



Early Childhood Graduates in the Workplace: Experiences and Perceptions

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Executive summary

This report of an Early Childhood Studies Degrees Network (ECSDN) funded collaborative research project explores the experiences and perceptions of Early Childhood Studies (ECS) graduates in the workplace. Previous research has shown the benefits of a graduate workforce in the delivery of high-quality education and care for young children, their families and communities. This project aimed to build upon the previous two ECSDN funded projects and was completed in two phases. The first involved a national survey of ECS graduates which aimed to understand their experiences as they entered the workforce and developed their own career pathways. The second phase centred around an online ‘world café’ event for employers which aimed to understand the value of the degree and its graduates from the perspective of the sector. Shared thematic analysis brought the findings from these two phases together to draw conclusions about the overall experiences and perceptions of ECS graduates in the workplace.

The key findings and recommendations are:

- **1. Promoting the value of the degree experience to the individual learner**
There needs to be greater appreciation of the wide diversity of career pathways that ECS Degrees contribute towards and the transferable skills developed through the ECS degree experience.
- **2. Advocating for ECS degrees and their value to society**
Employers value ECS graduates for their knowledge and understanding, but there needs to be a shared appreciation of this value from parents, policymakers and wider society.
- **3. Bridging the gap between theory and practice**
The practitioner role is increasingly challenging and complex. Graduates will continue to require support once they enter workplace. There is scope for new networking opportunities for graduates within ECSDN and for further alignment between degree and workplace professional learning opportunities.
- **4. An eco-system of early childhood**
A joined-up, bi-directional partnership approach to working with the sector, that supports ECS students and employers, as well as universities, is needed at a time of crisis for the sector.
- **4. National qualifications frameworks and pay scales**
Policymakers should consider a national qualification framework with commensurate funding and pay scales.

1.0 Introduction

This collaborative study, involving three English universities, aimed to build upon previous ECSDN funded projects (Fairchild et al. 2022; Richardson et al., 2022) to contribute to existing knowledge regarding the role of the ECS graduate workforce. It was completed in two phases, which focused on eliciting the perspectives of Early Childhood Studies (ECS) graduates and employers from the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) sector.

Phase 1 involved a national online survey of ECS graduates, distributed through social media and our university alumni networks. The survey used a mixed methods design, to collect information regarding graduate roles, destinations, experiences and professional identity. This phase was guided by the question: **How have ECS degrees contributed to graduates' career pathways and sense of professional identity within ECEC?**

Phase 2 involved an online ECEC employers 'world café' (Lohr et al., 2020) event, which also sought to foster collaboration, dialogue and closer partnerships between the ECEC sector and universities. The aim for this was to explore the role of the graduate practitioner and the contribution they make to the work of ECEC settings in each of the three university locations. This phase of the project was guided by the central question: **How do ECS degrees and ECS graduates contribute to the delivery of services to babies, children, families and communities?**

2.0 Context & Literature Review

This section offers an analysis of the research literature to provide contextual information and a background to the development of ECS degrees and their value in the workplace.

2.1 Development of ECS degrees

Early Childhood Studies is an 'established discipline' that focuses on the 'holistic development of infants and young children from conception to the age of eight' (QAA, 2022: 3). ECS degrees are conceptualised as inter-disciplinary and multi-professional and were first developed in 1992 (QAA, 2022). Their aim is to support the provision of a well-qualified graduate level workforce with a grounding in both practice and research (Molla and Nolan, 2019; Silberfeld and Mitchell, 2021) who can advocate for children and families.

ECS degrees are of value to society as they have an important role in improving quality in the sector (Mikuska *et al.*, 2023; Campbell Barr, 2018) and as interdisciplinary forms of knowledge, in society as a whole. Despite these benefits, ECS graduates face challenges in gaining acceptance, status and pay in the workplace (Silberfeld and Mitchell, 2021). Workplaces in early childhood are diverse in nature and include

practitioners with a wide variety of qualifications and backgrounds. An important advancement in recent years has been the establishment of the Early Childhood Graduate Practitioner Competencies (ECGPCs) at degree level, Level 6. These competencies are quality assured through the Early Childhood Studies Degrees Network and aim to 'strengthen degrees with placements, or that are work-based' (ECSDN, 2025a). These competencies help to address the lack of practical experience that presents challenges for future employment, as well as challenges for employers (Lumsden and Musgrave, 2023) and help to raise confidence and skills to support employability (Richardson et al., 2022).

2.2 Benefits and impact of a graduate workforce

International recognition of the benefits of early years graduates shows that they have an impact on improving children's outcomes and life chances (Campbell-Barr et al., 2020). Therefore, supporting Early Years educators' professional learning is a matter of social justice (Sakr and Bonetti, 2023). Yet, in 2020, Pascal, Bertram and Cole-Albäck found that many issues pertaining to the findings of the Nutbrown review (2012) were still in evidence. They assert that if societal and educational disadvantage is to be redressed, investing in the professional learning and development of professionals within the early childhood education and care workforce is crucial. Particularly for children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Mathers et al, 2011; Sylva et al., 2004). Furthermore, there needs to be incentivisation to progress within the profession through the provision of well remunerated leadership opportunities (Pascal, Bertram and Cole-Albäck, 2020).

ECS Graduates have developed a wide skill and knowledge base (Murray, 2013; Osgood, 2010), including theoretical knowledge of child development (Barron 2016), reflective skills (Trodd and Dickerson, 2019), and practical skills drawn from placement (Richardson, et al. 2022). ECS graduates and professionals are driven by an ethic of care and a passion to help support the wellbeing and development of children (Lightfoot and Frost, 2015). This is a key ingredient when working with children (Langford, 2019), with parents valuing this quality highly in those caring for their children (Osgood, 2010).

Ofsted (2022) reports a correlation between high-quality provision and the number of graduates employed, asserting that 'outstanding providers have, on average, nearly twice as many staff with a degree-level qualification as those receiving other inspection outcomes'. Similarly, Bonetti and Blanden (2020) identified a relationship between good outcomes for children across mathematics, communication and emotional development and the qualifications of the staff employed within early childhood settings. Importantly, this impact was further enhanced for disadvantaged children spending more than fifteen hours a week within an early years setting. Consequently, ECS graduates have a key role to play in the development of high-quality settings and in achieving positive outcomes for children (Bonetti and Blanden, 2020; Oppenheim & Archer, 2021).

Highly qualified education and care professionals also have the potential to reduce wider social inequalities (Bonetti and Blanden, 2020; Nutbrown, 2012; Ofsted 2022; Oppenheim & Archer, 2021; Sammons et al., 2015; Sutton Trust, 2021; Sylva, et al. 2004). As they enter the profession, ECS graduates are particularly well-placed to lead practice in improving outcomes for children and families living in the areas of social and economic disadvantage (Early Education, 2022) that are being disproportionately disadvantaged by the current cost-of-living crisis. The development of a highly skilled and highly qualified workforce is central to achieving these goals (Nutbrown, 2021; Ofsted 2022).

2.3 Graduate identity

Many prospective students applying for ECS degrees have an interest in working with young children but are sometimes uncertain about their career trajectories (Richardson and Lumsden, 2023). As a result, they may need individualised support to raise their confidence in their ability to work with children (Holman and Richardson, 2020) and their aspirations for a successful career in the sector. Similarly, Lumsden and Musgrave (2023) suggest that the space that studying for an ECS degree offers, enables students to consider and develop their personal and professional identities.

There needs to be a coherent workforce vision and strategy that addresses professional learning and development and that as part of this, collaborative leadership development needs to be a key feature (Bonetti, 2019; Sakr et al., 2023). Furthermore, Pascal et al. (2020: 32) suggest that the lack of parity between Early Years Teacher (EYT) and Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) means that work in early years settings has ‘limited attractiveness to potential candidates.’ The situation is compounded by ongoing recruitment and retention difficulties within the sector (Early Education, 2022), despite some recognition from OFSTED (2022) of the work that settings are currently undertaking to address the impact that the pandemic and periods of lockdown have had on young children, families and communities. Given this apparent paradox between evidence relating to the significance of a highly skilled ECEC workforce for children, families and society, and a wider social and political context which appears to risk repeatedly undervaluing ECS graduates and professionals, further research which seeks to illustrate and develop understanding in this area is vital.

2.4 Recent challenges in higher education

Notions of professionalism and graduate status are contested, leaving room for individuals and policies to redefine this concept to suit their own needs and purposes (Holmes, 2013; Hordern, 2013; 2014; 2018). Urban *et al.*, (2012) see quality as being related to professionalism within a continuous process that requires emphasis on relational and processual aspects. These aspects are challenged in the current climate in higher education. Marketisation and the cost-of-living crisis are impacting on higher education, with universities seeking evidence of the value of degree courses and the contribution of their graduates to the workforce (McIntyre, 2022). These political

developments are beginning to impact on ECS degrees with courses potentially being discontinued and consequently, the supply of graduate-level practitioners to the sector may be reduced in the coming years.

2.5 Why this research?

There is now an urgent need to consider how ECS degrees are positioned within the higher education sector. The ways in which they contribute to graduate career pathways and identity need to be understood, so that the valuable contributions that ECS graduates make to society are not lost within the current neoliberal culture that is impacting on university decision making. Furthermore, this needs to be considered through the lens of employability and the perceived value of ECS degrees need to be sought. The following section considers the research questions and approaches that have facilitated our exploration into the ways the ECS graduates and ECS degrees contribute to the delivery of services for babies, children, families and communities.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Research design

The design for this study adopted aspects of both pragmatist (Feilzer, 2010) and feminist participatory (Caretta & Riano, 2016) methodologies. This approach was underpinned by the nature and purpose of the research questions and the recommendations of previous ECSDN funded studies (Fairchild et al, 2022), which included an aspiration to focus on regional variations and to increase the number of participants. The study comprised of two phases, the first focused on the perspectives of early childhood graduates and the second on the perspectives of early childhood employers.

3.2 Phase 1 - Online survey

The first phase was designed to address the following research questions:

How have ECS degrees contributed to graduates' career pathways and sense of professional identity within ECEC?

- Where are ECS graduates working and what were their career pathways?
- How do they perceive the value of their ECS degree?
- What are the experiences, challenges and successes of being an ECS graduate in the ECEC sector?

To achieve this, we conducted a mixed methods online survey using Microsoft Forms. This survey was targeted at ECS graduates nationally and promoted via a) the ECSDN conference b) alumni teams at our 3 institutions and c) social media including LinkedIn and X. The survey received 83 responses. Whilst we acknowledge that the recruitment approach means that, to some extent, the sample is likely to have higher representation of ECS graduates who have a) remained active in the sector/professional networks and b) are connected to our three institutions, given the scope of the study and the previous recommendations, we do not feel that this detracts from the utility of the data and its role in provoking further discussion and analysis in this area.

Our approach in Phase 1 focused on understanding the current context for ECS graduates and gaining insights into their perceptions of their qualifications, experiences in the workplace and sense of professional identity. The adoption of a mixed methods approach was appropriate here, with quantitative questions allowing the collation of a larger scale picture of ECS graduate routes and role types, and qualitative questions supporting an understanding of graduate experiences. The survey was divided into three sections: 1) your job role and career pathway, 2) the value of your degree, and 3) your experiences as a graduate. Significant time was given to ensuring questions were clear, specific, non-leading and carefully mapped to the research questions, this included a small pilot within one of our institutions.

Following the data collection stage at the end of Phase 1, qualitative responses to the survey were analysed using an in-person team-based, reflexive thematic analysis inspired by Braun and Clarke (2006; 2022) and quantitative responses were summarised using descriptive statistics. In addition, at this point we also identified a series of micro case studies which were illustrative of the range of career pathways. The analysis of the data was then used to refine the focus and sampling approach when identifying employers to participate in Phase 2.

3.3 Phase 2 - Online world café event

The second phase was designed to answer the research questions:

How do ECS degrees and ECS graduates contribute to the delivery of services to babies, children, families and communities?

- How do employers perceive the value of ECS degrees?
- How do ECS graduates contribute to the delivery of services for children and families and communities?
- What are the challenges and opportunities of employing and working with ECS graduates?
- How can ECS degrees be developed through closer partnership working between settings and Higher Education Institutions?

To address these areas of focus we organised an online workshop involving partner employers connected to each institution. This phase utilised a world café approach inspired by a model outlined by Lohr et al. (2020). This method was selected as a collaborative and discussion-based format of conducting participatory research and collecting qualitative data. The session was hosted via Microsoft Teams with 10 employer representatives attending, these came from across the three regions of England covered by our institutions. Dr Helen Lyndon (CREC) also attended to deliver a guest lecture, which was intended to add value and attractiveness to busy employers who agreed to attend the workshop. It is worth noting that whilst efforts were made to consider opportunities to engage employers who reflected some examples of broader career pathways (which was a key finding in Phase 1), time and logistical constraints meant that we were unsuccessful in extending recruitment for this phase beyond the immediate ECEC sector.

The world cafe approach drew on Lohr et al.'s (2020) principles, meaning we aimed to facilitate an online discussion session which was hospitable, connected diverse perspectives, encouraged contribution and focused on harvesting collective understandings. Practically, the session involved organising rotating small group breakout room discussions focused on a key theme relating to employing ECS graduates, each facilitated by a member of the research team. Groups were allocated 15 minutes per theme, covering a) value and contributions b) challenges and opportunities and c) partnerships between employers and universities. Each discussion led to a collaborative response, this was recorded on a live 'Padlet' and used to further contextualise the introduction of the theme to the next group. By the end of the session all participants had engaged in small group discussion relating to all three themes. These small group discussions were also recorded to support analysis.

Following the workshops, world cafe data was analysed by adopting collaborative reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006; 2022), which allowed for embracing the complexity and richness of the findings as well as considering any contradictions or tensions. Following initial engagement with the data, our analysis developed via a collaborative in-person process, drawing on the value of considering different perspectives as part of a process of co-research (Lyndon & Edwards, 2022).

3.4 Ethical considerations

The project received ethical approval from Birmingham City University and this approval was then ratified by the respective ethics committees at both the University of the West of England and Canterbury Christ Church University.

In keeping with BERA guidelines (2024) the team remained committed to an ethical approach throughout the project, ensuring it was an ongoing concern at every stage of the research process. We also recognised the ethical implications of representing and

interpreting the views of others in research and this was something we reflected on as a team at each stage of the project.

We were concerned about the time and work pressures faced by our potential participants, as well as the importance of not taking graduates or employers away from work with young children. We responded to this by ensuring the survey was accessible and could be completed in under 15 minutes, and the world cafe was efficiently organised with discussions completed in under an hour, and value for employers enhanced through the guest lecture.

All participants were fully informed about the project aims and informed consent was collected in relation to all data. All data has been anonymised in this report, and in other related outputs. In addition, to ensure data protection compliance throughout the project, GDPR compliant tools were used throughout and all data was anonymised prior to being shared between institutions.

4.0 Findings: Phase 1 Survey

This section reports on the findings from the Phase 1 online survey, which aimed to address the research question:

How have ECS degrees contributed to graduates' career pathways and sense of professional identity within ECEC?

We have collated key quantitative data relating to further study (Table 1) and diverse career pathways (Table 2), before illustrating examples of some career pathways (Table 3) and our thematic analysis of ECS graduates' perceptions of benefits, successes and challenges. Further analysis is provided in section 6.0.

4.1 Graduates going on to further study

The survey results demonstrated that 51% of ECS students had pursued some form of further study following completion of their degree. Most examples were at postgraduate level, but some chose to study specialist certificate and diploma level pathways:

Course	Percentage of Respondents
PGCE Primary	33%
Masters/MSc	29%
Certificate/Diploma/Level 4 in specialist area	12%
Postgraduate	10%
EYITT/EYTS/EYPS	6%

PhD	6%
SENCO	2%
NPQ	2%

Table 1: Courses studied post ECS degree

4.2 Graduate career pathways

The ECS graduates who responded to the survey had progressed into a wide range of different roles. Whilst many of these roles were directly related to ECEC (which is the focus of much of the literature in section 2.0), these roles also encompassed other related areas including primary teaching (21%), health sector roles (10%) and work in social care (9%).

Role	
Primary Teaching/TA	21%
Early years practitioner	16%
Early Years manager/leadership role/setting owner	15%
Other Sectors	13%
Health sector professional	10%
Social care role	9%
Teaching FE or HE	7%
Specialist SEND Teacher/TA	4%
EY consultant/trainer	2%
EYT/EYP	1%
Childminder	1%
Masters/PhD student	1%

Table 2: Career Pathways post ECS degree

Survey data then allowed us to explore examples of individual career pathways, which illustrated a rich diversity of examples within our sample. Whilst Table 2 highlights that many ECS graduates do progress into ECEC and work directly with children, Table 3 illustrates the presence of many examples where graduates then moved on, either into related sectors (e.g. policy) or advisory/training/management roles, as their careers progressed.

Current Role	Research Associate and Early Education Consultant	Detective Constable	PGCE student	Deputy Manager
Qualification Level	EY consultant/trainer	Postgrad	Primary PGCE	EYITT/EYTS/EYPS
Year of ECS Graduation	2009	2017	2016	2013
Course post ECS	MA Education	Post grad in policing	Currently completing PGCE in Primary and Early Years 3-7 years.	EYPS through university Montessori assistant course

			Level 3 Certificate in Forest School Leadership.	
Job/Roles	Area Senco LA LA Advisor Ofsted Inspector	Family support worker Family Group Conference Coordinator Senior family support worker Detective Constable	Early Years Practitioner Forest School Leader	Childcare Play Worker for holiday company Early Years Practitioner Room leader

Table 3: Individual career pathway examples

4.3 Benefits, successes and challenges of being an ECS graduate

The survey also provided an insight into ECS graduates' views of the benefits, successes and challenges they had experienced. Table 4 illustrates our identification of some of the key themes which were generated through our analysis of the qualitative responses to open questions relating to these issues.

Benefits & successes	Challenges
Knowledge and understanding (n-60) such as child development (n-33), policy and legislation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expectations to know everything about children • Changes to legislation and guidance
Skills e.g. reflection, Pedagogy, application of knowledge e.g. planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concerns about EYFS qualification requirements (n-12)
Career progression (n-18) (although (n-7) cited lack of opportunities as a challenge)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low wages (n-17) • Expectations to go into teaching
Personal development such as time and project management, self-confidence, team building, academic writing, communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expectations to cope with a higher workload • Stressful occupation • Degree status (eg 'full and relevant')
Professional confidence as leaders, mentors and advocates for ECEC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low status/lack of recognition (n-18) • Lack of respect
Access to higher level qualifications , teaching and jobs to access higher pay and opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Degree is not seen as a 'good degree'

Table 4: ECS Graduates' views of benefits, successes and challenges

The value of enhanced knowledge and understanding was by far the most frequently cited benefit, with examples including reference to policy and legislation, sociological

perspectives, pedagogy, child protection and safeguarding, inclusion and self-regulation. The ECS degree enhanced graduates' "...ability to analyse information and be curious", while others said, "the work we did surrounding inclusivity has been very helpful". Critical thinking, the application of theoretical knowledge and deeper observation also stood out as key skills when it comes to understanding children's behaviour.

Participants within this phase of the study also placed value on their personal development which included leadership skills and their confidence in advocating for the ECEC sector. Importantly, they stated that the ECS degree had granted them access to further study, while one respondent summarised the benefits of their degree by saying, "Honestly I find all of it useful, I apply it every day in what I do and this is relevant to all of the roles I fulfilled in the early years sector."

References to challenges were more varied, which may be seen to reflect the varying professional contexts illustrated by the above tables. Graduates expressed concerns regarding pay and status. References to unclear qualification requirements and pathways were relatively frequent and some responses alluded to challenging or unrealistic expectations placed upon graduates.

4.3 Feeling valued as an ECS graduate

The survey asked graduates whether they felt valued by employers, colleagues, parents and policymakers. 37 responded that they did feel valued by all four of these groups, suggesting that their ECS degrees were valued in practice. Although some graduates already had experience of working in the sector before gaining the degree, they felt that the higher-level qualification had enabled them to enter new roles and achieve their career goals.

However, when asked to explain more negative experiences, graduates noted that while policymakers may understand the value of the degree, "that doesn't always reflect the opportunities given or the financial rewards". Others felt strongly that their degree was not valued in policy stating that:

"I think the government and general public do not see us as professionals, more like babysitters. 0-5 are the most important years in a child's life yet the qualifications practitioners are required to have is incomparable to that of a teacher for any other age group."

Similarly, in response to the question of whether they felt valued by parents and policymakers, one graduate said, "People seem to judge the ECS degree as an 'easy' subject and policymakers do not always seem to take our knowledge seriously or think we know what we're talking about". These experiences impact significantly on ECS graduates' sense of professional identity.

4.4 Professional identity

Phase 1 data demonstrates that ECS degrees have helped graduates to navigate their careers into a range of graduate roles and developed their professional identity. They achieve this by developing their knowledge base and expanding their professional skills through placement. Graduates learned,

“Not only how children develop and grow, but the importance of understanding of people's families and the bigger impact. How to support families and communities, laws and legislation. How we all have a responsibility to help others and the importance of it. What impact one person can have. To be kind and help people however you can.”

Furthermore, graduates reflected on the value that an ECS degree has had within their varied and unique career pathways explaining that, “I believe my ECS degree is what gave me the foundation to go and study my PGCE. I had a good knowledge of how children develop and was able to use this in practice”.

They also referred to the wide range of transferrable skills they have developed and the ways in which this has contributed to their professional identity and career pathways:

“It has prepared me incredibly well for my chosen career. I also know that if I want to change career, I have learnt lots of transferable skills from my degree to other fields working with children.”

When reflecting on the impact that the ECS degree has had on their work with families, the wider community and other professionals, participants commented, “Families really appreciate being supported by someone who has an in depth understanding of child development”. These professional skills and personal values are important outcomes of the degree that contribute to developing self-confidence and the ability to work effectively within professional teams. When writing about their own degree, one graduate explained that:

“I have had a fantastic experience meeting other professionals in the sector through my degree. I have a deeper understanding of policy, and I have been encouraged to professionally challenge many aspects of the early years.”

Graduates went on to identify other skills and attributes that they have developed throughout their degree, all of which have supported them in developing their own professional identity and career pathways. Examples included:

“The confidence to lead, and to mentor others in supporting children's needs.”

“Continuous reflection helped to enhance my own practice.”

“I feel strongly that I work with empathy and professional curiosity with all of the children and families that I work with. I have an excellent understanding of the

role of schools and other education establishments, and this has supported me to be able to interact and integrate within each school community I work within.”

In summary:

“It supported me in shaping my values and developing my own pedagogy. It also supported me in being not only a reflective practitioner, but a reflective person in all areas of my life through the skills I developed on the degree course”.

These are the key skills, knowledge and experiences that enabled graduates to gain a strong sense of professional identity.

5.0 Findings: Phase 2 World Café Event

This section reports on the findings from Phase 2. These are structured using key themes identified in the analysis of the world cafe data in response to the question:

How do ECS degrees and ECS graduates contribute to the delivery of services to babies, children, families and communities?

5.1 Knowledgeable and reflective professionals

Employers consistently agreed that graduates bring a deep knowledge of child development and an understanding of what that looks like in practice. They appreciate the holistic, interconnected and interdependent nature of children’s learning and are able to use their own observations to assess and plan for meaningful teaching and learning experiences. Graduates display elevated reflection and critical thinking skills. They question assumptions and understand the meaning and purpose behind their own practice. They identify opportunities for individual children’s further learning while sharing what they notice with others to lead pedagogical practice. However:

“... it's really individual and down to the person themselves and the type of degree and where they studied, because they are different. There are different types of early years degrees”.

The expectations of graduates in the workplace can also be higher. They are seen to be given more autonomy and responsibility over the direction of the curriculum while they co-construct the pedagogical approach and the learning experiences offered through shared reflection with the rest of team and also the children. ECS graduates are able to interpret and carry out their own context-specific action research within the setting, leading to evidence-based practice. Graduates bring new perspectives and fresh knowledge, “...it's refreshing to have somebody coming in with that new perspective...”.

When summing up the value of employing a graduate, one employer suggested that while it is not essential to have a degree, it is “cherry on top of the cake”.

5.2 Complexity of the role

Employers wanted people to understand that early childhood graduates are working in very complex communities where children experience physical, language and emotional difficulties, often as a result of living in poverty. New graduates need to know the theory and the reasons behind this, while external expectations are centred around supporting children with SEND, particularly in areas of deprivation where needs are high. Staff recruitment and retention can be challenging in these areas because applicants may not want to take on the additional responsibility, and “the job is just a lot harder than what it was”. Staff work long hours and it is emotionally and physically very demanding, yet, “... it seems that we are just little bit invisible”.

Employers were keen to make effective use of graduates’ high level of knowledge but explained that:

“...is not possible because sometimes at the end of the day they are exhausted. Everyone is doing what they need just to hold on and make sure everyone is safe, and that’s it. There is no energy left for anything more.”

They argued that this is something policymakers need to consider:

“... they need to hear our voice, our voice for practice, what we are feeling... we have to manage all of that and keep our emotion down. Keep smiling, keep loving.”

5.3 Graduate level pay

Employers reported a significant gap between the high salary expectations of graduates after completing an ECS degree and what is affordable within early years settings:

“The bread and butter of it is salaries and for people to feel that their salary level is commensurate with the years of studies that they've done.”

Given their higher-level qualifications and the benefits that graduates bring to their settings, it is perhaps not surprising that ECS graduates have an expectation of a graduate role and progressing rapidly to a management position with a salary that is commensurate with the time and expense of their studies. Leadership roles also bring an expectation of higher pay than other practitioners who may have been working in the setting longer which “makes it really challenging to pay people maybe what they're expecting when there's no statutory need or kind of recognition of the roles within the setting”.

These responses suggest an important role for the Early Childhood Studies Graduate Practitioner Competencies in evidencing a graduate’s practical experience and enabling them to access leadership roles at an earlier point in their careers. Several employers argued that a more equitable and sustainable solution would be the introduction of

national pay scales for early years practitioners along the lines of those already in place for teachers, providing “clear career progression that's funded”.

Employers in nurseries and daycare settings feel they are competing against schools and other professions. “It feels like sometimes they step right over early years provision to go into something else that has a more kind of graduate led workforce approach.”

Highly qualified staff:

“come in for a bit and then they'll go back to teaching because there's no career progression or they're not being paid what they feel that they should be paid. But again, we don't have pay scales that we work along. We just set our own pay scales for a company and that varies with every single nursery. We're all very, very different, whereas schools have something to work towards and follow.”

5.4 Funding for a graduate-led workforce

Funding was also a major concern for the employers themselves as many were struggling to manage deficit budgets and the overall sustainability of their settings, therefore with, “all the will in the world, we'd like to recruit higher-level practitioners, but there's no money there. There's no investment”. Others reported simply that, “We don't really have any graduates applying”. However, all agreed, “We definitely need more funding, and definitely more pay, if you really want to have a graduate”.

The option of matched funding from central government or local authorities was discussed at length, perhaps where employers provide a basic salary, “and then it gets matched, or a percentage of money gets matched, so we can build that pay scale up”. This idea led to further discussion about former funding models where settings had previously received top-up funding for having a graduate, or other quality elements of funding that could be used to support a graduate lead.

Examples of the Northern Ireland model of qualifications, where a qualified specialist lead is required (DoE(NI), 2025), and an English example where specialist leaders are currently funded through a local Early Years Hub, were also discussed as potential approaches. However, employers were aware that they are mostly competing against schools and possibly other professions when seeking to recruit highly qualified staff. “...it does almost feel like sometimes they go right over early years provision, or the PVI sector for sure”.

5.5 Valuing graduates within the wider sector

Employers were unanimous in saying they feel undervalued and the workforce is not given the profile or professional respect it deserves. We “feel quite insulted really”, “...we're never, ever, ever getting recognised!” This lack of recognition is likely to impact negatively on potential ECS students and new graduates entering the workplace if early years professionals are “...not seen as academic or competent in terms of contributing to the larger discussion around child development and children's learning”.

Employers often chose to focus on their own organisations and local contexts because that is where they felt able to have the most impact. However, they agree that it is important for everybody within the sector to be clear about the theory behind their work, to explain its rewarding elements as well as the challenges, and to develop discourses that give themselves credibility. National conversations need to happen “...to change the perceptions of how our workforce is. And it’s not just babysitting. It just annoys everyone, all of us that are in it.”

5.6 Valuing the degree

Furthermore, employers felt strongly that policy does not value Early Childhood Studies degrees as, unlike the Level 3 qualification, there is no statutory requirement to have a degree:

“... you've got people coming in as graduates and coming into an incredibly important sector that's, you know, vital for the health and future of our whole society and they're not valued, and they're not paid and there isn't clear career progression.”

Employers saw the expansion of the nursery entitlement (DfE, 2025) as a lost opportunity to build and develop a clear workforce strategy while addressing some of these issues. “But instead, you're expanding the entitlement and making these issues worse for the recruitment and retention of staff”. Employers concluded:

“Yes, we can do the best we can with whatever we have. They will feel there is a good, loving atmosphere, but they need more than just people to be happy with them. Graduates need to have a career path. If they want to project themselves in the future, they need to see that yes, I can bring my career here.”

At present, “We've got a lot of people with EYITT, people with QTS and you know, who are just working below their qualification ultimately... it feels unsustainable really.”

5.7 Supporting and retaining graduates

Low pay and status in the sector mean that even where employers are “...lucky and have got someone who is a graduate” they struggle to retain them:

“...we lose them because they get tempted by another nursery that's going to give them maybe another 10 or 20 pence an hour and they go. Also, the lure of the schools is there isn't it, because they're term time and their hours are a lot more regular than a nursery like ours that is open from 7:00am 'till 7:00pm, 364 days a year.”

Individual employers have found their own strategies to support the retention and professional development of graduates in their settings. These focus on the graduate’s own interests and passions, perhaps developing a project or an aspect of work across the setting. Some settings ask their graduates to work alongside the manager on

pedagogical leadership, shaping the curriculum and evaluation projects. This gives them a sense of being respected as well as a degree of professional autonomy. Graduates apply their critical reflection skills to identify areas for improvement and promote excellent outcomes for children. “So yeah, I suppose just utilising them as much as we can by bringing in what they love most.” Employers explained “... it's about seeing the competence of an individual” but also:

“...being aware of issues of race, diversity and unconscious bias that can impact on whether a graduate receives positive validation and feels able to be aspirational in their career or able to speak up on matters of inclusion.”

Therefore, looking at the wider setting, employers focus on, “ensuring that the vision and values of the setting can align and be quite aspirational. We've got a lot of our graduates apply to work here because of the vision and values. Something that people can get behind.”

Other creative solutions included offering an additional paid day off for staff member's birthday and significant discounts on staff childcare, although these are costly options for the setting.

These incentives need to be balanced with potential tensions around graduates' transition into the workplace where the relationships between new graduates and existing staff must be managed carefully. It is important for graduates to be able to listen to and learn from those who have more experience. “Sometimes graduates have to humble themselves and listen to those people who are maybe less qualified than them” as they are “essentially doing the same job as everybody else”. Furthermore, the current pressures on the sector impact on the availability of leaders and managers to support graduates as much as they might wish to. Managers are:

“...burnt out, surviving not thriving. Firefighting has an impact on enthusiastic new educators. You know, on the end of the long hours, we are so tired that we don't really have much strength to be excited about any new research. We just want to go home, have our food and just relax. It's so hard.”

5.8 Bridging theory and practice through placement

Employers noted that students often struggle to balance practice and theory in placement because either “they don't know what to expect or they come in with a certain expectation” and settings are all very different. Basic care needs “like changing and nappy or bottle feeding” need to be understood quickly for students to engage with what's happening on the ground.

Managers and practitioners from one setting had visited the university to give guest lectures and to prepare students for placement, explaining, “What we are looking at is what the impact will be and how those knowledges can be used effectively and transformed to make a clear difference in children's learning and development.”

There was general agreement that students require more experience in placement so that they are able to contribute to practice, work under pressure and not just see themselves as being there to observe. Employers concluded that what is needed is a placement experience that acts as “a bridge to reality”.

5.9 Many different routes and qualification pathways

When discussing the role of ECS graduates, it became clear that there is confusion around qualification levels and professional development pathways. “There’s the part-time foundation degree route versus students who have been studying full time and the disparity is unbelievable. ECS is so different to the EYT in terms of teaching standards”. Several employers were modelling practice and teaching their own apprentices through 18 months to 2 years of study, leading them to believe that sometimes these staff members “come out with a higher level of practical knowledge and understanding of being able to apply their theory to practice than ECS students we’ve had who have come straight out of their studies.” These concerns returned the conversation back to the need for a national qualification framework linked to appropriate pay scales.

5.10 A two-way partnership between universities and the sector

Employers reflected on their partnerships with the universities offering ECS courses and were keen to emphasise the importance of building a reciprocal, two-way relationship to achieve a greater impact of the degree courses. They suggested that universities could “listen more to employers” and to what happens in an “on the day-to-day basis with children”. Equally, they would like to hear good news stories and new ideas from research that universities could contribute to practice. Therefore, it is important to “keep that communication flowing from both sides”.

Having a key contact at the university, with a number to call or an email address to write to, is particularly helpful. This is important when things go wrong or there are concerns but also in having regular contact with module leaders who can support students to gain a better understanding of the expectations before starting placement. Although students may source their own placements independently, stronger relationships with the university tutors would enable managers to support students to do their best and perhaps be more aspirational in their own practice.

Employers would also find it “useful to know a bit more about the content about what’s being learned” or to have “... a friendly professional partner who has a higher level of knowledge or understanding of a specific type of research coming in and saying, hey, that’s really interesting because in my research I saw this”. They suggested creating a network where lecturers and the leadership team from the setting “get together and have conversations on a regular basis”. A “leadership learning circle” perhaps.

When arranging these kinds of joint events, online and during the working day are best because of the long working hours in the sector and “people are less likely to want to do stuff in the evening”. It is also helpful to check other early years training and

development opportunities that are being offered in the local area to avoid potential clashes. The aim would be for “a more joined-up approach” across a sector “where people are underpaid and undervalued, so professional development that is both supporting people's holistic development and a chance to reflect and to build” is very important.

5.11 An eco-system of early childhood

Partnerships between employers, universities, local authorities, stronger practice hubs and the wider sector was envisioned by employers as being part of an “ecosystem of early childhood” with a united, synchronised approach and a shared vision and vocabulary. At a local level, this might be an eco-system of contextualised perspectives, and opportunities to discuss and provide a strategic holistic approach to workforce development, as well as issues such as retention and recruitment.

However, developing an early childhood eco-system requires universities to engage more actively in existing networks, enhancing spaces to share, rather than trying to create new ones in competition for practitioners’ time and resources. There are already so many networking opportunities for leaders and managers as well those specialising in working with babies, or two-year-olds, or outdoor learning for example, but closer partnership working within an eco-system of early childhood could provide new opportunities for practitioners to engage with research and consider undertaking higher-level qualifications themselves.

6.0 Discussion and Analysis

In this section, our collaborative, reflexive thematic analysis brings together the findings from both phases of data collection to explore the overall experiences and perceptions of ECS graduates in the workplace.

This research has revealed the diverse and unique graduate career pathways that have arisen through a combination of the individual ECS graduate’s identity, their skills and interests and the opportunities that have been made available in the workplace. This reflects the breadth of skills and the knowledge base that graduates develop during their degree (Murray, 2013; Osgood, 2010), enabling them to transfer their knowledge within different career contexts. Graduates have navigated their careers according to these opportunities and this often involves further study while the degree acts as a launchpad for these different career roles and further qualifications. However, the graduate’s own agency is a key factor as this positions them to be able to take up the opportunities when they arise. There is potential therefore, to consider ways of supporting and guiding graduates through these transitions. This requires investment in both provision for continuing professional learning and through leadership opportunities (Pascal, Bertram and Cole-Alback, 2020).

Deep, child-centred knowledge, critical thinking, research skills focused on developing their own practice, and ongoing reflection, reinforced through pedagogical leadership,

are the key benefits that are valued and supported by employers. These findings are consistent with the wealth of existing research highlighting the contribution of higher-level qualifications to enhanced quality of provision and outcomes for children (Barron, 2016; Bonetti & Blanden, 2020; Murray, 2013; Ofsted, 2022, Trodd & Dickerson, 2019). They show the impact of ECS degrees and their value to society which needs to be acknowledged more widely outside of the sector.

However, the expectations of graduates are high, and the role is growing and becoming increasingly complex. New graduates often find the transition into the workplace challenging and therefore more support may be needed to provide a bridge from the theory learned in university to the practice in settings. This could be achieved through enhanced mentoring and induction frameworks and a coherent workforce vision (Bonetti, 2019; Sakr et al, 2023) that considers ways in which graduates might experience a seamless transition between their degree and into graduate employment.

A key message from both graduates and employers is that they do not feel valued by policymakers. The sector requires more funding to support graduate roles, and after years of study, graduates rightly expect a graduate-level salary. There need to be clearer career pathways and consistent language around the roles and qualification titles. Pay, terms and conditions should have parity with graduates working in teaching to achieve greater recognition and respect. Ideally, this would include national qualifications frameworks and associated pay scales for the early childhood workforce.

These arguments are all reflected in earlier research (Pascal et al., 2020; Nutbrown, 2012, Nutbrown, 2021), while the strength of the present study lies in the inclusion of new voices from both graduates and employers who are clearly continuing to struggle but now within the current financial climate. However, there is an interesting contrast between the career pathways described by the graduates and the findings from the world café discussions. Although employers talked about losing graduates to teaching, many have stayed within the broader multi-agency working context despite being acutely aware of the lack of recognition. This is a testament to their commitment to working with children and making a positive difference in their lives. Graduates are clearly committed to helping to improve outcomes for children and families in areas of social and economic disadvantage (Early Education, 2022).

Many graduates valued their degree experience and the personal skills they had developed alongside the professional knowledge. Their diverse career trajectories illustrate the transferable nature of these skills and their confidence in themselves as graduates. As Lumsden and Musgrave (2023) argue, it is this values-based, holistic and transformational nature of early childhood studies that gives it its value and yet this remains largely invisible to policy makers and higher education institutions who seem more concerned with financial outcomes and employability metrics (Hordern, 2018).

Greater advocacy is clearly required to promote the importance of ECS degrees for both individual students, children and families and wider society. During the world café discussions, employers called for deeper, more engaged partnerships and communities of practice with universities. Perhaps then, this may offer the greatest potential for

strengthening the position of ECS degrees, through a united ‘eco-system of early childhood’, supported and connected through the Early Childhood Studies Degrees Network.

7.0 Recommendations and Responses

1. Promoting the value of the degree experience to the individual learner

There remains a strong need to advocate for the recognition of the value and importance of ECS graduates both within the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) sector and in higher education institutions.

- Raise awareness of the transferable skills developed through the ECS degree experience, their importance for employability and their ‘graduateness’ in nature.
- Universities and key organisations, including ECSDN, could seek to showcase and promote the wider variety of career pathways which ECS graduates follow.

2. Advocating for ECS degrees and their value to society

Employers value ECS graduates for their knowledge and understanding, but there needs to be a shared appreciation of this value from parents, policymakers and wider society, especially in financial terms.

- ECS programme leads and academics, professional organisations, and ECEC employers need to work collaboratively to raise awareness of the contribution of ECS graduates among parents, policymakers, and wider society and to advocate for policy change.

3. Bridging the gap between theory and practice

ECS degrees support elevated reflective and critical thinking skills which enhances graduates' personal development as well as localised, context-specific pedagogical and research knowledge. However, graduates continue to require support to develop their understanding of wider contextual factors such as the impact of poverty and additional needs as well as receiving more support to develop their leadership skills, once in employment.

- This could be supported through the development of further alignment between degree and workplace professional learning opportunities.
- Opportunities could be provided for graduates to network together within ECSDN. This would enable them to share experiences and develop a stronger sense of professional identity as alumni.

- It is important to promote the role of the ECS Graduate Practitioner Competencies in enhancing graduates' professional knowledge and confidence in their own ability to take the lead in the workplace. These experiences foster an aspirational attitude to career planning.

4. An eco-system of early childhood

A joined-up, bi-directional partnership approach to working with the sector, that supports ECS students and employers as well as universities is needed at a time of crisis for the sector.

- These partnerships could be further developed through the enhancement of existing networks and further joining up of professional learning opportunities to establish an eco-system of early childhood studies networks, linked through association with the ECSDN. This could include supporting settings through opportunities to further develop mentoring and coaching for students and graduates.
- Universities should review the ways in which they work with ECEC employers, identifying opportunities for 2-way relationships which include potential for aspects of co-design and improving engagement/presence in existing sector networks.

4. National qualifications frameworks and pay scales

The recognition, retention and impact potential of ECS graduates within the ECEC sector continues to be limited by the absence of adequate structures and resourcing to support graduate employment.

- Policy makers urgently need to work towards a defined graduate level role within ECEC, with appropriate status and remuneration to support 'the sustainability of a graduate workforce' (ECSDN, 2025b).
- Policy makers should work with the workforce and the education sector to resolve the need for clarity regarding nationally recognised qualification pathways, relevancy and levels (Nutbrown, 2012).

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We hope the recommendations will support a wider recognition of ECS degrees and the important role that their graduates play in supporting young children, their families and wider communities.

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