioners comes to fruition. Due to the complexity of the DfE website in locating appropriate qualifications many settings still find it difficult to navigate the myriad qualifications to ascertain what constitutes a level 3 practitioner. Furthermore, our research findings indicated that work still needs to be done in raising the profile of the ECGPCs throughout the sector. Although many of our interview participants had heard of the ECGPCs, many claimed they were still unfamiliar with their content, remit and legitimacy.

Concluding the research and next steps

Conducting the research was an effective way to open up this dialogue between two Higher Education Institutions (the University of Portsmouth and the University of Chichester) and the ECEC sector. The outcomes of this research will also be shared with other Higher Education Institutions to help them further consider and develop their degrees. It is hoped that there will be more opportunities to collaborate between the ECEC sector and Higher Education Institutions. Ultimately both the sector and Universities 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. We want to thank the participants 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. We would also like to thank the Executive Committee of the ECSDN for awarding us this funding. The full project reports are available at <https://tinyurl.com/2p87pw65> or <https://tinyurl.com/yaxxyt8w>.

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