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# A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF EARLY YEARS DEGREES AND EMPLOYMENT PATHWAYS

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## Executive summary

Degree-qualified staff in early years settings have been identified as contributing to the overall quality of services and to improve children's outcomes. Yet, despite the international recognition of the importance of a graduate workforce for early years services, little is known about the structure or content of early years degrees available in England. In the last few years, several organisations have tried to provide some clarity through the development of competence frameworks, but none of these are mandatory and there is still little information to ascertain what theoretical and/or practical elements these degrees should contain. This leads to a fragmentation that is evident in, but goes beyond, the array of degree types on offer.

In addition, while degrees are recognised for their pedagogical contribution to the quality of early years practices, the benefits in terms of employment conditions accruing from having a degree are not evident. Fluctuating policy commitments have resulted in a two-tier system, whereby staff in the maintained sector are required to hold a degree with Qualified Teacher Status (QTS), while the commitment for a graduate led workforce in the private, voluntary and independent (PVI) sectors has been removed. On entry to the workforce, those with QTS have established mentoring provision, with little known about the provisions for those working in the PVI sector. It is not clear whether changes in policy have resulted in those obtaining early years degrees to select alternative pathways, and, if so, what bearing this has on their earnings.

Our goal was to fill in these evidence gaps by exploring the content of the full range of early years degrees in England available during 2019 and the employment trajectories of early years graduates for 2012/13, the latest year for which suitable data is available.

The first stage of the research undertook a mapping of the different types of early years degrees available in England (such as Bachelor of Education, Bachelor of Arts, Postgraduate Certificates in Education, the historic Early Years Professional Status, and the current Early Years Teacher Status) and the associated entry requirements, course content and practice (work-placement) arrangements. The second stage of the analysis examined data on early years graduates' outcomes to investigate entry (into programmes) and exit characteristics of students, as well as their employment pathways, such as type of employment, geographical movement to find employment and earnings, three and a half years after graduation.

## Key findings

- **Early years degree choices in England are highly fragmented.** A search on the UCAS database identified 320 degrees from which a prospective early years student in England could choose. Analysis of course descriptors identified variable entry requirements, particularly in relation to the UCAS entry points (ranging from 16 to 112) and whether there were core minimum requirements, such as GCSEs in Mathematics, English and Science.
- **Degree content and age specialisation are fragmented.** Analysis of online course descriptors demonstrated that early years degrees cover a range of subjects, but with no obvious common core. References to the age foci of degrees extended beyond what might typically be described as 'early years'. Degrees had a strong employment orientation focussing primarily on professional practice and reflection, alongside pedagogy (teaching and learning). And yet, they lacked clear references to future statutory aspects of working in the early years, such as child protection and children's rights.
- **Work-placement arrangements are also fragmented, with links between theory and practice not always strong or uniform.** While some degrees 'encouraged' students to undertake work-experience/placements, others stipulated a set number of hours to be done, per term, year or over the duration of the degree. In some instances, the degree was designed to be

combined with paid employment. Detail on the work-placement arrangements was often unclear, including whether or not students would receive a mentor from either the university or employer, and what processes were in place for assessment.

- **The early years student population differ from the broader student population in a number of ways.** Almost half of the 2012/13 cohort was 30 years or older when they finished their course. While directly comparable figures are not available, when considering all undergraduates across the UK, in 2012/13 only 27 per cent of students were over the age of 25. Additionally, early years students also had a non-traditional educational background, such as level 3 vocational qualifications (36 per cent) and level 4/5 qualifications (27 per cent). This suggests that these courses are fulfilling a widening participation aim in terms of increasing the age range of potential students and may allow for prior work experience among this group.
- **Students' demographic characteristics are linked to the characteristics of the courses they undertake and, in turn, have an impact on their employment opportunities.** Of the cohort under study, 41 per cent of early years students were studying part-time compared to 24 per cent for all undergraduate students in England. The large proportion of part-time students is driven significantly by the older student population, and may reflect a greater need or willingness to balance study with work, care or other responsibilities. In addition, 30 per cent of students studying early years courses were doing so as part of a foundation degree, compared to an average of 5 per cent of all students in England. Finally, only 5 per cent enrolled in Initial Teacher Training or PGCE courses, despite these courses having guaranteed teacher training components and therefore likely to be linked to career incentives.
- **The majority of early years graduates find employment with the sector but there is no real financial incentive to stay.** Three and a half years after graduation, 56 per cent of the students in our sample were employed in the early years sector, 15 per cent worked in occupations classified as *Managers and proprietors* and 28 per cent found employment outside of the sector. The lowest earning group appears to be *Managers and proprietors*, with 60 per cent earning less than £20,000 per year, compared to 47 per cent of those employed in the early years sector as non managers/proprietors and 43 per cent of those employed outside of the early years sector. Beside differences for those in managerial roles, however, there appears to be little variation in pay between those inside and outside the sector, suggesting that even for those with a degree in early years there is little economic incentive to remain employed within the sector.
- **There is a clear salary premium for those accessing early years courses with a more academic-oriented background and for pursuing teacher training.** Three and a half years after graduation, 43 per cent of students who entered with a degree or above earned more than £25,000, compared to only 30 per cent of those entering with a level 3 academic qualification and 21 per cent of those entering with level 3 (vocational) qualification. In addition, 54 per cent of graduates without teacher training earned less than £20,000 compared to only 21 per cent of those with teacher training; instead, 51 per cent of those studying teacher training courses earn over £25,000, compared to 23 per cent of those without teacher training.
- **The early years workforce is highly localised.** The vast majority of early years students travelled less than 50km between their pre-university residence and study location (79 per cent) and between their study and work location (77 per cent). We also observed a clear preference for students to work close to their pre-university residence (92 per cent stay within 50km), likely reflecting students "moving back" after completing their course. Meanwhile, teacher training courses are unequally distributed across the country, becoming a key determinant of which areas are likely to be well-served by the graduate workforce.

## Conclusions

The goal of this study was to provide new insights into what an early years degree constitutes in England and the employment trajectories of graduates. The evidence gap in this important area of early years practice and policy has hindered advocacy efforts in support of a sustained policy commitment for a degree-qualified workforce in early years services. Meanwhile, fluctuating policy commitments for a graduate workforce across the sector have exacerbated a two-tier model between graduates obtaining QTS and those who do not. Data on graduate employment clearly shows an employment premium amongst graduates with QTS.

Although degree descriptors illustrate a strong employment focus in their content, there was much variability in the entry requirements, age focus, course content and work-placement arrangements. Despite the employment focus, there are questions as to whether degrees are covering content that will enable students to go on to work in early years services, such as having age specific child development knowledge and meeting statutory obligations around child protection and children's rights. The fragmentation in degrees presents a challenge for the quality of early years degrees due to a lack of clear expectations of the content covered for students or employers. In addition, the fragmentation is higher in the case of degrees without QTS that are more likely to lead to employment in PVI settings compared to those with QTS, further exacerbating the negative consequences of the two-tier system.

The geographical distribution of courses raises concerns around access to quality degrees that will fulfil employment ambitions if students are unable or unwilling to travel for study. The lack of movement is also reflected in employment trajectories, whereby an uneven distribution of courses is likely to reflect an uneven distribution of graduates within the workforce and within the country. Ultimately, the uneven distribution of graduates, alongside the variances in what students will have explored in their degrees, results in variable experiences for children in early years services.

Our recommendations are as follows:

- The establishment of a national group within the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) to review the content and structure of degrees. The review should:
  - Consider what degree content will enable students to fulfil the legislative requirements that they are likely to undertake in future professional roles around child protection and children's rights.
  - Establish the full range of practical elements and models adopted within early years degrees, including mentoring systems, and minimum expectations of the knowledge and skills of mentors. Findings should inform national minimum work placement/practical requirements for early years degrees.
  - Ensure degrees support students to understand their local contexts and respond to the needs of the children and families in their communities.
- Further research on the induction systems present for those going on to work in early years education, comprising of analysis of the structural and process features of existing models (including international examples). The research should provide a structure for the development of a feasibility study on appropriate models, the organisational and cost implications, to inform national minimum induction standards for the early years sector.
- The publication by Higher Education Institutions of how their courses meet QAA benchmarks in a standard and accessible format to support students' choice.



## Background

There is widespread international recognition of the importance of degree-qualified staff for the quality of early years services. Yet, very little is known about what degrees encompass with regard to theoretical and/or practical content, or what the employment outcomes are for those undertaking the degrees (Campbell-Barr, 2019; Oberhuemer, Schreyer & Neuman, 2010; Urban *et al.*, 2011). In fact, while different organisations and groups have produced competences frameworks (Early Childhood Workforce Initiative 2018; ECSDN, 2018; European Commission, 2018), none of these are compulsory and variations among programmes remain, making it difficult to assess the actual impact of a degree on students' preparation and employment opportunities. In addition, research shows that students often recognise the value of a degree from a pedagogical point of view, but do not see a corresponding match in improved employment opportunities or conditions. A recent study conducted in England, for example, found that gaining graduate employment in the sector is usually challenging, but even more so when a graduate lacks prior work experience (Silberfeld & Mitchell, 2018).

In a study of 27 European states, Oberhuemer (2011) found only five countries where a bachelor's degree was not yet required to work with children age three to six, Germany, Austria, the Czech Republic, the Slovak Republic and Malta. Despite evidence linking high quality provision to higher qualifications on entry to the profession (Mathers *et al.*, 2007; Sylva *et al.*, 2004), in England, only the maintained sector is required to hire professionals with a Qualified Teacher Status (QTS), whereas no formal training is required to be employed in the Private, Voluntary and Independent (PVI) sector. Those choosing to work in the early years can undertake Bachelor of Education (BEd.), Bachelor of Arts (BAs) and Postgraduate Certificates in Education (PGCEs) in Early Years Education, Early Childhood Education and Early Childhood Studies. In addition, there is the historic Early Years Professional Status (EYPS), as well as the current Early Years Teacher Status (EYTS). Subject Benchmarks across the different graduate qualifications vary, including varying practical and taught content requirements. Further variations exist between degree providers due to localised interpretations of the Subject Benchmarks (QAA, 2019). Several organisations (Early Childhood Workforce Initiative 2018; ECSDN, 2018; European Commission, 2018) are trying to make the case for stronger government involvement and support for early years professionals to gain graduate status and for providers to recruit and retain graduates, but the fact that we do not know much about what a degree encompasses does not help these advocacy efforts.

International evidence on the content of early years degrees signals the importance of them being education focused (Early *et al.*, 2006; Karila, 2008), but with little to indicate what an education focus constitutes. Evidence from England has highlighted the importance of knowledge on developmental psychology, understandings of how children learn, and strategies for teaching and learning (Brock 2013; Urban *et al.* 2011; Wood 2007) as important for the early years workforce. In countries such as China, Croatia and Hungary, psychology, sociology and theories of pedagogy have been identified as core subjects in the initial training of early years graduates (Dubovicki & Jukić, 2017; Li & Chen, 2016; Oberhuemer, Schreyer & Neuman, 2010). However, it is not evident how (or if) these different areas are reflected within the qualification pathways available for working in early years education in England.

Fluctuating policy commitments to have degree-qualified staff in all early years centres have resulted in a split model, where the maintained (state) sector employs teachers with QTS while PVI providers inconsistently employ graduates as there is no legal requirement for them to do so. This split model is also reflected in different pay levels and working conditions. For example, the average hourly pay is £8.30 for staff working in PVI settings, £14.40 for nursery staff in school-based providers and £15.10 for reception staff (Bonetti, 2018).

In 2007 a commitment for all PVI settings to have access to a graduate resulted in the introduction of the EYPS, a professional accreditation endorsed by the government for graduates who demonstrated that they met the requirements of the EYPS standards. In September 2013, the EYPS training programme was replaced by the EYTS, which focuses on high-quality practice in provision for children aged up to five. The 2017 Early Years Workforce Strategy committed to look into how to increase graduates working in early years settings in disadvantaged areas, but this commitment has recently been scrapped (Kay *et al.*, 2019). Therefore, while significant parts of the sector are trying to retain the focus on graduates as key to high-quality provision, the policy landscape is much more volatile in its commitment.

The lack of clear information on what an early years degree entails does not help in establishing a long-term commitment to graduate staff. With this project we aimed to fill in a gap in the literature that is currently hindering the debate around graduates in early years services through an analysis of what early years degree qualifications constitute and of the employment trajectories of graduates in the early years sector. Higher Education providers are required to return data on students' outcomes to funding and regulatory bodies. We explored these data to identify key characteristics of students who undertake a degree with an early years/early childhood specialisation, and to increase our understanding of the opportunities and challenges the sector faces in making this career path an appealing one.

This project aimed to answer two main questions:

**Research question 1: What are the different routes available to obtain a degree with a specialisation in early years/early childhood in England?**

To answer this question, we undertook:

- A mapping of the different types of early years degrees: BEds, BAs, and PGCE in early years/early childhood.
- An analysis of the different types of degrees in terms of entry requirements, classes/modules required and offered, work-placement, etc. including which elements are compulsory. The core focus of the framework analysis considered the subjects/topics that were present in the full range of degrees identified.

**Research question 2: What are the opportunities and patterns of employment of early years graduates?**

To answer this question, we carried out the following activities:

- An analysis of data on students' entry into programmes and exit characteristics.
- An analysis of the employment patterns of early years graduates addressing questions such as: whether they stay in the early years sector; how far they move to undertake their studies and later to find employment; and the salary premium of different degree types .

The project design was divided into two stages to answer the two core research questions. The next chapter will provide an overview of the methodology and findings related to the systematic review of all early years degrees available in England, which looked at both structural and interpretive features using a framework analysis. Next, we present the findings of the quantitative analysis of Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data on the employment opportunities and trajectories of these students. Finally, we will discuss the findings and provide recommendations for practice and policy.

## Stage One: Systematic Review of Early Years Degrees in England

### Identifying Degrees

To establish the full range of early years degrees available (i.e. those degrees that could lead to employment in the early years and childcare sector) a series of UCAS searches were undertaken to identify the undergraduate courses available for the 2019/20 academic year (see Appendix 1). An initial search identified undergraduate courses, before a second search identified any post-graduate options, such as a Postgraduate Certificate in Education. The search terms used included:

- Childhood studies
- Early childhood education
- Early childhood education and care
- Early childhood studies
- Early education
- Early years

The first search term 'childhood studies' generated 499 courses from 123 providers. Each subsequent search term generated additional results that were checked against the initial list of courses to avoid any duplication. The search took place over July 2019 and it was observed that there were variations in the results depending on when the search was undertaken, indicating new courses being added and others removed. There were also some additional courses identified via university webpages once the analysis commenced.

We initially identified 647 different degree variations. However, on looking at the list of courses we identified areas of duplication. For example, some universities offered a range of combined Honours degrees and/or Foundation Degrees with Top-Up Years, alongside full degrees. Where there were instances of duplication, these were removed from the analysis. In total 320 degrees were identified as suitable for further analysis (a loss of 327 degrees).

### Analysis

We recorded the following structural features for each of the identified courses:

- Name of the institution
- Course title
- Degree type
- Entry requirements (UCAS points and other expectations e.g. GCSEs)
- Fees
- Duration
- Age range (relating to the age of children)
- Placement details (what work-placement requirements are there)
- Optional modules (does the degree offer options in what to study)

An additional structural feature for the level of detail found about the degrees on university websites was added following observing the variation that existed. Adopting a framework approach, a thematic analysis of online course descriptors for the degrees identified was undertaken. The analysis captured the detail provided through the online course descriptors under a series of predetermined themes. Drawing on knowledge of the literature on early years degrees, the themes included:

- International (does the degree provide an English, European or international focus)
- Sociology

- Psychology
- Child Development (psychology, biology, neuroscience)
- Professional Practice and Reflection
- Play
- Creativity
- Health and Well-being
- Environment and Sustainability
- History
- Philosophy
- Children's Rights
- Safeguarding
- Inclusion, social inequality, social justice
- Pedagogy (Teaching and Learning)
- Technology (Digital Childhood)
- Research
- Policy
- Critical/Contesting (does the degree state it offers a critical approach)

Following a pilot analysis of ten degrees, two additional themes were identified:

- Working with Families
- Leadership

The analysis recorded what was written in relation to each theme, leaving blank any theme that did not feature in the course descriptors. The analysis is biased towards those institutions that provided detailed course descriptors.

A summary of each theme was created, including recording overlap with other themes. A mapping exercise then recorded where different themes were connected to each other based on the frequency of references.

### Structural Features of Early Years Degrees in England

The data are presented as an overview of the indexing, charting and mapping, before considering the interpretive features. Therefore, there is a presentation of the quantitative aspects of the framework analysis, before looking at the detail of the course descriptors and what they present in regards to what an early years degree in England looks like.

Of the 647 degrees that were initially identified, 320 were analysed. The loss of just under 50 per cent of degrees is the result of the variables outlined in the suitability section in Appendix 1, but particularly where a core degree was offered as a combined honours. In one instance, a university offered a core early childhood degree with 80 different combined honours. While removal of the combined honours, along with other potentials for duplication in the analysis helps to limit double coding, it is possible that some double coding may still occur. The instances of double coding relate to where a Higher Education Institution offers a degree via a partner college (or other institution). For example, a number of universities validate the degrees offered by Further Education Colleges. In some instances this may mean the same content is being described (as well as delivered). However, as it was not always apparent which university was validating a degree at a college, it was hard to consistently account for such potential double coding. Further, where it was evident what validation agreements were in place,

there were some differences in the online course descriptors, suggesting that a consistent approach to removing duplications as a result of validation agreements was not possible.

The majority of the degrees identified were BAs. The low number of BEd degrees and PGCEs that are specific to early years education demonstrate these courses have been declining across England in recent years. Instead, students undertake courses focused on primary education, some of which include a specific early years focus. The more generic, primary focus of the degrees has the potential to dilute a focus on pedagogies specific to working in early education (Campbell-Barr, 2019).

In combining the number of different Foundation Degrees, it is evident that these make up the next largest proportion of degrees available (30 per cent). In the next chapter we consider the students enrolled on the Foundation Degrees and the respective employment trajectories.

Table 1: Degree Type

Type of Degree	Number of Degree	Percentage of Degrees
BA	6	2%
BA (Hons)	189	59%
BA/BSc (Hons)	2	1%
BEd (Hons)	2	1%
BSc (Hons)	8	3%
Foundation Degree – FD (not specified)	20	6%
Foundation Award - FdA	68	21%
Foundation Education - FdEd	6	2%
Foundation Sciences - FdSc	1	0%
Graduate Certificate	1	0%
Higher National Certificate - HNC	1	0%
Higher National Diploma - HND	4	1%
Msci undergraduate	1	0%
Post Graduate Certificate Education - PGCE	4	1%
Post Graduate Certificate - PGCert	5	2%
Post Graduate Diploma - PgDip	1	0%
Professional Award	1	0%

Entry points across the degrees varied, in part reflecting the different types of degrees. Where stated, the UCAS points ranged from 16 to 112, with an average of 89. Often the entry points were in conjunction with other requirements, such as GCSEs in Maths, English and Science or being in employment and where appropriate, the entry requirements were in relation to the degree classification of a prior qualification. A small number of course descriptors indicated that they would assess students on an individual basis.

The duration of the degrees was again in keeping with the type of degree on offer, with many offering flexibility in how the degree could be undertaken. Flexible pathways included part-time delivery (including focusing on providing delivery in the evenings and/or online), and the offer of a Foundation Degree followed by a 'Top-Up' year to gain the full BA.

Fees were also variable, with a general pattern of University Degrees being a higher value than Foundation Degrees offered by Further Education Colleges. In some instances, website descriptors indicated that there were incentives offered around the fees such as £150 free credit for undergraduate students and a £300 per year a Kick-Start Scheme. Such incentives reflect the wider marketisation of degrees in England. Other incentives related to guaranteed offers of interviews for PGCEs or MAs following the completion of a degree.

Degree structures inevitably vary between institutions, but an anticipated model of delivery was for there to be core modules that all students were required to undertake as part of the course and option modules, whereby students had a choice of modules and were expected to elect their preferred options. Almost a third of the degrees analysed clearly stated that they offered option modules (32 per cent), although more often it was not evident from the online descriptors whether options modules were available or not. Other 'options' included being able to travel abroad for part of the degree under schemes such as Erasmus and 'employment years' or 'sandwich years' that offered time in industry.

Most degrees indicated that there were options for undertaking work placements during the course (71 per cent). In some instances the description of what was required of the placement was generic, such as 'encouraged throughout the course', while other descriptors were specific about the number of hours needed. In relation to the number of hours, this could be a total number of hours over an academic year or the duration of the course, or a statement on the number of hours to be completed per term or per week. There was no consistency in whether the work placements were compulsory or optional. In some instances it was not a placement, but actual employment that was a requirement. The variation reflects that different placement options have been mapped onto the QAA subject benchmarks for subjects such as Early Childhood Studies (QAA, 2019). However, the variation in placement options is at odds with similar early childhood degrees available in countries such as Denmark and Hungary, where students progressively undertake more practice (and responsibility for the practice) throughout the degree (Oberhuemer, Schreyer & Neuman, 2010).

Just over a third of the degree descriptors (36 per cent) provided detail of the age range of the children and young people to be covered in the degrees. As can be seen in Table Two, there is little consistency in the age of the children that are the focus of the degrees and at times, the focus was on a particular school stage (Key Stage) rather than the age of the child. In a few instances, the course descriptors indicated that students could focus on different ages within the same degree.

Table 2: Age Focus of the Children/Young People within the Degree

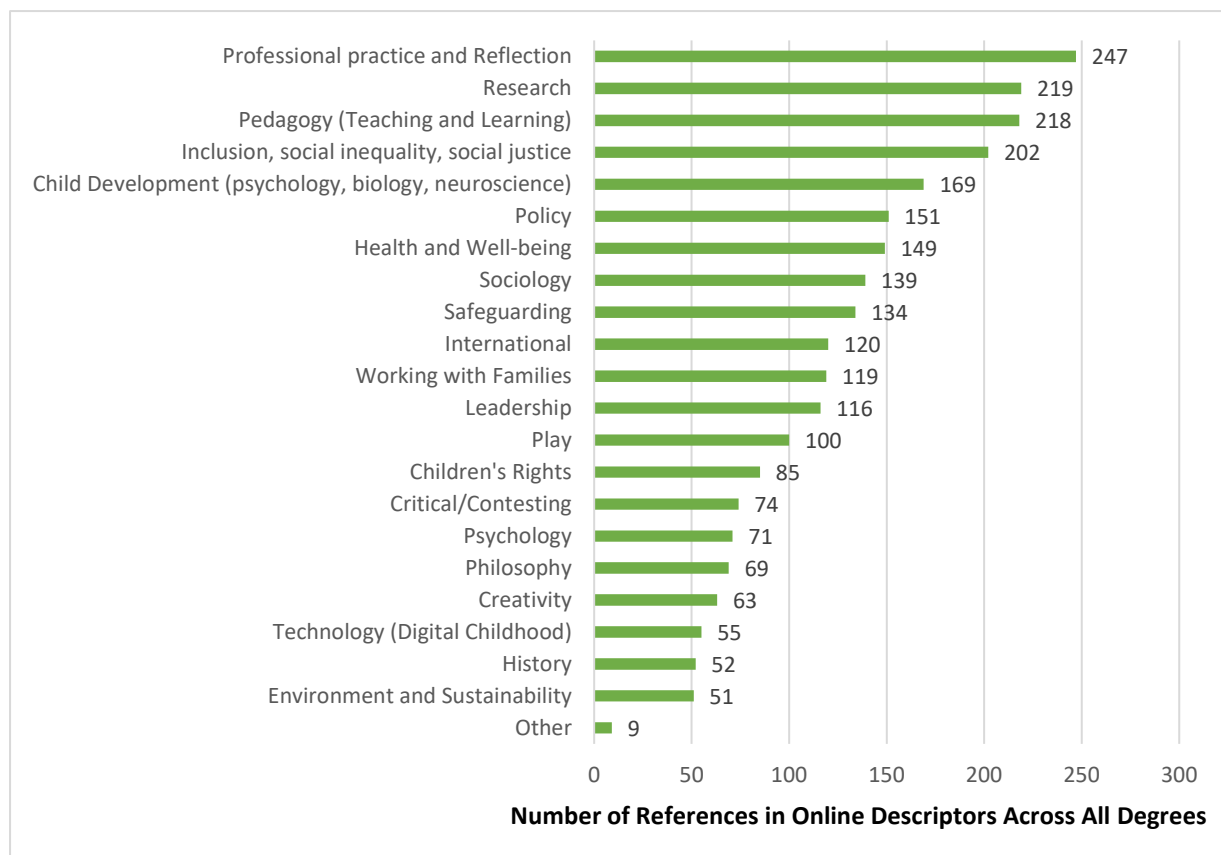
Age Range	Number of References
0-11	8
0-12	1
0-13	2
0-16	1
0-18	4
0-19	14
0-25	2
0-5	16
0-6	4
0-7	9
0-8	34
3 to 10	1
3 to 11	2
3 to 7	4
3 to 8	1
3-6	1
3-7 and 5-11	1
3-7, 5-11, 7-11	2
4 to 19	1
5-11	1
All stages of Education	1
Early years to secondary	2
EYFS and KS1	2
Starts at KS1	1

### Interpretive Features of Early Years Degrees in England

Following the analysis of the online descriptors of the full range of early years degrees in England, a chart was developed to detail how many references there were to the different themes (interpretive features that had been identified) across the degrees. Figure 1 presents the total number of references identified for each of themes across the 320 degrees. As outlined in the methodology section, the limit to this analysis is the level of detail provided in the online descriptors of the degrees. For example, the lower number of references to *Environment and Sustainability* does not mean that this topic is not covered in degrees (it could be embedded in course outlines or in teaching content); rather that it is not outwardly presented in how early years degrees are being described in online content.

Figure 1, therefore, represents how online course descriptors chose to outwardly present themselves to prospective students and wider society. The frequency of the references to the respective themes acts as a representation of what those delivering early years degrees identify as important aspects of the degrees. As degrees (especially in Higher Education Institutions - HEIs) are frequently delivered by experts in the field, the references to the different themes can also be seen as a representation of what those in the sector see as important for an early years degree.

**Figure 1: Interpretive Features of Early Years Degrees**



The analysis of the number of references identified in the online course descriptors for each of the themes offers some surprising results. For example, psychology is often regarded as the corner stone of the early years professional's knowledge-base (Campbell-Barr, 2017). The infrequency of references to psychology therefore seems misplaced. However, psychology has a series of sub-disciplines, of which child-development is one. Therefore, the low reference to psychology may be countered by the higher frequency to child-development.

Play also has a surprisingly low frequency, given that it is often regarded as a core aspect of early years pedagogy. However, pedagogy is the third most frequently referred area when looking at all of the nodes. While pedagogy was associated with teaching and learning, the association between the two led to a mapping of where there were cross-references between the themes, such as whether play was referred to within the context of pedagogy.

Figure 2 illustrates where the themes were connected in the analysis. Connections were identified through reading the theme descriptors and tallying the number of references to other themes. The thickness of the lines illustrates the strength of connection between the various themes as follows:

- One to five references = ½ point line
- Six to ten references = 2 point line
- Eleven to fifteen references = 3 point line
- Sixteen to twenty references = 4 point line



The mapping of the connections between the themes illustrates firstly how different aspects of the content presented as part of early years degrees are often connected. This is to be expected, whereby early years degrees are identified as drawing on a range of disciplines to inform and support professional practice in early years education, with connections being made between different disciplines and other aspects of the degree (Campbell-Barr, 2019). In many respects, the mapping represents a messiness of the broad knowledge-base of early years degrees. However, the mapping also shows that the connections are not as strong as might be anticipated, with no one theme having any more than twenty references to another theme.

The mapping illustrates that where a theme appears to have an unexpected low frequency in the analysis of the online descriptors, this may be countered by how it is connected to other, associated themes. For example, the earlier assumption that psychology may be represented as child development does have some weight, as does the connection between play and pedagogy. To consider these relationships in more depth, each theme in the framework was re-visited and a summary created as to what was recorded for each, including the relationship to other themes.

Figure 2: Mapping of Interpretive Features of Degrees



## Professionalism and Pedagogy

*Professional practice and reflection* was the most common feature found in the analysis. Reflection has long been identified as central to the work of those in early years education (Brock, 2013; Willan, 2017), offering opportunities to consider and develop practice; as such there were references to 'reflections on practice' across the different course descriptors. However, the stronger emphasis was on 'professional practice'. There were variations in the exact focus of professional practice, such as 'working as a professional', 'professional development', 'professional practice' and 'professional skills', but overall the course descriptors provided both support for the early years being a profession and for recognition of students' emerging sense of professionalism. However, there was a lack of references to values, principles or professional ethics, suggesting that the focus on professionalism is more associated with practice, skills and employability.

The links with employability recognised the potential future working scenarios of students, such as the role of multi-agency working (N=57). Although *leadership and management* was less frequently referred to in the course descriptors (see Figure 1), it recognised the strong employment focus that was evident in the course descriptors and the role of degree qualified staff in leading early years practice. Some course descriptors referenced leading practice and teamwork, with a few mentions of 'values'. Leadership and management was also sometimes linked to research (the second highest ranked item).

Many of the degree descriptors referred to *research*, often in the context of doing a final year dissertation. Most courses referred to 'research' generically, but there were references to 'methods' (N=33), including links to practice or work-based research, further illustrating the links to practice evident in the degrees more generally. Only a few courses made explicit reference to a need to focus on a child or children in research and even fewer courses mentioned child-specific methodologies (N=2). There were also only a few mentions of ethics. However, the lack of mention of children or ethics may be that it is not being presented to students at the outset of their degrees, but it is present in the actual taught content.

*Pedagogy (teaching and learning)* was the third most frequently referred to area, but it was a broad topic. Some degrees referred to 'teaching and learning', while others adopted the use of the term 'pedagogy'. The use of the term pedagogy was in wide-ranging ways, such as 'pedagogic principles', 'responsive pedagogy' and 'social pedagogy'. In some instances, there was mention of specific aspects of teaching and learning in the early years, such as literacy, assessment, science, maths and language, especially within the degrees that had a clear pathway to teaching. Often there was a link to explorations of the curriculum, although it was not always stated which curriculums, suggesting a broad approach. In some instances, there was acknowledgement of the role of assessment and observation for those training to work with young children, but these were more commonly found in the descriptors for courses that had routes into school-based teaching.

*Pedagogy (teaching and learning)* was one of the most interconnected themes in the analysis, with links to child development, creativity, play, policy, internationalisation and social inclusion. It is therefore possible that *Pedagogy (teaching and learning)* may be encompassing aspects of the themes that were recorded as having lower frequency of references in the course descriptor.

For example, play and play-based pedagogy are often referred to within the context of early years practice, such as in the QAA benchmarks and the EYFS. It was therefore surprising that *play* did not feature more prominently in the online course descriptors, particularly as it is a complex concept with different interpretation and approaches. Where it was mentioned, it was often in relation to 'play and

learning', illustrating the links to pedagogy identified earlier. In some instances (N=11), there were mentions of focussing on the curriculum and play and/or emphasising the importance of play.

Within the small number of references to creativity, there was often little to establish what this meant. In some instances, there were mentions of what might be regarded as forms of creativity, such as stories, music and art, while in others it was a more general link to pedagogy, teaching and learning and the curriculum.

*Environment and sustainability* appeared to be linked to pedagogy through a consideration of the pedagogic environment. This included what makes an effective environment, and environments for learning and teaching. However, it was surprising how minimal the focus was on sustainability, given the current social focus on sustainability. Similarly, there were few references to outdoor pedagogy, despite outdoor learning having a strong history in the early years (Tovey, 2007). Again, it may be that outdoor learning is embedded in the *pedagogy (teaching and learning)* aspects of the degrees, but this was not evident in the online descriptors. Where there were explicit references, this was in relation to being outside of the classroom, including outdoor play and learning outside, as well as two forest school modules.

Some of the degrees referred to *technology* through the digital environment, including several references to digital literacies, and variations of the digital world, digital age and digital childhood. A number of references (N= 13) focussed on using ICT (Information and Communications Technology) to support and assess learning, illustrating the connection to *pedagogy*. Other references focussed on childhood and technology and some referred to 21<sup>st</sup> Century childhood. Another clear focus within mentions of *technology* was the multi-media world with references to social media, film, TV, advertising, media reports and the internet. Therefore, technology appeared to have two strands, one related to the use of technology by children and the other about technology in children's lives.

*Pedagogy* was also linked to the *international* theme. The course descriptors that made a reference to international perspectives most commonly used the term 'international', with some being specific about 'international childhoods'. Global perspectives and approaches were also referred to, with variances including things like 'childhood in a global context', 'global education', 'global citizenship' and 'global development'. However, there were also references to curriculum, illustrating where degrees drew on examples of pedagogy and curriculum from different parts of the world. Linked to this, some courses made it explicit that there was a comparative element within the international perspectives.

A clear feature of the *Philosophy* theme was a focus on different theoretical perspectives and key philosophers within the early years (some of whom represented an international focus). Within this, many references were in relation to philosophical perspectives of early years, or youth and childhood. Similarly, philosophy of education, and links with learning, development and play also featured. Seventeen references focussed more on education within philosophy, with modules referring to educational policy and practice, social justice and identity.

While *critical/contesting* did not have many overall references, it was a strongly connected node, being connected to policy, sociology, history and professional practice. Where there were mentions of *critical/contesting* it was often in relation to 'concepts', particularly the concept of childhood (N=21). In other instances, it was a more general recognition of the need for students to be critical, questioning and willing to debate (N=13), including in relation to their professional practice. Thus, as a node it was about both the students' approach to their professional practice and studies as well as individual subjects.

### Approaches for Focussing on the Child

The degree descriptors also included aspects that were specific to the children that students would be going on to work with in the future. *Child Development* has been identified as central to the knowledge-base of those working in early years services (Callanan *et al.*, 2017). Although there is evidence that child development knowledge should be age specific, the earlier analysis of the age range of the degrees suggests that there is considerable variation as to what age of child development is being focused upon in early years degrees. While some degrees had a clear focus on birth to eight years of age, others had a broader focus of birth to twenty-five years of age.

Within *Child Development* there was a focus on different aspects of children's development: physical, behavioural, emotional, mental health, social and cognitive development. Several courses mentioned covering a range of approaches and perspectives to child and youth development, whilst the majority summarised 'child development' or 'the developing child' (N = 107). Several references to child development (N= 42) were combined with learning or aspects of learning development, including a focus on language, early literacy and communication. A couple referenced development in relation to families, home and relationships. Very few focussed on understanding behaviour. A couple included considering transitions and health as well as atypical development. Infrequently, child development was identified as having a biological and psychological perspective, which included lifespan development, human growth and one referenced brain development.

Several references among *psychology* overlapped with *child development*, including cognition, language development and growth and learning. References to *psychology* included 'applied psychology', 'psychology of childhood' and 'psychology and the family'. Focus on development varied from babies and toddlers, to the lifespan of a human, including a focus on growth and learning development. Further to this, course descriptors included considering approaches to understanding learning.

While psychology is often presented as the cornerstone of early childhood education and care theory, *sociology* received more references, such as the 'study of childhood', 'concepts of childhood', 'constructions of childhood' or 'the child in society'. However, sociology represented a very fragmented category with variable terminology to describe it. There were some references to the child within the family and some connections to notions of culture. There were also some connections made to behaviour, social justice and race.

The *history* node was strongly connected to sociology. Mainly, references to history diverged between exploring the background to conceptions of childhood and linking history with education. A number of references (N=22) included historical perspectives, notions of childhood and the history of childhood and youth. A further 16 references focussed more on education such as the past, present and future of schooling and schools, the history around alternative educational curriculum approaches and education in Britain. A slightly less dominant feature among history was pioneers of Early Childhood, and exploring historical, cultural and social influences on childhood.

The history node was also strongly connected to *inclusion, social inequality and social justice*. *Inclusion* was a clear dominant feature among the degrees. However, closer analysis revealed many variances. A few references indicated a broad focus on inclusion, such as 'an inclusive environment' or 'inclusive learning and education'. Occasionally, inclusive education was grounded in the context of Early Years or Special Education. 'Inclusive practice' was mentioned often (N= 32), sometimes referred to as 'collaboration' or 'inter-professional practice'. However, only two referenced social policy including one mention of the SEND Code of Practice.

There was a significant focus on diversity and equality (N= 79) with the inclusion node with links to 'equal opportunities' and 'equity', as well as 'social justice' and 'anti-discriminatory practice'. Many degrees highlighted different areas of inclusion, including 'multicultural awareness and perspectives', 'racism', 'refugees' and 'migrant families' (N= 19). Supporting learners with English as an additional language was mentioned minimally. Some courses (N= 15) also referred to 'social class', 'social mobility' and 'socio economics', suggesting social mobility is linked to inclusion, but explicit references to social mobility were minimal within the degree descriptors. Gender issues and sexuality were also mentioned, including references to '21<sup>st</sup> Century families' (N= 16). Interestingly, listening to children and children's voices was mentioned only twice.

Several references provided more in-depth detail on the different categories of special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) (N= 22), including dyslexia, Autism, sensory impairments and profound and multiple learning disabilities (PMLD). Within the broader category of SEND, a few modules referenced positive behaviour management or supporting children with challenging behaviour (N= 7). Although several mentioned SEND, it was surprising not to see more references to early identification and interventions (N= 7) within the degree descriptors. On the other hand, 18 courses focussed on individual differences, which included references to meeting individual needs, assessment and different support strategies.

References to *safeguarding* included children, young people and families, as well as multi-agency working. Within this theme, there was a focus on supporting and promoting wellbeing and welfare, with some links to risk assessment and risk management. Whilst risk and trust were mentioned, very few (N= 5) directly referenced ethical issues and values and only a few modules directly referenced Children's Rights. A few modules specified safeguarding for Looked After children, children in care or vulnerable children (N= 5).

Child protection featured in the safeguarding theme (N= 23), including 'protecting children' and 'keeping children safe'. This included references to keeping children safe from harm, and protecting children in early education and care environments. Furthermore, a small (N= 10) group of references focussed on 'crime, harm and society'. This included legal responsibilities, legal frameworks and legislation, as well as young people offending. However, when taken in the context of the 320 degrees analysed less than half referenced safeguarding (N=134) despite it being a statutory aspect of working in the early years.

Among *Working with Families*, there was a strong emphasis on community and collaboration. Whilst references were made to working with children and families in the community and society, there was an almost equal focus on working together, through multi-agency and integrated working. References to partnerships with parents, families and professional practitioners also reflect the importance of collaborative practice.

Many of the degrees mentioned working with children, young people and their families. Occasionally this was specifically in an early years context, or described as an introductory stage. In some instances, more detailed descriptions referred to the 'complexity' and 'role' of the family, as well as 'family dynamics' and 'leading effective practice'. However, very minimal references explicitly focussed on communication skills and communication and language with families. A small number of references linked working with children and families to safeguarding, specialist family intervention and support for troubled or vulnerable families.

A significant aspect of *Children's Rights* focussed on the rights of children and young people, including the identification of children as citizens with rights and responsibilities, identities, diversity and values.

Children's Rights was often linked with 'safeguarding', 'contemporary issues' and a few specified the UNCRC (N= 3). Additionally, children's rights featured the political system with a focus on youth and law (N= 21). Social justice, power, politics and participation were all mentioned, but only a few descriptors specifically linked rights with advocacy on behalf of children. Moreover, few references were made to children's voice, although some referred to children's perspectives and agency (N= 11). The low frequency of references to children's voices is surprising in light of the QAA benchmarks for Early Childhood Studies (QAA, 2019) identifying children as active participants in their lives, families and society. Very few mentioned family rights (N = 6).

Analysing the degree descriptors relating to *health* revealed a range of focusses including 'holistic health', 'family health', 'the healthy child', and occasional references to health conditions or illness. Many focussed on physical health such as exercise, physical activity, diet, nutrition and healthy living, with most descriptions specifying children's 'health and wellbeing'. Within the focus on children's health and wellbeing, some references specified mental health and wellbeing, including social and emotional development and resilience. A few referenced supporting children after loss and bereavement, whilst other courses included mental wellbeing for children and families. Mental health also featured alongside counselling and therapeutic services.

Mentions of *policy* were sometimes specifically to a reference to 'the state'. On occasion, there were also connections made to professional practice. As a theme, it was one of the most connected ones, but the connections were disparate. As such, policy was connected to themes such as international, history and social justice, but with only a few course descriptors making these connections.

## Summary

The analysis of the online course descriptors indicates that the content of early years degrees is highly fragmented in the topics covered, but that there are a range of connections made between the different themes identified. The areas identified in the course descriptors recognise that early years degrees are something of a theoretical and practical hybrid (Campbell-Barr, 2019; Rhedding-Jones, 2005; Vandenbroeck, Peeters & Bouverne-De Bie, 2013), drawing on different theoretical disciplines and seeking to relate them to a practical application.

Through the online course descriptors, it is evident that early years degrees in England are supporting students to develop, and reflect on their professional practice in developing pedagogical approaches for working with children. The focus on professional practice and reflection, including specific aspects of practice, such as pedagogy (teaching and learning), offers encouraging signs that early years graduates are being supported in developing knowledge and skills that will enable them to deliver quality early years education. In considering different ways to focus on the child in support of quality early years education, a range of different perspectives come together from understandings of child development to knowledge of inclusion. However, the broad range of ages that are being covered in the degrees analysed, often without a clear specific early years focus, raises questions as to whether students are being provided with content that will support them to both gain employment in early years education and have age appropriate knowledge to support children's holistic development. The lack of references to safeguarding and children's rights raises a further question as to whether graduates will be able to meet statutory requirements for working in early years education, whilst also potentially undermining key quality principles in early years education.



## Stage Two: Opportunities and Patterns of Employment of Early Years Graduates

### Data and Methodology

#### Data source

The analysis presented in this section uses two datasets held, and linked, by the Higher Education Standards Authority (HESA): the 'Student' dataset which holds information on students' course and entry characteristics, and the 'Destinations (Longitudinal) from Higher Education' (DLHE) dataset, which holds information on post-study approximately three and a half years after graduation.

We requested data about students who finished their degree in 2012/13, meaning the 'destinations' data was collected in 2016/17, the latest and last year this data is available.<sup>1</sup> We requested information relating to students finishing undergraduate degrees, which include bachelor's degrees, foundation degrees and PGCEs. If courses were not registered with HESA because their provision is not university based, such as those offered by Teach First, we were unable to analyse the career outcomes of the students attending them and, therefore, we excluded them from the analysis.

#### Data validation

We requested data for those students who attended courses categorised as one of the JACS code included in the list below:

- L500 Social work
- L520 Child care
- L530 Youth work
- L590 Social work not elsewhere classified
- X100 Training teachers
- X110 Training teachers - nursery
- X120 Training teachers - primary
- X121 Training teachers - infant (key stage 1)
- X160 Training teachers - specialist
- X161 Training teachers - special needs
- X190 Training teachers not elsewhere classified
- X200 Research & study skills in education
- X210 Research skills
- X220 Study skills
- X290 Research & study skills in education not elsewhere classified
- X300 Academic studies in education
- X310 Academic studies in nursery education
- X320 Academic studies in primary education
- X360 Academic studies in specialist education
- X370 Academic studies in education (across phases)

JACS codes are used by HESA to classify courses. When Higher Education (HE) institutions register a course with HESA, they are required to register its subject area, which they do by specifying the JACS

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<sup>1</sup> The survey and sampling methods were changed from previous years, making a comparison across years inappropriate. In addition, 2016/17 is the last year for which the data is available under this format. HESA now record destinations data through their [Graduate Outcomes](#) dataset, which will have the first statistical outputs released in Spring 2020.



code. Initial analysis carried out during the first phase of the project highlighted the variety of degree types and modules content offered to early years degree students, as well as the lack of a clear definition of the age group in the course descriptors. Based on these initial findings, we decided to over-request possible course codes to make sure we would not exclude students enrolled in degrees with an early years focus but that had a slightly different JACS code.

Entries are recorded by 'instances', which refer to areas of study taken by students. An instance will either refer to a student studying a full course (where the course is all in one subject) or will refer to part of a joint honours course. In the latter case, there is a field 'weight' associated with the student that will refer to the proportion of study in that subject area.

For the initial data requested, we received 6,285 entries, referring to 6,160 students, with the difference corresponding to students taking joint honours qualifications where both subject areas are within the relevant subjects listed above. We first filtered the data, to include only relevant courses. We required the *Course title* variable to contain 'early' or 'childhood' in the title, or the JACS code to be X310 (Academic studies in nursery education) or X110 (Training teachers – nursery). An additional manual test was then applied, which led us to drop many courses that were in Social Work or general education with no indication of an early year's specialisation. This restricted the data we could use to 1,730 entries and 1,660 students.

Throughout our analysis, for the number of students we used the number of unique student codes. This means that we considered students doing any portion of their degree in early years as being early years graduates (and are counted equally).

## Key Findings

### Student Characteristics

As discussed in the previous chapter, there is large variation in the type and content of early years courses delivered within the English HE system. Several studies have showed that, on average, the early years workforce (graduates and non-graduates) is older, more financially insecure and more predominantly female than the national working population. Therefore, any variations in the entry characteristics of people studying different courses must be considered within the larger picture of the sector (Bonetti, 2018). Furthermore, the extent to which demographic or academic characteristics determine entry to certain courses will impact upon how these characteristics vary between different career outcomes.

We observed that the student population of early years courses differs from the broader student population in a number of ways, with age being one of the most significant. Table 3 illustrates this, referring to the students' age when they finish their courses.

**Table 3: Age of Early Years Students When Finishing their Courses**

Age	Percentage
20 and under	3%
21-23	33%
24-26	10%
27-29	6%
30 and older	48%

*Notes: figures based on a total of 1,660 students who graduated from early years degrees in 2012/13*

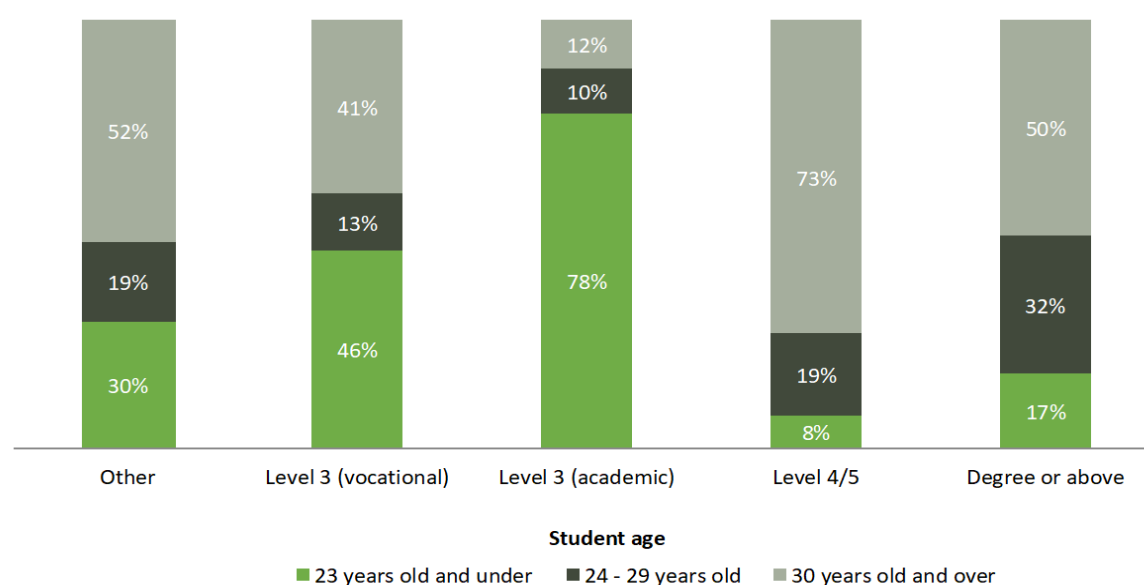
*Source(s): HESA DLHE Long Record 2012/13*

Students who graduate at age 21-23, particularly those not in foundation degrees, generally will have entered HE shortly after finishing key stage 5 study at age 16-18. The large proportion of older students indicates that many students are entering these courses from a non-traditional educational background. This is illustrated by a higher number of students being in the 30 and older group than in the 21–23 group. Directly comparable figures are not available, but when considering all undergraduates (not just those graduating) across the UK (and therefore not just England), in 2012/13 only 27 per cent of students were over 25.

Students entering HE courses can do so with a number of different qualifications. We obtained the highest qualification on entry from the variable *Highest qualification on entry*, with additional aggregation to group together similar types of entry qualification. In this analysis we aggregated them into five key groups:

- Level 3 academic qualifications (AS or A levels and baccalaureate qualifications) – 14 per cent (235 students)
- Level 3 vocational qualifications – 36 per cent (605 students)
- Level 4/5 qualifications – 28 per cent (445 students)
- Degree level or higher – 7 per cent (120 students)
- Other<sup>2</sup> - 15 per cent (255 students).

Figure 3: Student Age and Highest Qualification on Entry



Source(s): HESA DLHE Long Record 2012/13

Figure 3 illustrates how age relates to the qualifications held by students when entering these courses, showing the extent to which they might be coming from non-traditional backgrounds. For example, whereas students under the age of 24 represent 78 per cent of students entering these courses with

<sup>2</sup> The category “Other” contains students with qualifications at level 2 and below, HE access courses or certain level 3 qualifications, and those without formal qualifications or who are admitted on the basis of previous experience.

level 3 (academic) qualifications, this proportion drops to only 8 per cent when considering those entering courses with level 4/5 qualifications.

Alongside representing distinct academic backgrounds for the students involved, these qualifications are also correlated with the age of students. For example, level 3 academic qualifications (and to a lesser extent level 3 vocational qualifications) are linked to students entering HE directly after leaving key stage 5 provision, whereas level 4 or 5 qualifications suggest some sort of bridging qualification between key stage 4/key stage 5 education and university education.

The breakdown between academic and vocational level 3 qualifications is of interest as we know that, when taken at age 16-18, the different routes tend to be associated with different attainment at post-16 (Huws and Taylor, No Date; Office for Students, No Date).

### Course Characteristics

There are a number of course attributes which reflect significant variations in the type of course provision, as well as being strongly linked to the entry characteristics and outcomes of students taking these courses. If certain course types attract students from certain backgrounds, it is important to consider what employment opportunities their graduates attract. In Table 4 we summarise some key attributes of early years courses.

**Table 4: Course Attributes**

Course Type	Percentage of Students
Full-time	59%
Part-time	41%
No Teacher Training	84%
Teacher Training	16%
Foundation	30%
PGCE / ITT	5%
Undergraduate	65%

Source(s): HESA DLHE Long Record 2012/13

The proportion of students studying early years courses part-time is significantly higher than the average across courses more broadly: of the cohort graduating in 2012/13, 41 per cent of early years students were studying part-time versus 24 per cent for all undergraduate students in England (HESA, 2014). The proportion of part-time degrees overall has dropped significantly over the last 10 years, with significant political focus on the decline in part-time students (alongside a similar decline in the number of older students) (House of Commons Library, 2020).

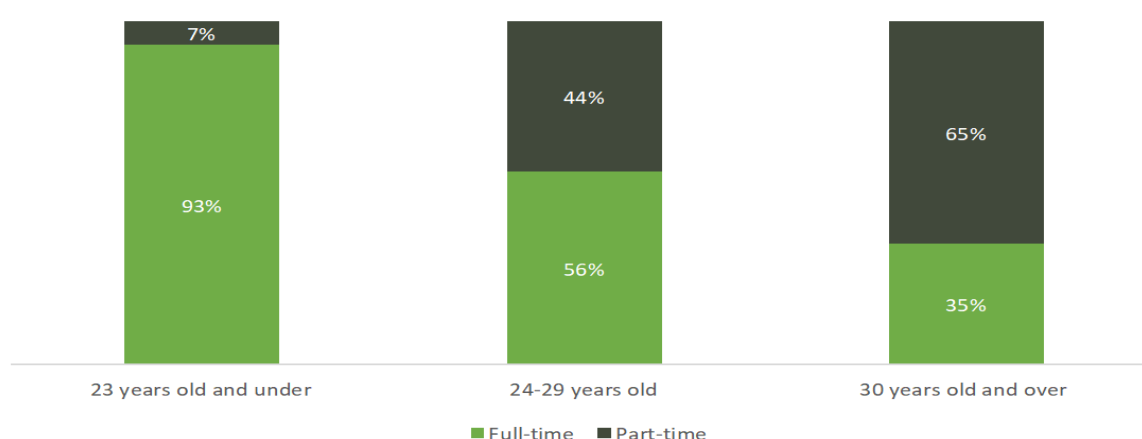
Large proportions of students study undergraduate or foundation level qualifications, with these groups representing 95 per cent of all students in the 2012/13 cohort. A smaller percentage of students enrolled in Initial Teacher Training (ITT) or PGCE courses, despite these courses having guaranteed teacher training components (and therefore likely to be linked to career incentives). 30 per cent of students studying early years courses are doing so as part of a foundation degree, a proportion far higher than the England average of 5 per cent (HESA, No Date).

Only 16 per cent of students studying early years courses receive teacher training qualifications, meaning the number of students who access the benefits associated with this form of training is limited. As expected, these courses are also concentrated within certain courses types: of those

undertaking teacher training courses, 53 per cent are undergraduates, and the rest are PGCE or ITT students. For those not taking teacher training courses, 67 per cent are undergraduates and 33 per cent are foundation degree students. Although undergraduate courses allow people to undertake teacher training, the fact that most students on these courses do not qualify with teacher training is a feature worth reconsidering when looking at the different employment outcomes we see associated with these courses.

As mentioned above, there have been longstanding concerns around the number of part-time and mature students within the English HE system, with the Augar Review recognizing flexible and lifelong training as a key issue within post-18 education. Figure 4 shows that the large proportion of part-time students is driven significantly by an older student population, which may reflect a greater need or willingness to balance studies with work, care or other responsibilities.

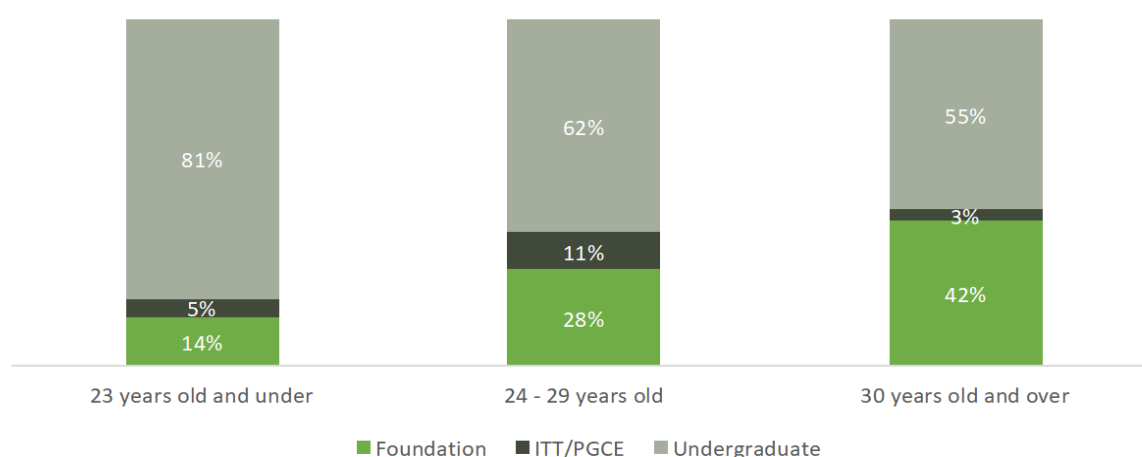
Figure 4: Age and Part-time Study



Source(s): HESA DLHE Long Record 2012/13

It is also clear that the large proportion of part-time students is linked to the course type being studied. While older students represent a small proportion of those studying early years courses generally, as an age group they make up the largest proportion of those studying foundation degrees.

Figure 5: Age and Degree Type



Source(s): HESA DLHE Long Record 2012/13

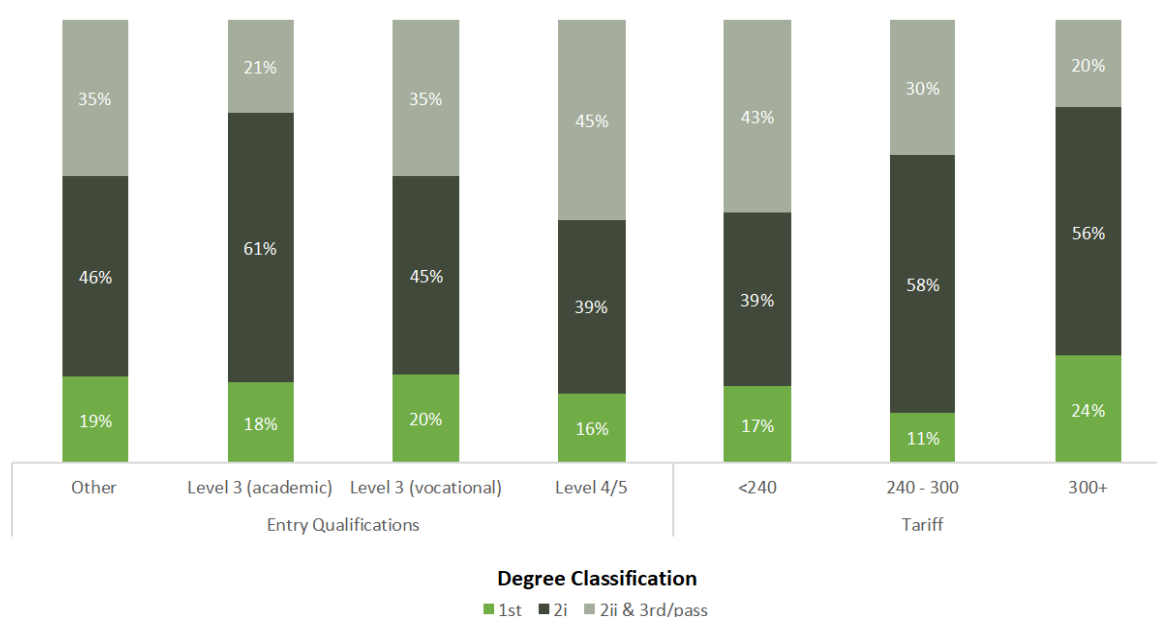
As older students are more likely to study part-time and foundation qualifications, this group of students is largely responsible for how the cohort differs from those studying other (non-early years) degree qualifications.

In addition, the distribution of part-time and full-time students is not independent of the students' entry qualifications. Only 13 per cent of students from a level 3 (academic) background go on to study part-time, compared to 37 per cent of those with level 3 (vocational) qualifications and 39 per cent of those entering with level 4/5 qualifications. This again indicates the role of part-time study in facilitating the education of those entering from non-traditional backgrounds.

Within the English education system, graded degrees (as opposed to qualifications which are taken as pass/fail) are commonly separated into 1sts, 2is, 2iis and 3<sup>rd</sup> class degrees. 1sts and 2is are usually considered to be "good degree" classifications and commonly form the basis for admission into further study or certain graduate professions. The classifications are normally assigned on the percentage of marks achieved by a student.

The entry tariff of a student is a number calculated from the number of level 3 qualifications taken by the student, the grades achieved in these qualifications and the "size" of the qualification (which typically represents the number of learning hours associated with the qualification).<sup>3</sup> Figure 6 illustrates that levels of first class degrees are similar between different groups, but the level of 2is v 2iis and 3rds is linked to entry qualifications.<sup>4</sup>

**Figure 6: Degree Classification and Entry Qualifications**



Source(s): HESA DLHE Long Record 2012/13

A higher degree classification is correlated with higher entry tariffs, a relationship found in more recent data for the whole HE sector (Office for Students, No Date). It also illustrates that those entering

<sup>3</sup> Analysis of this cohort uses the old (pre-2016) UCAS tariff system where students would receive between 40 and 140 points for a completed A-level. This contrasts from the newer system where the points for a completed a level are within the range of 16 to 56.

<sup>4</sup> We have excluded those who are entering these courses with degrees due to small sample sizes – this is likely due to PGCE courses commonly not offering grades for the qualifications.

with level 3 (academic) qualifications are significantly more likely to achieve a 2i (and therefore more likely to achieve a good pass), a relationship that is also found more broadly within HE (Office for Students, No Date).

The last element of students and course characteristics that we considered is the relationship between entry qualifications and the student pursuing teacher training. Almost three quarters of those entering early years courses with a degree go on to study a course which contains teacher training, whereas for level 3 (academic), level 3 (vocational) and level 4/5, the proportion is always under 15 per cent. This suggests that those students starting early years courses with a degree are much more likely to undertake a course that includes the teacher training component compared to those with lower entry levels.

Similarly, for students entering these courses with a UCAS tariff, higher tariffs are associated with a greater chance of accessing teacher training courses. For example, while only 13 per cent of students with tariff of under 240 entered teacher training courses, this proportion doubled to 26 per cent for those with a tariff of over 300.

### Employment Outcomes

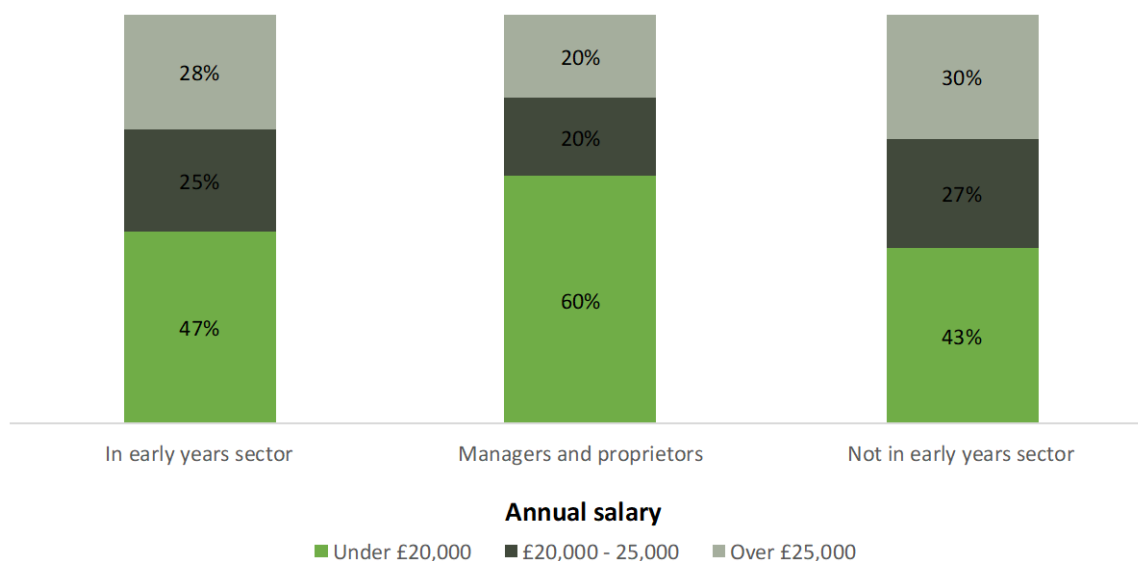
The employment outcomes of early years graduates are an important metric to assess the quality of provision and the role of HE in upskilling the early years workforce, alongside affecting the long-term sustainability of early years degree courses.

Three and a half years after graduation, we have employment outcomes for 1,620 students in the original 2012/13 cohort. Most (55 per cent) were employed in early years roles involving child contact. An additional and much smaller group (just over 1 per cent) held roles within early years but in occupations we would consider as involving no child contact. 28 per cent went on to hold roles outside of the sector.

An additional 15 per cent graduates worked in occupations classified as *Managers and proprietors in other services nec (not elsewhere classified)*. As this is the second largest individual occupation code, it is possible that many of these professionals work within management or proprietor roles in the early years sector, particularly in a PVI setting. We therefore analysed this group as a separate category to avoid skewing results for more frontline workers. A fuller breakdown of the employment codes present within the graduate population can be found in Appendix 2.

Figure 7 illustrates that there is a clear variation in pay between these groups. The lowest earning group appears to be *Managers and proprietors nec*, where 60 per cent earn less than £20,000 and only 20 per cent earn over £30,000. The equivalent figures for people employed in the sector are 47 per cent and 28 per cent, and for people outside the sector are 43 per cent and 30 per cent. The low pay of the managers and proprietors group provides further evidence that they may consist largely of those in managerial roles in PVIs. Previous studies, for example, have shown that the hourly pay of senior managers in PVIs is lower than the hourly pay for frontline workers in the maintained sector (Bonetti & Akhal, 2020).

Figure 7: Pay and Employment Area

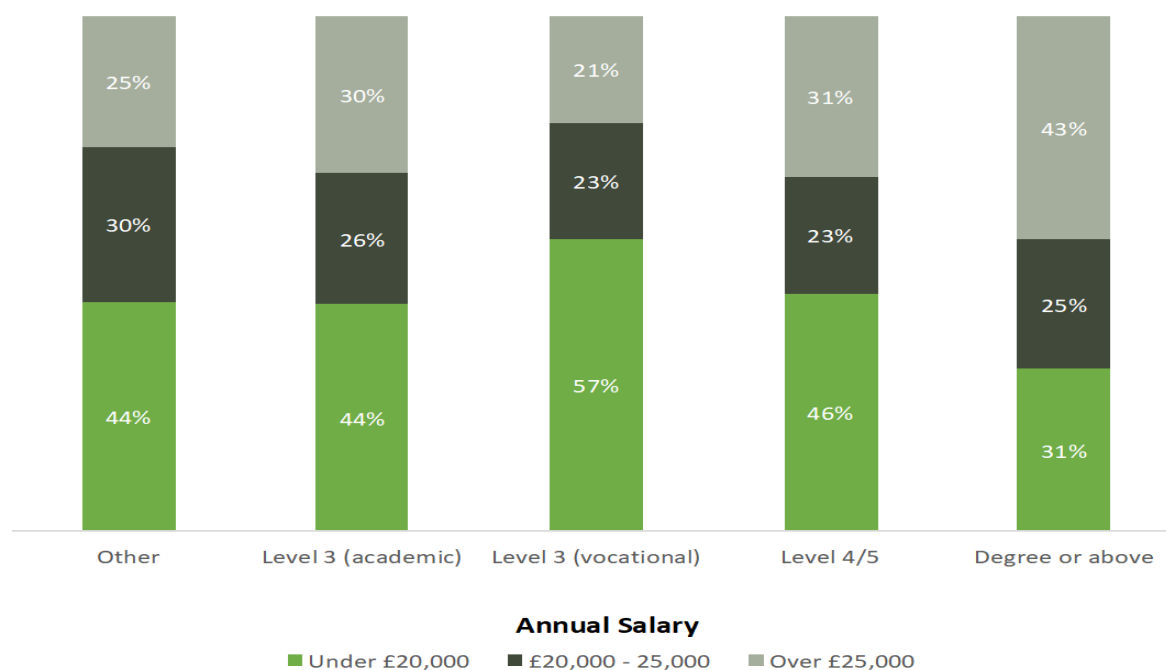


Source(s): HESA DLHE Long Record 2012/13

Outside of managerial roles, however, there appears to be little variation in pay between those inside and outside the sector, suggesting that even for those with early years qualifications, there is little economic incentive to remain employed within the sector. This again is in line with other studies showing that early years workers are paid very similar wages to people in the beauty industry and the retail sector (Bonetti, 2019).

Our analysis of the 2012/13 cohort also shows that there is a clear premium in salary for those accessing early years courses with a more academic-oriented background.

Figure 8: Salary and Entry Qualification Type



Source(s): HESA DLHE Long Record 2012/13

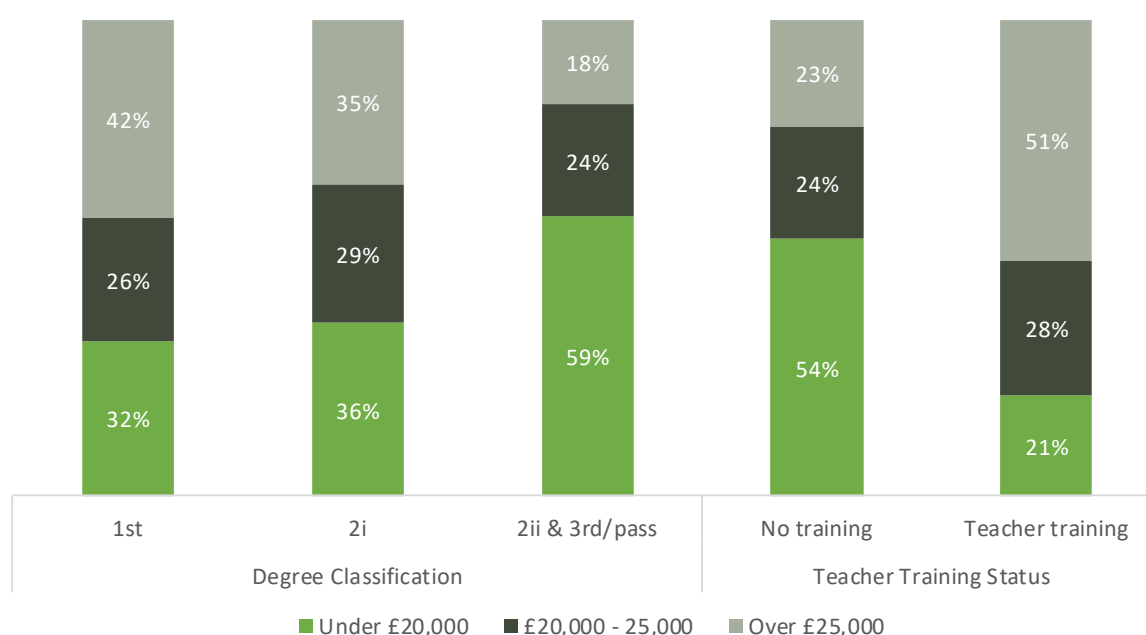
Figure 8 shows that three and a half years after graduation, 43 per cent of students who entered with a degree or above earned more than £25,000, compared to only 21 per cent of those entering with level 3 (vocational) qualifications. The variation in pay between different entry qualifications is partly explained by variations in access to teacher training courses and age, although people with level 4/5 earn less than level 3 (academic) pupils despite being older on average.

The relationship between entry tariff and future salary is weaker: a higher tariff is associated with only slightly higher pay three and a half years after graduation. For example, 51 per cent of students entering with a tariff of less than 240 were earning less than £20,000, compared to 48 per cent for those with a tariff in the range 240-300 and 45 per cent for those with a tariff of over 300. Access to the higher pay bands shows similar variation, with 23 per cent of those with a tariff of less than 240 earning over £25,000, compared to 29 per cent of those with a tariff of 300+.

The impact of studying full-time or part-time on career outcomes is also interesting to note, as we have seen above that part-time courses attract certain types of students, which in terms of age tend to be more representative of the sector. Part-time students are less likely to earn within the higher salary bands or work within the sector. This likely reflects teacher training courses being concentrated within the full-time student population, alongside differences in entry qualifications between the full-time and part-time cohorts.

Finally, both degree classification and the presence of teacher training appear to be strongly linked to earning capacity.

**Figure 9: Earnings and Course Outcomes**



Source(s): HESA DLHE Long Record 2012/13

In general, higher degree classifications are associated with higher salaries. However, the most significant difference in salaries occurs at the 2i / 2ii borderline, which commonly represents the boundary for a good pass. Over half (54 per cent) of graduates without teacher training earn less than £20,000 three and a half years after graduating, compared to less than a quarter (21 per cent) of those



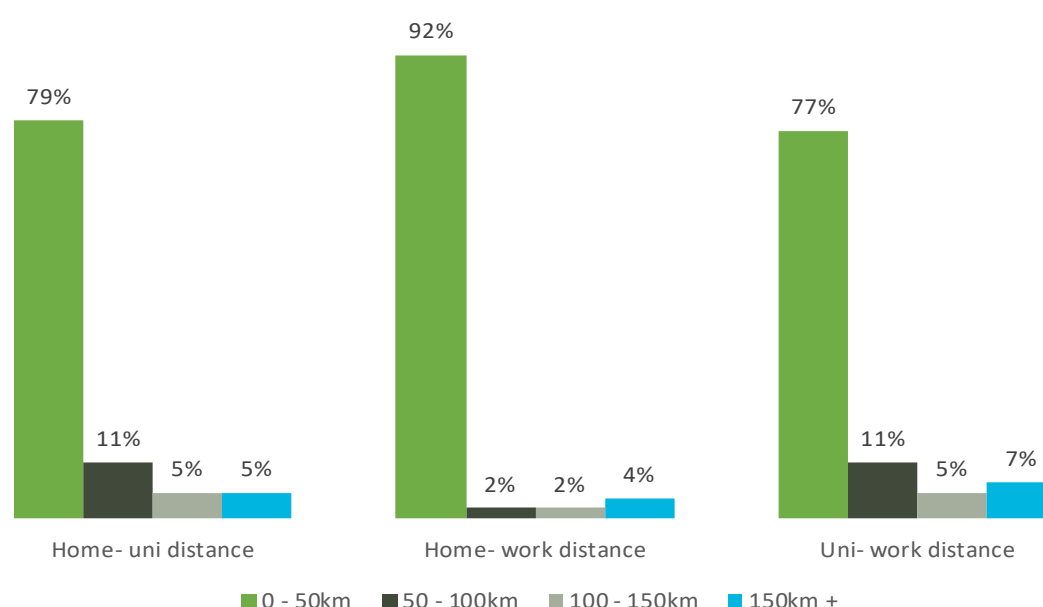
with teacher training; instead, over half (51 per cent) of those studying teacher training courses earn over £25,000, compared to less than a quarter (23 per cent) without.

### Geographical Analysis

The geographical distribution of students and courses throughout England is of key importance in determining areas of the country that might be poorly served in terms of courses availability and in assessing whether the geographical distribution of courses has an impact upon the distribution of the graduate workforce. We looked at the distance travelled by students to attend early years courses and to take up employment after graduation, and at how these movements vary for students within different regions in England.

The distance travelled by a student is likely to reflect a measure of the pull factor a student experienced (to a university or a course), along with giving us a sense of the extent to which a student is able or willing to move to undertake studies or employment.

Figure 10: Distances Travelled

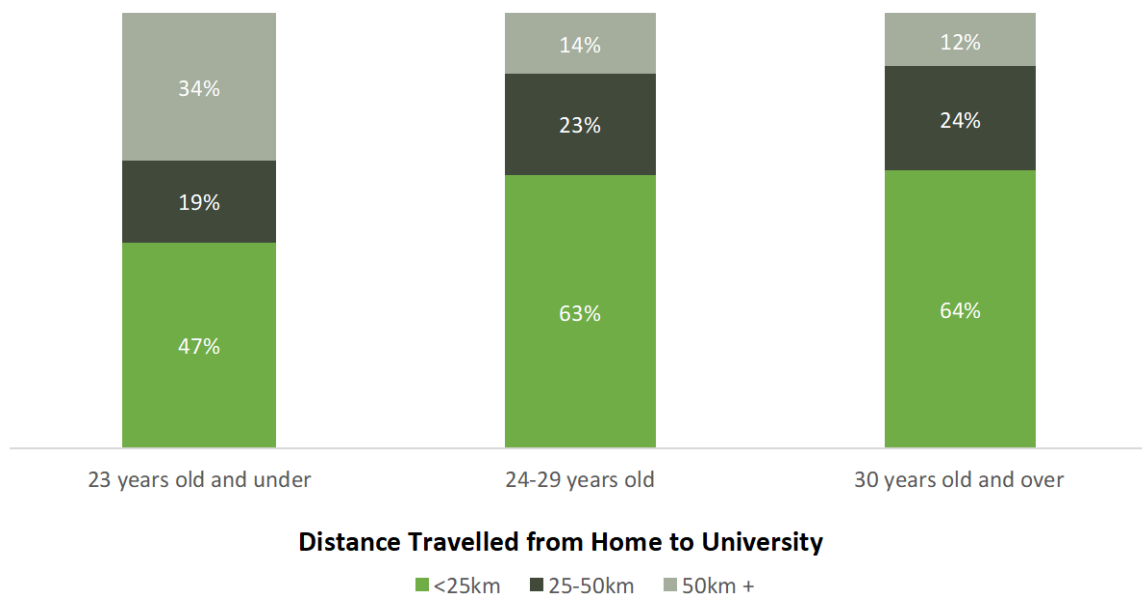


Source(s): HESA DLHE Long Record 2012/13

Figure 10 shows that most of the students taking early years courses undergo little movement, with the vast majority travelling less than 50km between their pre-university residence, their location for study and work. It also shows that there is a preference for students to work close to their pre-university residence, likely reflecting students “moving back” after completing their course.

At the beginning of the chapter, we observed that relatively older age is one of the key attributes that distinguish early years students from the broader student population. We therefore checked how age relates to the distance students are willing to travel for their university courses.

**Figure 11: Distance Travelled from Home to University, by Age**



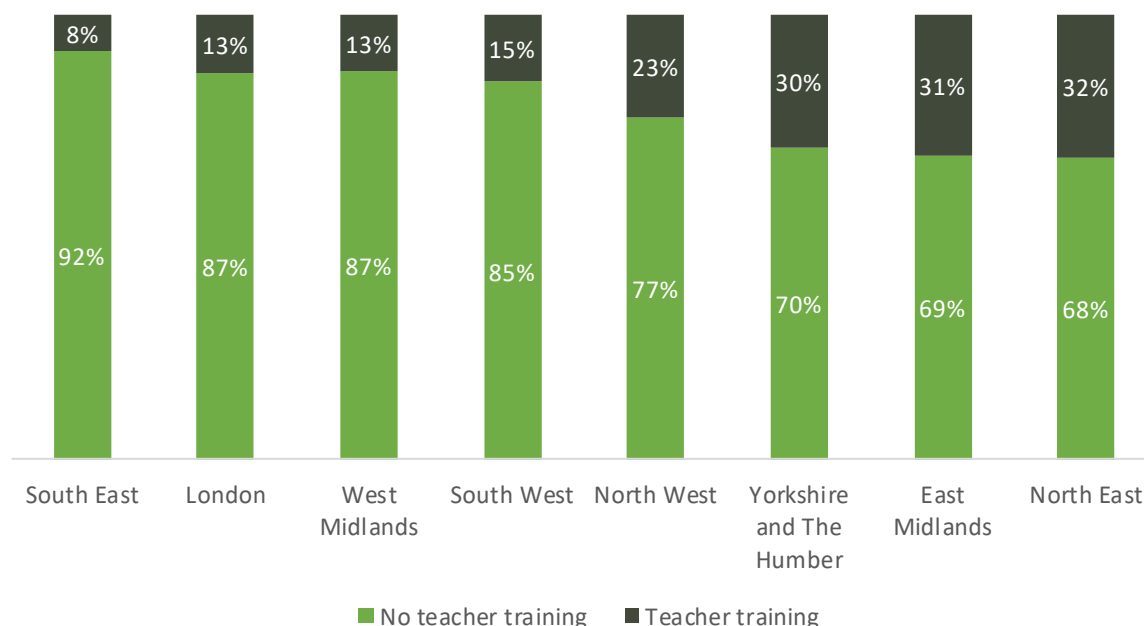
*Source(s): HESA DLHE Long Record 2012/13*

Figure 11 illustrates there is a preference for older graduates to stay close to their pre-university location for their studies, with this relationship appearing only to hold between those graduating aged 23 and under compared to those graduating at age 24 and above. Older graduates are also more likely to be studying part-time and to undertake foundation degree courses, both of which are likely to impact upon this decision.

In terms of the distance between home and university, we observed little variation depending on the qualification type being studied. Students studying foundation degrees are less likely to travel far, with 64 per cent travelling less than 25km from home to university, but all course types showed over half of students choosing to study within 25km of their pre-university residence. This could be partially explained by the more limited economic returns associated with early years degrees and their older age profile. Both of these factors are more significant for those doing foundation degrees.

The fact that students move only small distances suggests that the distribution of early years courses across the country is important, as it heavily impacts upon the number of students who can access these courses and the areas of the country which are likely to be well-served by the graduate workforce.

Figure 12: Location of Students on Teacher Training Courses



*Note: we omit the East of England due to small sample sizes*

*Source(s): HESA DLHE Long Record 2012/13*

Figure 12 shows that teacher training courses are unequally distributed geographically, with less than 10 per cent of students studying early years courses in the South East having teacher training. When combining the clear improved career outcomes for teacher training graduates with the strong preference for students to travel little during their studies, it is concerning that the distribution of teacher training courses is very geographically unequal.

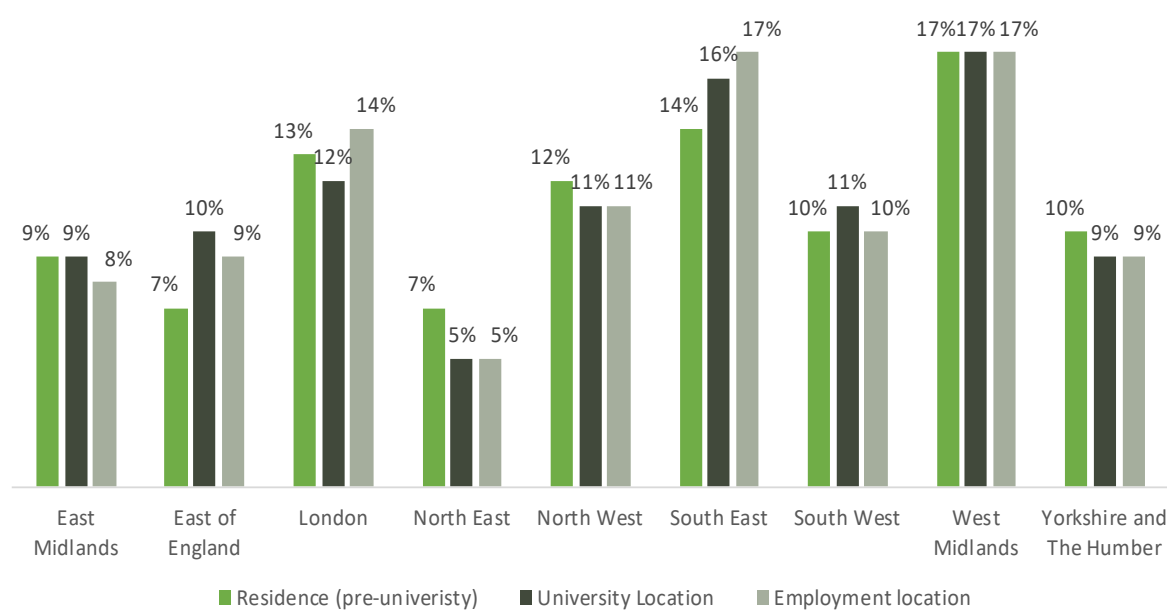
In addition to the location of courses with the highest returns, it is interesting to look at how these students are geographically distributed at every stage of their life: pre-university, during university, and in employment. The variation in the number of students studying early years courses at university level by region is driven by variation in access to HE more generally. However, when comparing pre-university residence, university location and employment location within early years, interesting findings emerge.

It is interesting to compare the destination of EY graduates three and half years after graduation with the location of the courses and the region of residency of these students before they began their courses. We therefore look at the proportion of EY graduates located in each English region at each stage of their journey: residence (pre-university), university location and employment location. This can inform us on whether the areas of England with the highest number of students who wish to study EY degrees are also the areas with the largest numbers of courses and the areas where most of the students are based post-graduation. Any mismatches, e.g. if lots of students from a certain area study EY courses but most courses are located elsewhere, may reflect a possible area of concern.

Figure 13 illustrates this, showing the proportion of students who are based in a region at each stage, and indicates whereas a large proportion of the total student population are based in some areas before they enter university, they may be based in different regions for their post-university employment. It indicates, for example, that in areas like the Yorkshire and Humber and the North East,

a smaller proportion of students end up studying or working there compared to those who lived in those regions pre-university. The reverse is true of the South East, which appears to attract students to study there and then even more graduates to work there. On the other hand, London seems to attract more people to work rather than studying.

**Figure 13: Proportion of Early Years Graduates Living, Studying and Working in a Specific Region**



Source(s): HESA DLHE Long Record 2012/13

The movement of graduates would also inform us as to whether the location of training providers can be used to guide the geographical distribution of graduates – whether the location of a university is likely to make any difference to a graduate’s decision to permanently relocate.

Most students (74 per cent) have lived and studied in the same region of England as where they work. A sizeable proportion of students (16 per cent) end up working in the same area as their pre-university location but studied elsewhere, suggesting again a “moving back” effect. A smaller proportion (8 per cent) choose to work in an area in which they have neither lived before university nor studied.

A very small proportion of students (3 per cent) ended up working in the same area as they studied but lived somewhere else, suggesting only a small number of students choose to move for employment based upon their university location.

**Figure 14: Geographical Variations of Early Years Graduates within the Workforce**



Source(s): HESA DLHE Long Record 2012/13

Figure 14 shows how the location of early years graduates varies between regions, in terms of the regions they end up employed in and the association they had with that location before employment. For all graduates, we see a clear preference for students to work and study in the area in which they lived before studying. There are some variations, however, with the North West and South West showing small movement levels.

### Further Study

The data showed that many students from the 2012/13 cohort went on to access further qualifications after finishing their degree.

**Table 5: Number of Additional Qualifications Taken**

Number of Additional qualifications taken	Proportion of Students
1	28%
2	8%
3	2%
4 or more	2%
None	60%

Notes: figures based on a total of 1,653 students who answered the question

Source(s): HESA DLHE Long Record 2012/13

Table 5 illustrates the extent to which students graduating from early years courses took additional qualifications, with 40 per cent of them going on to study at least one more course. It also shows a large proportion of students taking two or more additional qualifications. By comparison, only 13 per cent of all UK and EU domiciled graduates pursued further studies after finishing their degree (HESA, 2018).

Given these results, we decided to check which courses they accessed and how patterns varied depending on student background. As there are courses that on their own may not improve career opportunities, we also wanted to understand whether their graduates go on to upskill further with the aim of increasing these opportunities.

For those taking additional qualifications, we first checked which type of qualification they had already gained. With certain qualifications having particular benefits, it is important to ascertain whether additional qualifications reflect a willingness to do post graduate study or indicate a problem with the first degree, such as a degree that does not open many career opportunities on its own.

**Table 6: Highest Qualification Taken by Those Pursuing Additional Study**

Highest Qualification Taken	Foundation	Undergraduate
Higher degree, mainly by taught course (MA, MSc)	<10%	<10%
Not aiming for a qualification	<10%	<10%
Postgraduate diploma or certificate (incl. PGCE)	15%	42%
First degree (BA, BSc, MEng)	57%	<10%
Professional qualification (e.g. Chartered Accountancy, Chartered Institute of Marketing)	<10%	14%
Other diploma or certificate	13%	23%
Vocational Qualifications	<10%	<10%
GCSE/A level	<10%	<10%

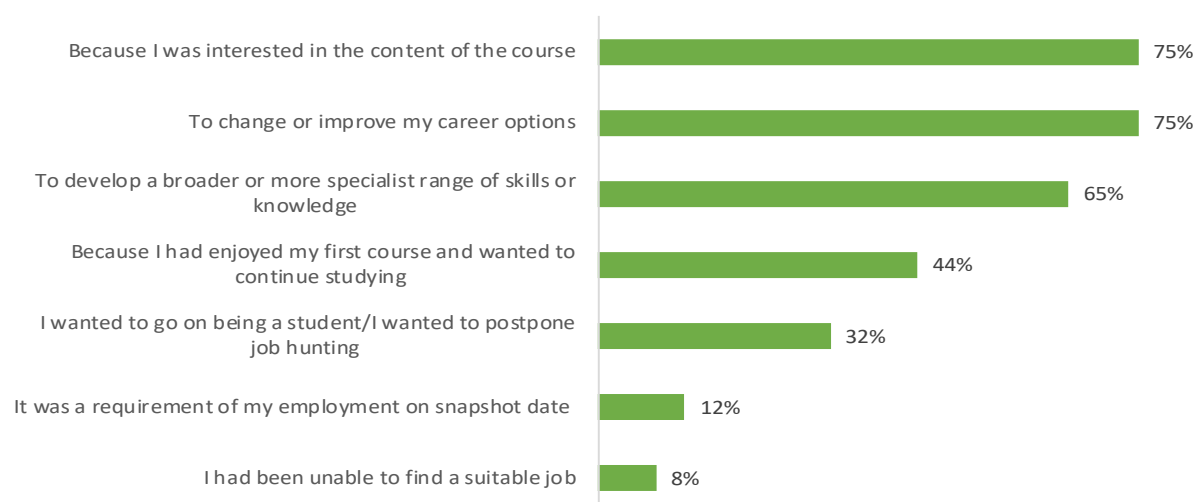
Notes: figures based on a total of 654 students who answered the question

Source(s): HESA DLHE Long Record 2012/13

Among additional qualifications being taken, Table 6 shows large numbers of students going from undergraduate to postgraduate diplomas, and from foundation degrees to first degrees, reflecting the key benefits of following the progression path to a career. For example, there is clear propensity for pursuing postgraduate certificates (including PGCE), likely due to the clear advantages to getting QTS (or alternatively, the problem of students taking a degree without realising the premium in terms of salary come with specific qualifications – PGCE, ITT or undergrad with QTS).

Those students who were taking qualifications on the survey date gave a variety of reasons for choosing to pursue further study besides the fact that it was a requirement, with large numbers stressing the improved career outcomes associated with further study as well as an interest in course content.

**Figure 15: Reasons for Taking Additional Qualification**



Source(s): HESA DLHE Long Record 2012/13

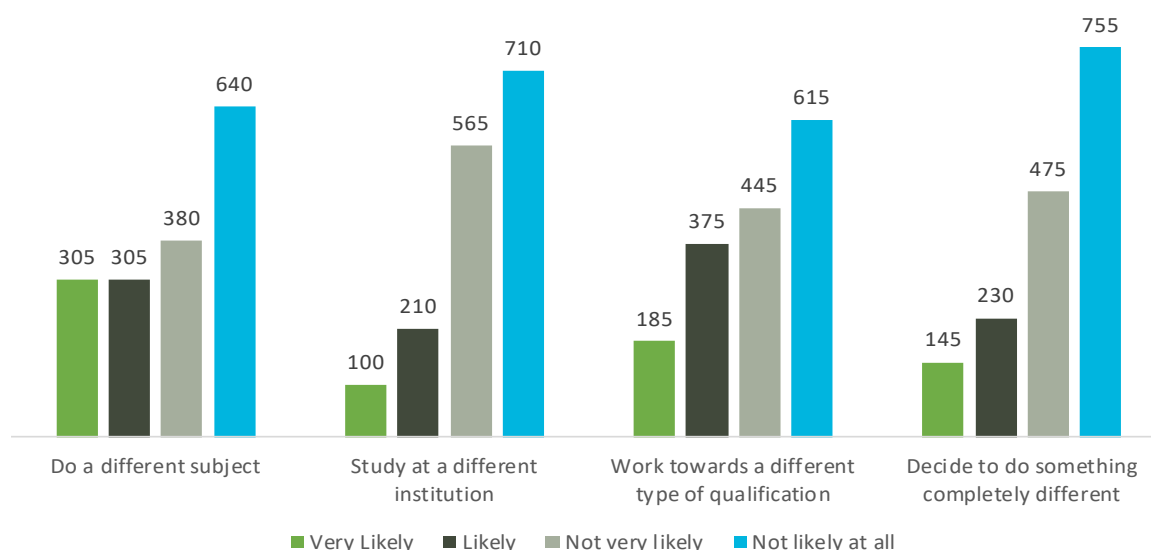
Figure 15 shows that there is a significant number of students for whom employment is a reason for additional study, with 75 per cent in study doing so to change or improve their career options. This is important to consider when we see certain courses have clear premiums in terms of employment.

### Life and Course Satisfaction

There is significant variation in the extent to which students are satisfied with their course. This is important to consider as a large variation in course satisfaction could reflect variations in the quality across the HE sector and indicate areas of weakness. It could also give information on the mismatch between students' expectations and their courses, which may reflect upon the quality of careers advice and student information levels on entering these courses.

Graduates were asked *"If you were to choose whether or not to do your course again, how likely or unlikely is it that you would..."*, and were asked this question in relation to 4 different aspects of their course: *Do a different subject*, *Study at a different institution*, *Work towards a different type of qualification*, and *Decide to do something completely different*.

**Figure 16: Course Satisfaction Measures**



Source(s): HESA DLHE Long Record 2012/13

Figure 16 shows that subject and qualification type typically rank as the areas that graduates are least happy with. This supports the sector's concerns around inconsistency in early years degree provision and a lack of clarity in the qualification system. In particular, the large proportion of students who wish they had studied a different qualification likely represents the clear economic incentives for studying to obtain a QTS, which may not have clear before starting the specific qualification.

Beyond satisfaction with courses, there are broader wellbeing measures to consider. Graduates were asked to rate on a scale of 0 (not at all) to 10 (completely) four wellbeing measures: satisfied, worthwhile, happy and anxious. For example, the satisfaction question asked *"Overall, how satisfied are you with your life nowadays?"*<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> We have inverted the scale for anxious so that all wellbeing measures can be considered on a scale where 10 corresponds to the greatest wellbeing.

**Figure 17: Wellbeing Measures**



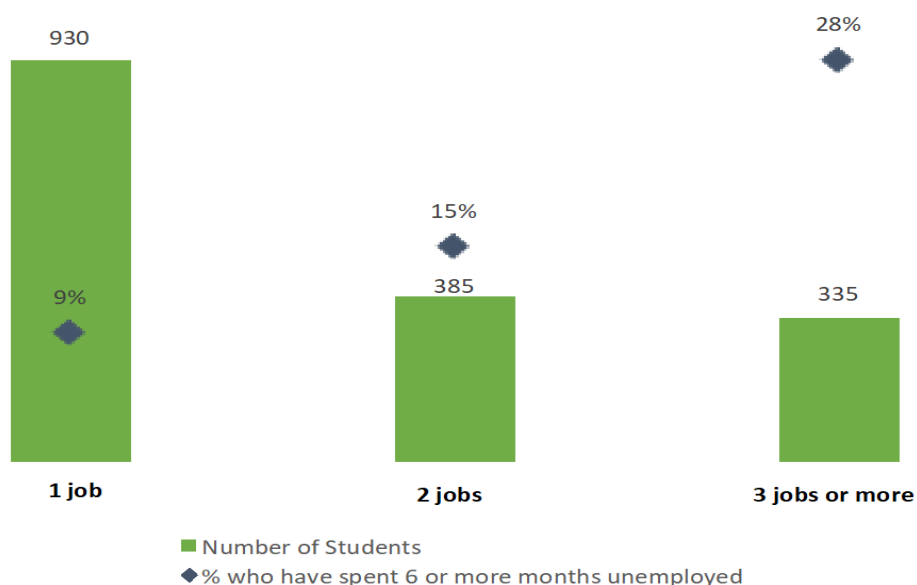
Source(s): HESA DLHE Long Record 2012/13

Figure 17 shows that all four wellbeing measures see scores concentrated in the upper range of the distribution, indicating high wellbeing scores among graduates. It is clear, however, that some measures are more concentrated in the higher or lower areas than others. For example, it appears that feeling anxious is more common among early years graduates than other negative feelings.

### Job Trajectory

The number of jobs a graduate has held within the time frame between completing their course and being surveyed is another important piece of evidence in assessing the career outcomes of students, as it reflects both the precarity of certain employment areas (particularly when combined with local unemployment) and the extent to which graduates can take on different roles.

**Figure 18: Number of Jobs Held by Students and Likelihood of Prolonged Period of Unemployment**



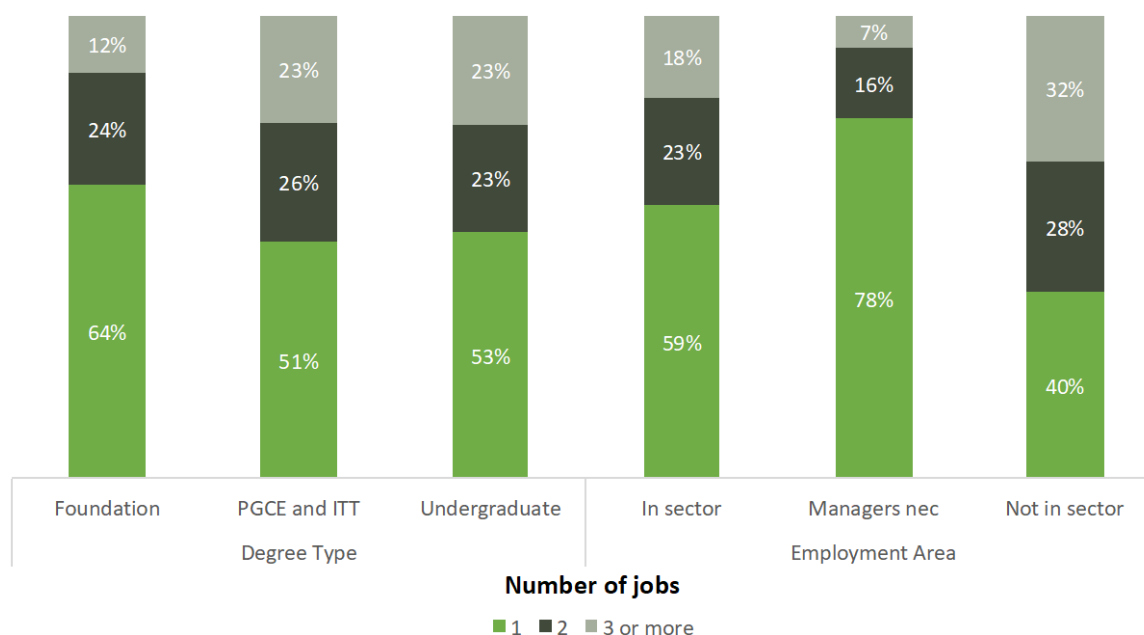


Source(s): HESA DLHE Long Record 2012/13

There is significant variation in the number of jobs held by graduates finishing their course and being surveyed, with those who have held more jobs also being more likely to have spent a significant period of time unemployed. This suggests that having held multiple jobs is linked to career instability.

The potential link to career instability means that the number of jobs held is an interesting metric to consider in terms of how it relates to different employment sectors and degree types. Figure 19 illustrates how degree course and employment area affects employment precarity.

**Figure 19: Number of Jobs and Employment Area and Degree Type**



Source(s): HESA DLHE Long Record 2012/13

Employment in the early years sector appears to be more consistent among early years graduates, which likely shows their commitment to the sector. Fifty-nine per cent of those who work in the sector have held only one job since graduating, compared to only 40 per cent of those who work outside of the sector. Consistent employment appears to be more strongly linked to employment area than salary, which may suggest it is the primary economic incentive for those who choose to work within the sector.

Despite this, we also see that having a smaller number of jobs is linked to characteristics that are in turn linked to low pay (managers nec, foundation degrees), meaning consistent employment may relate to a lack of alternative options, as opposed to a particularly well-liked career.

### Summary

Graduates of early years courses differ in a number of attributes from other graduates, typically being older and more likely to study part-time and foundation degrees. These characteristics appear to be linked, and, among early years students, are also linked to accessing these HE courses from different academic backgrounds.

Beyond the background of graduates entering these courses, we continue to see differentiated paths taken by students throughout their studies and into further employment. The small proportion of students who enter PGCE ITT courses or undergraduate courses which contain teacher training, go

onto to access increased salary opportunities, with many students stating a preference that they would have rather studied a different qualification and chosen to take additional qualifications.

The uneven geographical distribution of course types reflects concerns around access to certain courses, with students unwilling or unable to travel far for study. As this lack of movement is often also reflected in their employment, an uneven distribution of courses is likely to reflect an uneven distribution of early years graduates across the country.

## Discussion and Conclusion

The link between quality early years education and children's outcomes is internationally recognised, whereby high-quality services provide an important foundation to children's later learning (European Commission, 2011; Nutbrown, 2012; OECD, 2011; OECD, 2015; Sylva, 2014; Sylva *et al.*, 2004). While quality is a much-debated concept within early years education (Campbell-Barr & Leeson, 2016; Dahlberg, Pence & Moss, 2013), those who work in early years services are identified as central to the quality of provision and higher qualifications (particularly at degree level) have been associated with improved child outcomes, particularly among children from lower-socio economic groups (Sylva *et al.*, 2004).

Despite this evidence, in England qualification requirements across the sector are variable, with staff working in the Maintained sector required to hold a degree with Qualified Teacher Status and those working in the Private, Voluntary and Independent (PVI) sector only required to hold vocational qualifications. Even where degrees are required or available, there are differences in their form (such as the combination of practical and theoretical elements) and content. For example, those in the PVI sector have historically undertaken the Early Years Professional Status and can now complete Early Years Initial Teacher Training, but both of these graduate level qualifications differ from Qualified Teacher Status.

The QAA Benchmarks for Early Childhood Studies (QAA, 2019) emphasise interdisciplinarity, with health, legal, education and social work fields all being anticipated, while accounting for regional variations in the course content that reflect the context. Subject areas to be (potentially) covered include psychology, education, health, welfare, sociology, social policy, cultural studies, history, law and economic perspectives, all of which were evident in the Stage One analysis to varying extents. The range of disciplines and sub-disciplines that have been identified as important for the early years workforce has led to it being identified as a theoretical hybrid (Rhedding-Jones, 2005) with this also being evident within the analysis of the online descriptors of the degrees available across England presented in Stage One. The initial analysis demonstrates a broad range of subjects covered within the early years degrees in England. Given the range of subjects and variable extents with which different subjects were mentioned in online descriptors, early years degrees in England are fragmented in their content. This fragmentation potentially translates into fragmented experiences for children within early years services.

Professional practice and reflection was the most frequently cited topic covered within early years degrees. The focus on professionalism is likely related to the debated professional status of those who work in the early years. Fluctuations in policy commitments for degree-qualified staff, changes in the degree status available to the sector, and the disparity in terms and conditions between those working in different sectors have contributed to contemplation as to what an early years professional is. Conversely, reflection is recognised as a deeply embedded and important skill for working in the early years sector. The combination of professional practice and reflection indicates a strong employment (and practical) orientation of the degrees available in England that is embedded in the ideological and political history of early years professionals. The suggestion is that early years degrees are strongly orientated to the employment market, reflecting a wider focus on skills and employability that is evident across Further and Higher Education (Furlong & Whitty, 2017) and often present within Degree Benchmarks.

The practical orientation of early years degrees is further illustrated by the focus on pedagogy within the online descriptors, but also the requirements for students to undertake practical work experience alongside their degree. The practical focus illustrates the importance of experiential learning within

early years degrees. However, whereas countries such as Finland and Hungary offer models whereby students are progressively expected to take on more responsibility within their practical placements over the course of their degrees (Oberhuemer, Schreyer & Neuman, 2010; Onnismaa, Tahkokallio & Kalliala, 2015), our analysis suggests that in England it is more variable. Where there is an alignment between students' existing employment and their degrees, this is likely to facilitate widening participation. Where placements are undertaken on a voluntary (i.e. not paid) basis, the number of hours completed can vary in terms of both total number and when it is to be undertaken over the course of each academic year. Students will therefore graduate with varying levels of practical experience. It was beyond the scope of this analysis to investigate the characteristics of those with whom students work during their practice placements, though it is an interesting issue. For example, it is unclear if students work with those with an equivalent or higher qualification (see Nutbrown, 2012) or what are the arrangements for mentoring relationships within early years placements.

The analysis in Stage Two also highlighted some key characteristics that distinguish early years students from students within HE more broadly. Students enrolled in early years courses are typically older, studying foundation degrees, studying part-time and likely to be entering HE from less traditional backgrounds (having studied level 4/5 qualifications or vocational level 3 qualifications). As this group of students is relatively atypical in terms of age and entry qualifications, the data suggests that these courses are fulfilling a widening participation aim in terms of increasing the age range of potential students. This is further supported by the large number entering with level 4 or 5 qualifications (some of which may be bridging qualifications into HE study) and the large number studying foundation degrees (which may act as bridging qualifications into full undergraduate degrees). The career trajectory of atypical students (in terms of age and entry qualifications) may allow for prior work experience among this student population. This would be particularly true in the context of the funding that was available at the time of the student cohort under consideration. For example The Graduate Leader Fund offered an incentive for PVI settings to employ a graduate or an Early Years Professional (Mathers *et al.*, 2011), with other fee-based incentives being available to support those in PVI settings to obtain degrees. However, as that funding stream has been phased out, students' characteristics of more recent cohorts may be different.

The relevance of the HESA cohort for widening participation goals should be assessed keeping in mind that those students graduated several years ago, and that in the intervening years there have been reductions in the number of part-time students as well as changes in students' characteristics. The data did not allow us to determine the success of policies aiming at widening participation. However, it was clear, and concerning, that the graduates from non-traditional backgrounds are likely to be concentrated within course types with smaller financial rewards. Therefore, it is important to ensure that those who are accessing less financially rewarding courses are aware and able to access as many course types as are consistent with their personal and career plans, and that these opportunities are appropriately geographically accessible.

The fragmentation in course content and structure mentioned above raises additional questions as to whether there is an expectation in the sector about what an early years degree should constitute. The degree descriptors offer one indication of what those representing the sector identify as important for initial early years graduate training. Beyond the employment orientation of the degrees, there remains a question as to what should be the subject content. The mapping of different aspects of degree content illustrates that some subject content was related, accounting for low frequencies in some areas being addressed by content in other areas. For example, psychology appears to be more specific to psychological perspectives on child development and play is embedded within the broader focus on pedagogy.

The frequency of different subject areas raises questions as to whether there should be core content to early years degrees. For example, under a third of degrees (22 per cent) clearly stated a focus on Children's Rights. While it is accepted that online course descriptors do not account for the detail of what is delivered in degrees, and Children's Rights may be addressed in the overall course content, there is a question as to whether such elements should be compulsory features of early years degrees. The QAA benchmarks for Early Childhood Studies identify children as active participants in their lives and those of their families and wider society, reflecting a wider philosophical movement around children as active social agents (Gabriel, 2017). While accounting for different interpretations of children and childhood, there is recognition of children's rights in the benchmarks, which have seen a revised focus following the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Therefore, the number of references to children's rights appears low given the wider early years context.

Working with Families was another area that appeared to have a lower than anticipated number of references, with just over a third (34 per cent) of courses explicitly indicating a focus on Working with Families. Working with Families has been recognised internationally as contributing to the quality of early years services (OECD, 2011), while the EYFS refers to partnership working between professionals and families (Department for Education, 2014). Further, given evidence that this area is often challenging for students (see for example Ward *et al.*, 2013), it could lead to claims that it needs to be embedded in early years degrees.

Within the subject specific content of early years degrees is also a question as to what age range degrees should focus on. International evidence suggests that early years pedagogy is unique, and that degrees should not cross between different curriculum stages (Garnier, 2011), while evidence from England has suggested that it is not just child development knowledge that is important, but age specific child development knowledge (Georgeson *et al.*, 2014). Within the degrees analysed there was evidence of a disparate array of age foci, some relating to curriculum stages, while others went from birth to 25. While the Early Childhood Studies benchmarks do not provide an upper age limit for a degree to enable them to align with different social contexts, there is a question of whether the early years context requires a specific age range.

Given the employment orientation of early years degrees identified in Stage One, results emerging from Stage Two of our analysis are important to understand how employment opportunities are distributed among early years graduates. Beyond the background of students entering early years courses, the analysis highlighted the different paths taken by students throughout their studies and into further employment. We observed that only a very small proportion of students enter PGCE or ITT courses, or undergraduate courses containing teacher training, which are the courses with a clear salary premium.

Finally, the uneven geographical distribution of course types raises concerns around access to certain courses, with students unable or unwilling to travel far for study. As this lack of movement is often also reflected in their employment, an uneven distribution of courses is likely to reflect an uneven distribution of graduates within the workforce. This provides some support to the hypothesis of a localised labour market within the early years sector. A localised labour market can have negative repercussions – for example, it may lead to providers having a restricted pool of job applicants – but also positive consequences as a community-based approach is a key feature of working in the early years. Either way, this labour market characteristic should be taken into account when considering formulating policies and/or financial incentives aimed at supporting the workforce to upskill.

## Limitations

The data used in the two strands of this project refers to different academic years. Stage One identified and analysed the early years courses available to students in the academic year 2019/20<sup>6</sup>, whereas in Stage Two we conducted a quantitative analysis of the employment trajectories of students completing courses in the academic year 2012/13 and surveyed three and a half years later (2016/17) to capture their long-term outcomes. As such, some of the data is not directly comparable and important education policies might have changed the landscape in the intervening years. However, previous research has shown that the years 2010-2013 can be considered the golden age of graduate-led early years provision. Between 2007 and 2011, when funding for the Graduate Leader Fund was ring-fenced, the number of early years workers with a bachelor's degree or equivalent increased dramatically, with positive impact felt across the sector for a few more years (Bonetti & Akhal, 2020). This suggests that the time frame of Stage Two represents the peak of funding of, and access to, early years degrees. Given the funding cut to the Graduate Leader Fund and, more broadly, to the Higher Education sector, and the increasing financial unsustainability of PVI settings, we can only expect long term outcomes for early years graduates to have remained stable or worsened, despite clear commitment from the workforce to upskill above and beyond minimum qualification requirements (Bonetti, 2018).

Another important limitation to the data used in Stage Two is that it does not include students obtaining the Early Years Teacher Status qualification, which is a key graduate route for professionals working in the PVI sector. We know from other studies, however, that the employment outcomes of professionals with EYTS have been very poor compared to those students obtaining Qualified Teacher Status, which has contributed to an even wider gap in the existing split system (Nursery World, 2018).

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<sup>6</sup> The analysis was undertaken over the summer, with some changes in the courses available emerging during the analysis.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

The goal of this study was to provide insight into what constitutes a degree-level qualification for working in the early years in England. Whilst there is an evident variability in qualification names, to date information was lacking on what the different qualifications constitute in their theoretical and practical foci, and on the subsequent employment trajectories of the respective graduates.

This study highlighted that degree variability goes beyond simple variation in qualification names and extends to their course content, as well as their linking of theory with practice. It also provided further support to existing evidence of a two-tier system between the PVI and maintained sectors. Differences are not limited to working conditions and pay, but also include fragmentation – which is higher in the case of degrees without QTS (that are more likely to lead to employment in PVI settings) compared to those with QTS, further exacerbating the negative consequences of the two-tier system. Finally, the analysis confirmed the initial hypothesis of a localised workforce, with early years students remaining local both to undertake their studies and to take up employment.

Based on the research findings we identify five key areas for discussion:

1. Degree fragmentation
2. Practical arrangements
3. Degree choice
4. Employment pathways
5. Localised workforce

### 1. Degree fragmentation

The fragmentation in degrees content poses a challenge for the collective quality of early years degrees, with no clear expectations of the content covered for students or employers. While degree fragmentation could be viewed as offering a variety of opportunity in future employment trajectories (whereby students have a broad knowledge-base), this is not borne out in the employment pathways. Instead, alongside a general lack of long-term strategy for workforce development, the degree fragmentation is likely to be contributing to a lack of clear employment pathways.

A high level of fragmentation also means that early years employers do not have clear indicators of degree quality in relation to the content covered. It is particularly concerning that our analysis found no guarantee of minimum expectations of content. Given the role of early childhood education in closing the disadvantage gap, the lack of reference to social mobility was surprising. Children's rights and child protection are also legislative requirements for those working in early childhood education, suggesting that they may be content that should feature more prominently in early years degrees compared to what this study found.

The disparity in the age focus of the degrees makes it questionable that students are obtaining age specific child development knowledge, particularly where the age range is broad. Existing qualification frameworks do not provide clarity on what the age focus should be, with Qualified Teacher Status focusing on three to seven years and Early Years Initial Teacher Status focussing on birth to five years. Age specific child development knowledge is an important attribute of the early childhood professional knowledge-base, but requires clarification.

### 2. Practical arrangements

Fragmentation in work placement requirements across early years degrees presents a challenge to the quality of degrees being a balance between practical and theoretical content for developing professional practice. Fragmentation in the incorporation of practical elements of degrees is in

contradiction to models seen elsewhere in Europe. The two-tier system between degrees with and without QTS also translates into a two-tier model on entry to employment, whereby a formal induction system is built into the QTS but not into other early years degrees. However, the removal of a policy commitment for degree-level staff in early years settings, and of the accompanying financial support, has made it harder to create a generalised induction system of high quality. Under current conditions, simply mandating induction without additional support and structures in place could lead to degree students being mentored by someone not qualified at degree-level or providers not having the right resources to support new graduates.

### 3. Locality of Degree Choice

Degree choice based upon locality has implications for both individual practitioners and providers. On the practitioners' side, it can restrict some students in making decisions about the quality and content of degrees where there is a lack of choice; on the providers' side, it can restrict the pool of applicants, potentially at the expense of quality.

With greater movement towards online learning (which may further due to COVID19) there is the potential for students to alter the ways in which they choose degrees. However, more research is needed to understand how and why students choose their degrees to fully ascertain whether the removal of geographical boundaries in choice of degrees leads to particular features being more desirable.

### 4. Employment Pathways

Employment pathways and opportunities are strongly driven by the two-tier system for early years degrees existing in England and have been impacted by changing policies around requirements for a graduate workforce. While most early years graduates found employment within the sector, we found little variation in pay between those inside and outside the sector, suggesting that even for those with a degree in early years there is little economic incentive to remain employed within the sector. On the other hand, we found a clear salary premium for those accessing early years courses with a more academic-oriented background and for pursuing teacher training. Given that graduates from non-traditional backgrounds were more likely to be concentrated within course types with smaller financial rewards, it is important to ensure that students are able to access course types that are consistent with their personal career plans. Access to opportunities needs to be appropriately geographically accessible.

### 5. Localised workforce

A localised workforce, both pre and post study, has important practical and policy implications. Students need to be equipped with the knowledge and skills that will enable them to engage with and respond to the needs of their local communities. Any workforce development strategy should recognise the key role that local authority and regional networks can/should play in complementing students' studies. While national regulations are needed, implementation works better when it is local. Local networks could provide the opportunity to ensure that the quality of degrees meets local demand and could support an induction/mentoring system.

## Recommendations

In line with our analysis, our key recommendations are the following:

- The establishment of a national group within the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) to review the content and structure of degrees. The review should:
  - Consider what degree content will enable students to fulfil the legislative requirements that they are likely to undertake in future professional roles around child protection and children's rights.



- Establish the full range of practical elements and models adopted within early years degrees, including mentoring systems, and minimum expectations of the knowledge and skills of mentors. Findings should inform national minimum work placement/practical requirements for early years degrees.
- Ensure degrees support students to understand their local contexts and respond to the needs of the children and families in their communities.
- Further research on the induction systems present for those going on to work in early years education, comprising of analysis of the structural and process features of existing models (including international examples). The research should provide a structure for the development of a feasibility study on appropriate models, the organisational and cost implications, to inform national minimum induction standards for the early years sector.
- The publication by Higher Education Institutions of how their courses meet QAA benchmarks in a standard and accessible format to support students' choice.

Quality early years services are well established as supporting the holistic development of young children, with degree qualified staff identified with improved quality of services and child outcomes. The research presented has sought to better understand what constitutes a degree-qualified workforce, in regards to the subject and practical knowledge of graduates and where they find employment. The consequences of the fragmented nature of early years degrees across England is that it has direct implications for the quality of early years services for children and families. Students, the early years workforce, children and parents all have a right to expect quality early years training in support of high quality services.

Despite early years degrees being characterised by fragmentation, early years graduates largely find themselves working in early years services, local to their homes and universities. The fluctuating policy commitment for a graduate led workforce in early years services is likely to have contributed to the fragmentation in degree content and structure, as well as a two tier model of employment opportunity dependent on students obtaining QTS. The early years workforce requires equality of access to quality degrees that provide equality of opportunity in fulfilling their personal and professional ambitions.

## Appendix 1: Identification and Analysis of Degrees

To establish the full range of early years degrees available (i.e. those degrees that could lead to employment in the early years and childcare sector) a series of UCAS searches were undertaken (see Appendix One). For each search on <https://www.ucas.com/> we used the following filters:

- England
- Undergraduate
- 2019/2020
- Show all courses (as opposed to only show 'Clearing courses with vacancies')
- After each search: change undergraduate to postgraduate to check for additions

The search terms used included:

- Childhood studies
- Early childhood education
- Early childhood education and care
- Early childhood studies
- Early education
- Early years

All results were then collated in one Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. This began the process of recording some of the structural features of the degrees, such as details of the name of the institution, course title and degree type. The spreadsheet also recorded under what search term the course was found and added to the list.

The first search term 'childhood studies' generated the largest number of results: 499 courses from 123 providers. Each following search term generated additional results that were checked against those already on the spreadsheet to avoid duplication. The search term 'early childhood studies' generated the second largest number of results, with 430 courses from 120 providers. On the other hand, 'early childhood education and care' generated 48 courses from 28 providers, which had all previously been added to the spreadsheet. By recording the results from different search terms on the same spreadsheet, we were able to re-check each of the courses offered by universities.

There were slight differences in results depending on when the search was undertaken. The identification of the full range of degrees fell in the period between university academic years and it was noticeable that courses were being added and removed during this period. For example, searching 'Childhood studies' generated 497 results on 01/07/19, which increased to 499 the next day and decreased to 496 within one week.

Furthermore, by systematically checking each course on every search term, it was noticed that one University changed the name of their Early Childhood and Popular Music course to Early Childhood and Music Production from 01/07/19 to 15/07/19. When a change in course title or different course was found, this was checked against the first search term 'childhood studies' to see if it was an additional course that had recently been added. The list of degrees for potential analysis was completed at the end of July 2019.

While many of the searches identified courses that had been listed as a result of earlier searches, there continued to be new courses identified. By using different search terms, there were up to another 55 courses that were not found until the fifth or sixth search term.

For postgraduate searches, each term was searched separately after searching the undergraduate courses. One PGCE course was found and added, along with PGCert or PGDip courses, but the remaining results were MA or PhD courses, which we did not add to the spreadsheet as they are not pre-requisites for employment in early years and childcare services. Courses added and found under the postgraduate searches were ticked under each search term with 'p/' to represent the postgraduate level.

UCAS also provided a list of several subjects that matched the first search:

- Early childhood studies
- Child studies
- Educational studies
- Child development
- Youth studies
- Child care
- Early years
- Child psychology
- Youth development
- Learning

Using all the filters and entering 'childhood studies' again, we searched under two of the recommended subjects listed by UCAS - 'child development' and 'child psychology' - as these terms were different from our original search terms. No new results were added to the spreadsheet, and results were ticked under the corresponding search terms for the 151 courses from 44 providers for child development, and 73 courses from 16 providers for child psychology.

Having identified the list of courses to be analysed, on undertaking the analysis we identified that on occasion additional courses could be identified on university web pages but had not been found via UCAS. Where the course was identified as suitable, we added it to the spreadsheet. For example, some Universities also offered a 1-year TopUp version of a course, or an Early Years Initial Teacher Training course, which was not found in UCAS using various search terms including 'Early Years Teacher'. A further column was created for additional courses offered by the University. Similarly, courses advertised on a University website included 'Child and Family Studies' which did not appear in any of the previous UCAS searches. Therefore, we conducted another UCAS search using the same filters with the search term 'Child studies' as recommended by UCAS in the above list. This generated 492 courses from 112 providers. The search for 'Child studies' was then added to the Excel spreadsheet, with new Universities and courses added and/or ticked under the search term. After this final search, all new courses found under 'Child Studies' were searched for under 'Childhood Studies' or other terms to double check that the course was found under the new search term, and that the course had not been added recently.

### Structural Features

After finishing the searches for the excel spreadsheet, we created another tab with all results named 'Degree summary'. This tab recorded the structural features of the degrees as follows:

- Entry requirements
- Fees
- Duration
- Age range (relating to children)
- Placement details

- Optional modules

After discussion, we included an additional column for the level of detail found about the degrees when we looked at them on the university web pages. Levels of detail varied from high, such as a description of each module for each year of a degree, to low, such as a short summary of the degree and a list of some modules. Other courses were classified as having medium levels of detail where there was some detail about individual modules, but not all. While the recording of the level of detail was not based on a specific index, it was felt important to have information on this as the level of detail about the courses inevitably influenced the degree with which we could fill in detail on the analysis of content.

### Suitability

We initially identified 647 different degree variations available for going on to work in early years and childcare services. The total number provides something of a dazzling figure when considering that a prospective student, willing to go anywhere in the country to study, could find themselves negotiating a list of 647 options. However, as we began to undertake the structural and interpretive analysis, we observed that often there were instances of the same courses, but with different pathways or they were joint degrees. For example, universities would offer an 'early childhood studies' degree, but with a pathway for leadership and management and another for inclusion and special educational needs. Where this was the case, the different pathways were analysed, but if the analysis demonstrated a duplication of the course, one of the variants would be removed to avoid double coding some institutions.

There were also universities that offered their Early Childhood Studies and other degrees as joint degrees. For example, in one university it was possible to undertake Early Childhood Studies in combination with 80 other subjects. It was felt that analysing all 80 would distort the analysis and, therefore, only the degrees that offered a clear early childhood focus were analysed.

A number of universities also offer the degrees as a full three-year degree and a two-year degree with a Top-Up. Again, where this looked to create duplication in the analysis, only the full degree was analysed. However, we are aware that at times universities have partnerships with other institutions to offer their degree and/or a Foundation degree that acts as a pathway to the university. In some cases, websites provided details of these partnerships, but not always. Due to not being able to be consistent in identifying where partnerships existed, and because of the potential for differences in what the different courses actually offered, we did not remove partnership courses from the analysis. However, we do acknowledge that this might have led to some duplication within the analysis.

Other courses were removed from the analysis because the course descriptors indicated that the degree's employment pathways were not relevant to early years and childcare. For example, it became apparent that some courses were focused on psychology and others were for social work, aligning with the relevant professional bodies in these areas. Therefore, the courses were removed.

In total 320 degrees were identified as suitable for further analysis (a loss of 327 degrees).

### Framework Analysis

Framework analysis supports a thematic inquiry of the components of the full range of early years degrees on offer in England and the management of a large volume of data, such as the one in hand for this study. Framework analysis is suited for applied policy research enabling both structural and interpretive features of the large number of degrees to be analysed in a systematic way. Framework analysis requires familiarisation with the degrees, creating a thematic framework, followed by

indexing, charting, mapping and interpretation (Srivastava and Thomson, 2009). The initial familiarisation with the degrees began by considering structural features pertaining to the university (e.g. fees, University Teaching Excellence Grades) and the course, such as entry requirements, number of modules, time for compulsory placements and other quantitative features. The next phase developed a thematic matrix; an interpretive framework identifying the issues and themes emerging from the degree descriptors, whilst making reference back to the original objectives of the project. The matrix will be cross-referenced to the QAA subject benchmarks to inform the initial thematic framework. The framework was shared amongst project partners and an advisory group to consider its scope and depth, being refined as necessary.

### Coding Framework

In line with moving from familiarisation with the degrees to recording the interpretive features, the overview of our process outlined above enabled us to record key structural information, before analysing for interpretive features as detailed below.

#### *Structural Features*

The structural features that were included in the analysis have largely been outlined above and are summarised below.

- Name of the institution
- Course title
- Degree type
- Entry requirements
- Fees
- Duration
- Age range
- Placement details
- Optional modules

The 'age range' referred to the age range of the children that were the focus on the degree. Often this information was not stated, but where it was details were recorded. Placement details referred to whether there was a compulsory or voluntary placement option and where possible details of which year of the degree that was to be completed and for how many hours or days was recorded, but again full details were often limited. In some instances, degrees were presented as complementing employment. Where this was the case we included this information in the 'placement details' category.

The optional module category enabled details of whether options modules were available to students in the degree. Where option modules are available it is worth acknowledging that this has consequences for the interpretive analysis as courses with more option modules have the opportunity to record information in more of the interpretive features than those that do not have option modules.

#### *Interpretive Features*

Following the initial familiarisation and charting of the structural features, researchers for the analysis of the degrees met to discuss an initial coding frame. Drawing on their prior knowledge of the literature on early years degrees an initial thematic coding frame was developed. The initial themes (nodes) were:

- International (does the degree provide an English, European or international focus)
- Sociology

- Psychology
- Child Development (psychology, biology, neuroscience)
- Professional Practice and Reflection
- Play
- Creativity
- Health and Well-being
- Environment and Sustainability
- History
- Philosophy
- Children's Rights
- Safeguarding
- Inclusion, social inequality, social justice
- Pedagogy (Teaching and Learning)
- Technology (Digital Childhood)
- Research
- Policy
- Critical/Contesting (does the degree state it offers a critical approach)

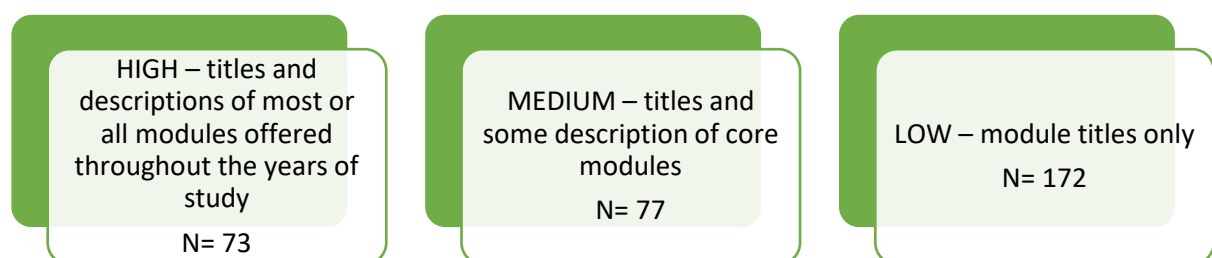
Selecting 10 degrees to represent the range recorded as detailed by the structural features, the coding framework was piloted. The pilot sought to ensure that a range of degree types were included, such as BAs, BEds, FD and Postgraduate options. To pilot the coding framework, the degree was found on the relevant university web page and the detail read through. The two researchers independently coded five courses each, listing how they were classifying descriptors of the degrees and noting areas that they thought were missing from the above list. After discussion the following two themes were also identified:

- Working with Families
- Leadership

It was also after this initial coding that it was agreed to record information about the level of detail of the degrees. Inevitably, university website descriptors of degrees are variable and where more than one course was available at the same institution it was evident that templates were in place to structure the information that would be provided online – something that was confirmed by members of the advisory group who work for and with universities.

The level of detail recorded was as follows:

Despite the low levels of detail provided for most courses, often an overall description of the course



and titles of modules made it possible to still record information in the framework analysis. However, where low levels of detail often resulted in only a few key words being recorded in the framework

analysis, those courses with more detail enabled a fuller description to be captured in the analysis. The analysis is, therefore, biased towards those institutions that provided more detail about their courses.

To support capturing the detail that was available, the charting of the degrees recorded an overview of what was said in relation to each node in the framework analysis, leaving blank any nodes that were not described in the course overviews. To support the interpretation of the nodes, each one was reviewed and a summary created of the detail that was recorded.

In analysing the detail that was recorded under each node, a mapping exercise was undertaken to see where different nodes related to each other. Each node was revisited and a record made of where the descriptors under the node linked to one or more of the other nodes. The frequency of the links was also recorded, enabling a map to be formed of how different nodes related to each other and the weight of those relationships.

## Appendix 2: Derived Variables

Below we provide an explanation of how two of the key variables used in stage 2 of the analysis were obtained from original variables in the dataset.

### Course Type

Course titles were searched for if they contain phrases or words that may indicate the course type. For courses with no such information, we searched for the course and HE institution website in order to find out more information. We were able to clearly identify some additional courses as being early years courses, but there remained courses we were unable to identify or courses where two different course types had the same name. We were left with 245 students enrolled in courses that we were unable to ascertain the 'type' of.

After this manual check, our dataset comprised 1,415 students who we could clearly assign to a course that was relevant for our analysis. Below is the breakdown by course type.

Foundation	ITT	PGCE	Undergraduate
420	15	60	920

### Job in the sector

Information on whether a job is in the relevant sector is held within the F\_WRK\_SOC\_2010 variable. We categorised the values held within this field in four ways: in sector, in sector (no child contact), managers and proprietors nec and out of sector.

Sector jobs are:

- (23150) Primary and nursery education teaching professionals
- (61250) Teaching assistants
- (23160) Special needs education teaching professionals
- (23190) Teaching and other educational professionals.
- (61210) Nursery nurses and assistants
- (61260) Educational support assistants
- (61220) Childminders and related occupations
- (61230) Playworkers

The only sector job that seemed to imply a lack of regular contact with children is (32330) Child and early years officers. This group is considered separately where sample sizes are large enough but when this is not the case the no child contact group is aggregated with other sector employees.

This categorisation is only applied to those individuals whose main activity was any possible value but "not currently in employment".

The overall breakdown for the job sector values is

Employment Area	Count
In Sector	895
In Sector (no child contact)	20
Managers and proprietors nec	250
Not in Sector	455



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