

Rage against the machine

The pipeline feeding Level 3 childcare staff into the sector is drying up, and we have the data to prove it. *Hannah Crown* speaks to a sector in crisis

The Level 3 workforce is shrinking at an 'alarming' rate, with the number of students finishing courses dropping by nearly a third in a year, *Nursery World* can exclusively reveal.

Analysis of full and relevant childcare courses completed across all awarding bodies shows 18,000 students finished courses between July and September 2014. One year on, this number dropped 30 per cent to 12,625.

The July-September period is significant because it's when the majority of certifications are awarded for completed courses.

FACING FACTS

The figures are hard evidence of the impact of the first full year of Early Years Educator (EYE) qualifications, which were introduced in September 2014 to raise standards in the workforce. But the associated requirement for maths and English GCSE at grade C or above has been slammed by employers, with one large chain reporting vacancy levels for up to a sixth of their workforce (see table, page 6).

The Level 3 (L3) analysis also shows drops in certifications at other times of year, likely to apply to students on 'roll on, roll off' courses: there was a 32 per cent drop in the number of students completing courses between January and March 2016 (Q1) compared with the same period in 2015. Smaller drops, of 13 per cent in Q2, and 11 per cent in Q4, were also recorded between 2014 and 2015.

The analysis of Ofqual figures was carried out by *Nursery World* and awarding body CACHE, which has launched a campaign to stave off the 'catastrophe' of the GCSE requirement



and press for the reacceptance of functional skills.

Julie Hyde, associate director at CACHE, which is now owned by NCFE, says, 'It's alarming. There was a glut of CYPW [children and young people's workforce] learners coming into the system from April to August 2014, who would have finished between April and September 2015 – so they will make things look better than they are. It's only EYEs coming through now. And of course people aren't progressing through the system from lower levels. So we expect these numbers to get worse.'

Ms Hyde says the majority of those

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accounting for the 34 per cent drop in completed courses would have been on work-based EYE programmes. College students are not expected to complete courses for another six to 12 months. But colleges are also hit: a recent PACEY survey found that 72 per cent of FE colleges said the number of students enrolling on EYE courses had fallen 'a lot' between this academic year and last, with a similar proportion of college leaders calling for the GCSE requirement to be scrapped. This is being borne out by settings. London Early Years Foundation (LEYF) says it has received around three applications from college students in the past three months.

Some of the EYEs to have completed courses last September would also be on apprenticeships. However, Ms Hyde says apprentices would only be a small proportion of these, because the impact of the GCSEs on this group has been extreme. Last year *Nursery World* found that, between ten training providers, apprentice intake dropped by between 46 and 96 per cent between 2013-14 and 2014-15.

BREAKING POINT

Ms Hyde adds, 'We had a huge increase in level 2 registrations, when providers were willing to take them on to do maths and English GCSE alongside. But when they haven't been able to get their GCSEs, even though many of these people are fully competent, they are moving outside of childcare into courses like social care where they can use functional skills.'

'The GCSEs are the barrier. It is as simple as that.'

'We are at crisis point,' says LEYF chief executive June O'Sullivan. Despite having recruited more than 80 level 3s this year, LEYF has more than

100 vacancies currently. 'The pipeline for new staff is dry. What we are doing is recycling a small number of staff around the sector, which means we are not growing any new employees.'

At least one setting, Bushy Cross in Somerset, has closed (in November last year) because the owners were unable to recruit enough staff.

The Department for Education, which has consistently said it is not about to apologise for raising standards, has now pledged a review of the GCSE requirements along with a workforce strategy. A spokesman says, 'We recognise that excellence can't always be measured in exam results - that's why a commitment has been made to revisit the GCSE requirement for the level 3 EYE qualifications and a decision will be taken later in the year.'

'This data confirms what the sector has long argued,' says Neil Leitch of the Pre-school Learning Alliance. 'The introduction of the GCSE requirements for EYEs has had a significant detrimental impact on the size of the level 3 workforce. To say this policy has resulted in a recruitment crisis is not an exaggeration.'

'Instead of dragging their feet, the Government should listen to the sector and retract this policy.'

Stella Ziolkowski, Director of Quality and Workforce Development at NDNA, adds, 'These figures are no surprise to us. The solution is for the Government to allow functional equivalencies to GCSEs.' She says the new childcare minister, Caroline Dinenge, must make the promised GCSE review 'a priority', adding that registrations (of people starting courses) are also down by as much as 70 per cent for some awarding bodies.

As the recruitment crisis takes hold, settings are saying they are constantly overstretched. 'It has been absolute pandemonium,' says David Gilbert,

co-director of single setting First Learners Nursery in Folkestone who has seven staff and two level 3 vacancies. 'I or the manager has had to cover by going into the room. But the paperwork still has to be done. I believe we are owed more in unpaid fees than we made in profit last year.'

He says the previous owner, who had qualified teacher status (QTS), died in April. 'I am the HR manager and just happen to have QTS - that's the only reason we didn't have to remain shut until 9am [when other members of staff came]. 'We tried to recruit two level 3s but one took another job and the other didn't turn up for interview.'

The setting has four qualified members of staff at level 3 or above, while of the others, one is expecting soon to get a level 3 and two are at level 2. The level 2s 'are going to do their level 3 training in the hope the GCSE requirement is dropped before they finish'.

STRUGGLING TO COPE

Mr Gilbert says, 'I had six weeks off over the summer with mounds of work to do and I haven't done much of it because I have been so shattered. The girls have to do their paperwork in the lunch hour. If one of them leaves we are in dead trouble. It's killing us.'

Nigel Rolfe, managing director of Surrey-based Cherry Childcare, says the ten-setting chain had to turn away three children with SEN because of recruitment issues. 'We have always welcomed these children. But now, if that child requires one-to-one support we can't give it. It is a very unpleasant situation to be in, but we just literally can't do it.'

There have also been situations where managers have had to go into ratio, he adds.

Ms O' Sullivan says, 'Existing staff

STAFF PERSPECTIVE

Emma Gunn, early years practitioner with a Level 3 diploma in childcare and education:

'It's a lot more pressure on the full-time staff. There's less time with your key children - I have six. Having agency staff isn't good for continuity, which children need,

and means the children come to me first so there is more pressure on me. Sometimes I have to take journals home when we used to get time out at work to do paperwork.

'Everyone just gets a bit fed up. I try to keep positive and just get on with it - I'm just hoping it will get better.'

are exhausted. They say that overtime isn't an option any more - it's essential. If anyone is sick or taking leave then they are at crisis point.'

She says 80-90 per cent of staff are doing at least two hours overtime a week. Managers and deputies are working an extra hour every night. She adds, 'Our staff are very dedicated. Some of them are coming in on Saturdays to get the environment prepared - the kinds of things which drive quality. They are exhausted and I don't know what to do to relieve them - you would normally give them time off but that just creates other pressures.'

'The biggest impact is on the current staff who are getting exhausted and having more illnesses,' agrees Wendy Taylor, manager of Acorns Nursery at Oaklands College in Hertfordshire who has five vacant full-time positions after three members of staff left over the summer.

She says, 'I find it stressful and very frustrating. I wouldn't be surprised if the three left because they were having to cover so much and not able to do things they want and were trained to do.'

'We want to innovate, introduce a Ferre Laevers approach and look at >

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LEVEL 3 EARLY YEARS EDUCATOR: FALLING NUMBERS

Level 3 certifications (all awarding organisations)	Total certification	Total certification %+/- on previous year	Q4	%+/- on previous year	Q3	%+/- on previous year	Q2	%+/- on previous year	Q1	%+/- on previous year
2016	3,505	-32%							3,505	-32%
2015	28,700	-19%	4,455	-11%	12,625	-30%	6,505	-13%	5,115	6%
2014	35,275	-4%	5,005	-8%	18,000	-4%	7,450	2%	4,820	-8%
2013	36,675		5,445		18,695		7,305		5,230	

From Ofqual data: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/vocational-qualifications-dataset>

A STUDENT'S VIEW

Jamie Papp completed a level 2 apprenticeship at Tops Day Nurseries in May. After moving schools in Year 10, the 25-year-old got Es in English and maths. Hannah Jennings, nursery manager, says he clearly had potential to be a supervisor. She says, 'He's confident and personable – you wouldn't know he was only a level 2 – and it is such a shame he can't progress. He works in the baby room and has excellent language skills, can get down to their level and bond with them and is great with the parents. When it comes to planning activities, he is creative and uses his initiative, doing research at

home on science experiments to do with them.

'We've given him some key children so he can progress and it gives him a bit of training and a sense of belonging – he's on the minimum wage and he could just up and leave and go into a school and we don't want that.'

Jamie says, 'I have thought about going to college, but I am not really a paper person – which is why an apprenticeship was good for me. I considered the level 3 but when they put the bombshell of the GCSEs behind it I thought that doing a full-time job (20 hours per week, and some weeks up to 40), plus doing English and



maths, and a level 3, would be too much. I always wanted to work with children. I have found my forte. But being at level 2 I am restricted – someone has to accompany me for opening and closing the nursery. I can't

administer medication. I was interested in being a SENCO, but you have to be level 3.

'I am on minimum wage and if this doesn't work out I will have to think about leaving childcare. It's depressing.'

quality of interactions between staff and children. We can't because we are so busy firefighting.'

BAD FOR BUSINESS

Settings offering in-house training are having to lower their standards and offer less-relevant qualifications as a result. Cherry Childcare, which runs its own training arm and recruitment company, had 92 per cent level 3 qualified or higher last June. A year on this had fallen to 83 per cent. 'We are expecting this to continue to fall,' says Mr Rolfe.

'Our business model has completely changed to saying "if you can get your level 3, then great". Our ethos has to be getting the level 2s in.

'It's killing apprenticeships. We want to take 12 apprentices a year. We are struggling to get 12 people – we've got ten – but 50 per cent of those won't pass their GCSEs.

'The point is if colleges aren't producing people, it's up to employers to train people as somebody needs to pick up the slack. And if we can't do that then we are falling off a cliff.'

Tops Day Nurseries MD Cheryl Hadland says, 'We have now had to resort to offering staff who cannot undertake a level 3 qualification a Playwork NVQ, which does not have the same GCSE requirements. This is not the qualification they want to hold – it limits them to only working with pre-school-age children, and our ability to offer pre-school worker

positions only increases across the summer holidays.'

A Department for Education spokesman tells *Nursery World*, 'This Government is raising the bar and making a significant investment in the early years sector, working closely

with the profession to help improve its status. As a result, numbers of qualified staff have risen, the number of graduates in the workforce continues to rise, and a record number of providers are rated Good or Outstanding.' ■

NURSERY VACANCIES ROUND-UP

Name	Location(s)	Number of settings	Staff	Full-time vacancies	FT vacancies as proportion of workforce
Acorn Childcare	Milton Keynes and Northants	10	224	14	6%
Acorns Nursery, Oaklands College	St Albans	1	13	5	38%
Cherry Childcare	Surrey, Hampshire, Buckinghamshire and Berkshire	10	200	12	6%
First Learners Nursery	Kent	1	7	2	29%
Happy Kids	Yorkshire and Manchester	11	91	6 (+3 part time)	7%
Kiddi Caru Day Nurseries	South, East Anglia	20	900	23 (+9 part time)	2%
Kids Allowed	Manchester and Cheshire	6	400	6	2%
LEYF	London	38	613	101	16%
Portico Day Nurseries	Lancashire	7	102	2	2%
Mama Bears	Bristol, Somerset and Devon	23	425	14 (+2 part time)	3%
Tops Day Nurseries	Dorset, Hampshire and Somerset	18	442	25 (+11 part time)	7%