

Graduate hall



New competencies to benchmark Early Childhood Studies degree qualifications will be launched in September. **Dr Eunice Lumsden**, head of early years at the University of Northampton, who has authored them, offer an exclusive preview



It is 25 years since the first Early Childhood Studies degrees were introduced and the Early Childhood Studies Degrees Network (ECSDN) was launched. The degree was aimed at providing higher-level study opportunities for those working in the early childhood education and care sector. Since this time the number of degrees has grown enormously, and early childhood is now firmly established as an inter-disciplinary academic subject that covers the period from conception to the age of eight.

The need for highly qualified graduate early childhood practitioners is as relevant today as it was in the early 1990s. However,

there are currently no practitioner competencies at graduate level. There is also some confusion in the Early Childhood sector about the level ECS graduates should be employed at and the practice skills they should have. This is reportedly presenting some challenges for employers and causing some issues during Ofsted inspections.

In response, the ECSDN has introduced Early Childhood Graduate Practitioner competencies, as an optional route in degree programmes. The overall aims are to strengthen degrees with placements, enhance employability for our students and bring clarity to the sector. They are available to members of the ECSDN and it will

be up to individual institutions if they want to use them.

With them, the early childhood workforce should be clearer about individual early career graduates' expected level of knowledge, skills and actual experience in practice. It will also enable them to decide whether to appoint them as a 'Graduate Practitioner' or not. The new genre of early childhood degree graduates will begin to emerge over the next three years. The network also hopes they will be adopted for degree-level apprenticeships.

What are Early Childhood Studies degrees?

Early Childhood Studies degrees afford students the opportunity ➤

The new genre of Early Childhood graduates will begin to emerge over the next three years



to engage with the multiple perspectives on early childhood. They promote the critical application of theory to practice with infants, young children and families. Integral to the degrees is holistic knowledge and understanding of how child development sits in the context of the family, community and wider society.

Anyone who has studied early childhood, or taught on the ECS degree, appreciates how the

knowledge, understanding and skills gained support future careers working with children and families. I certainly wish I had had this foundation before I started my career in social work.

ECS degrees can be studied in a variety of ways at a range of universities and further education colleges with higher education provision, across the UK. Some programmes have an academic focus only, others offer placement opportunities or are employment-

The degrees promote the application of theory to practice

based. Learners decide to study ECS at different ages, times in their life, with different entry qualifications and reasons. Some students have considerable experience in practice, others have minimal or no experience at all. They share an aspiration to work with children and families but are not always sure of the practice or professional direction they want to pursue.

There are currently four types of degrees mapped on to the Early Childhood Studies QAA Benchmark, an academic benchmark which provides the detail of the subject information that should be included in degrees covering early childhood.

Students can currently study a degree with:

- no placements
- formally assessed placements
- unassessed or sporadically assessed placements
- a combination of work and study for those in employment.

Early Childhood Studies Degrees and 'full and relevant' at Level 3

Following the introduction of the Early Years Educator qualification at Level 3, the qualification level of ECS graduates in relation to practice has caused some confusion. Currently, for ECS degree students to be counted as 'full and relevant' at Level 3 in England, their degree must be mapped onto the ECS QAA benchmark statement with assessed placements. It is the responsibility of awarding institutions to ensure ➤

THE NINE COMPETENCIES

- Advocating for young children's rights and participation
- Promoting holistic child development
- Working directly with young children, families and colleagues to promote health, well-being, safety and nurturing care
- Observing, listening and planning for young children to support their well-being, early learning, progression and transitions
- Safeguarding and child protection
- Inclusive practice
- Partnership with parents and caregivers
- Collaborating with others
- Ongoing professional development

How they are assessed

The competencies will be a matter for the university to assess via a combination of observations, practice-based tasks and a final assessment (at Level 6). The final assessment will confirm the award (or not) of Early Childhood Graduate Competencies. Examples are a portfolio assessment and/or an exit interview conducted in a walk and talk format, but will depend on the university. Approaches will be piloted and shared by the network.

For example, competency one will be assessed on elements including 'how you listen to and work in collaboration with young children', 'observe, support and extend young

children's participation in their learning through following their needs and interests' and 'support children to respect others by providing opportunities for their participation and decision-making.'

Awarding competencies

Universities will provide certification that the student has achieved the competencies, either integrated into the degree title or as a separate certificate. For example:

- BA (Hons) Early Childhood Studies (Graduate Practitioner)
- Jolene Bloggs has been awarded Early Childhood Graduate Practitioner Competencies

students have relevant assessed practice that meets the Level 3 requirements, and employers to ascertain the students' experience at interview and provide appropriate induction processes and career development opportunities. If they have any doubt about the placement elements of a degree programme they should speak to the awarding university or HE institution.

Some of the confusion about qualifications and whether you are 'full and relevant' to practise occurs because of the challenges in a sector with a mixed economy of practice. There is no clear career structure, associate pay scales or CPD structure. Plus, similar roles can be undertaken by practitioners with Level 3, 4, 5 and 6 qualifications, and salary scales are often attached to role, rather than qualification.

The relationship with Early Years Teacher Status (0-5)

Early Years Teacher Status (0-5) is a specialist early years role that involves trainees meeting professional standards laid down by the Government in leading education and care. As with any profession there are specific entry requirements which must be met, including maths, English and science GCSEs and the professional skills tests. As part of their training, candidates complete 120 days of practice experience and there are professional conduct expectations that need to be adhered to.

The Early Childhood Practitioner Competencies are not 'professional' standards. They will be awarded by



universities to students who have had 80 days of assessed placement experience and have demonstrated the skill in applying the holistic knowledge and understanding that underpins early childhood in practice at Level 6, with children aged birth to eight.

Roles and expectations

One of the challenges for those who gain EYTS is that they are not always seen as early career teachers who need to develop their skills and confidence in the role. The lack of a formalised newly qualified year has compounded this. This is similar for Early Childhood Studies graduates

who sometimes face challenges because of unrealistic expectations of their practice experience.

In reality, experience varies. Therefore, the move for clarity about whether early childhood graduates can practise at Level 6, 3 or need to undertake a Level 3 qualification once employed should benefit all. Once employed, the 'Early Career Early Childhood Graduate' needs a thorough induction, career development plan and supervision to enable them to flourish as leaders, or progress to specialist roles in safeguarding and SEND or pursue professional training to become an Early Years Teacher.

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Helen Perkins, senior lecturer, childhood and family studies University of Wolverhampton

'If students are engaging in the setting, then they are really

starting to understand theory. These competencies should make it clear to employers that not only do early childhood studies (ECS) graduates have in-depth theoretical knowledge and understanding of how children learn and develop, but are able to put it into practice,' says Dr Perkins.

'There are many reasons why students choose ECS:

some purely for the academic content, others to obtain the full and relevant status. Having these competencies as part of the degree will enable them to stand out at interview.'

Dr Perkins adds, 'There have been several past attempts to create graduate status, including early years practitioner and teacher status. These statuses have been Government-led and therefore their value and currency is at the whim of policy-makers. The new

competencies are owned by and connected to the ECSDN and therefore will be relevant whatever party is in power.'

Any of the 40 ECSDN member universities offering ECS degrees will be able to offer the competencies. 'It offers ECSDN members an opportunity to differentiate their offer from other universities, particularly useful as we all chase fewer students,' Dr Perkins adds.

Plus the competencies 'will transfer into the apprenticeships – we hope

that the current trailblazers group will look to the ECSDN to see how we can work together to create a world-class graduate early years workforce.'

She adds, 'After 25 years, we have got stronger and started to realise we do have a voice. The Government don't seem to be recognising what is good practice for ECEC. They don't seem to care about the research. Our job as the keepers of the standards of ECS is to say actually this is what is good.'