

Graduates' perspectives on their Early Childhood Studies programmes and employment opportunities (0026)

Helena Mitchell¹, Carolyn Silberfeld²

¹Oxford Brookes University, UK,

²University of Suffolk, UK

Early Childhood Studies (ECS) degrees are intended to provide an interdisciplinary curriculum which covers early childhood holistically (health, care, education and policy), and provide a base for research development in theory and practice. The degrees focus upon providing the foundation for a well-qualified graduate professional workforce, and an increase in high quality early childhood provision including the provision of childcare and education from birth. Working with young children has long been seen as a Cinderella option in the U.K. because of the poor status, pay and conditions that exist in the early childhood sector. However, in the past twenty years there has been increasing evidence of the importance of the earliest years of life, (OECD, 2001, 2006) and thus the need for those working with them to have a knowledge of underpinning theory about child development. E.C.S. degrees are multi-disciplinary and incorporate knowledge useful to other related professionals in education, health, law, social work and policy. Many of the degrees across the U.K. are now affiliated to the Early Childhood Studies Degrees Network (ECSDN).

A study examining the reflections of the graduates from one of the first ECS programmes was published in 1999. The current study is a belated follow up, but one which draws on data from ten Universities across the U.K., examining the perspectives of their graduates on the relevance, quality and employability benefits of their degrees. It draws upon literature from the field of employability, acknowledging that the concept has become far more sophisticated since the Dearing Report in 1997, including notions of graduate identity, (Holmes, 2013), and graduate social identity, (Hinchcliffe and Jolly, 2009). It acknowledges the increasing pressure on graduates to gain degree level employment, and the arguments around an over supply of graduates, (Brown and Hesketh, 2004, Purcell, 2012). Recent studies exploring the value of a degree have highlighted graduates' awareness of the financial challenges involved (Vigurs et al, 2016). Furthermore, graduates have shown increasing awareness that a degree can only be a starting point, (Brooks and Everett, 2009), and that extra-curricular activity is essential to learn the culture and context of the work environment, (Jones, 2014).

The arguments around employability for graduates who wish to work with young children however, relate also to government policy on early education and childcare. The importance of graduates working with young children was emphasised by EPPE, (2004), which found a positive relationship between the employment of graduates and the quality ratings received by a setting. The Labour governments of 1997-2010 invested considerable sums in the development of an early years workforce, with the development of an early years sector endorsed foundation degree which articulated with the Early

Childhood Studies degree, and the introduction of a new status, the Early Years Professional. But on the whole, graduates who wish to work with young children enter a different context from those in more traditional subject areas. Approximately 50% of graduates from ECS degrees enter teacher training courses, aiming for employment in a market which requires a graduate level status. But for those who do not, the opportunities for graduate employment are less straightforward. Increasing demands for childcare are not matched by salaries.

In a sector which is very diverse and generally poorly remunerated, and in which there have been so many changes to qualifications and status, those undertaking Early Childhood Studies degrees may find themselves struggling to gain acceptance, status and pay in the workplace. Newly framed government apprenticeships collude with this perspective. Although recognising the importance of the early childhood phase, policy relating to young children tends to ignore expert opinion and relevant research (Nutbrown,2013), even when commissioned by the Government (DfE,2012).

In this turbulent environment, how do graduates perceive the value and benefit of their ECS degrees? How do they reflect upon government policies which have impacted on their employment opportunities? How influential are public and professional perceptions of the role of those working with young children?

Methodology

The project employed a mixed method case study approach, with the case being institutions offering ECS degrees. Data was gathered through an online questionnaire using Google sheets, which respondents completed anonymously. Following a pilot study the questionnaire was modified in response to participants' feedback. Although anonymous, the questionnaire included an option to provide their email address should respondents wish to participate in a focus group follow up.

Graduate respondents were identified by their University and contacted through their Alumni office, then given the option to complete the questionnaire if they wished to do so. Ethical issues were a challenge. The study was approved in one of the researchers' home institutions, and several institutions also sought approval from their own ethics committees. Nevertheless 19 institutions did agree and of these, 48 graduates from ten different institutions across the U.K. responded. A follow-up focus group interview with a small group of volunteer participants, to further explore graduates' perspectives of their degree courses, was conducted in October 2015. This interview was recorded with participants' permission and transcribed later. Data has been analysed through content analysis of both the questionnaires and the focus group interview.

Results and implications

Several themes emerged from both tranches of data with considerable depth emerging through the analysis of the focus group discussion. Themes identified included :

- the realities of employment opportunities
- the status of ECS degrees and ECS graduates
- financial security and insecurity

- frustration with policy decision making and the implications of fragmented policy

Graduates articulated awareness of changes in government policy which they suggested were driven by political strategy and rhetoric rather than evidence. Of concern was how few participants not previously employed within the early childhood sector had gained relevant employment in practice or research as graduate employees. Post graduate study was perceived as necessary to achieve graduate status employment. Of interest was that even though some had not yet secured their preferred employment, all participants had improved their employment status, though not necessarily achieving financial security.

Although the degrees were highly rated by respondents, ongoing graduate financial insecurity may undermine the future stability of ECS degrees.