

4.3 Programme Delivery

Level 7 and Level 8 undergraduate degree programmes in ECEC should provide rich and diverse learning experiences for students to develop their values, knowledge(s) and practices as they develop as early years professionals. These experiences should include personal and professional development experiences that enable them to become reflective practitioners and prepare them for professional practice in the early years profession. Working with children, families and diverse communities not only requires a body of knowledge but the ability to translate that knowledge into action. In other comparable professions, undergraduate courses are four years in duration (e.g., primary school teaching, nursing, social studies) and postgraduate qualifications are two years in duration (e.g., primary and post-primary teaching). While providers have flexibility in terms of the design, development and delivery of degree programmes, courses should be informed by the following guidelines and students should have opportunities to experience the following elements throughout their course. These draw on the QQI list of core validation criteria (QQI, 2016) as well as providing specific guidance in relation to aspects of ECEC courses, including professional practice placement.

- The **programme objectives and outcomes** should be clear and consistent with the award sought.
- Each module objective and learning outcomes should be clear and communicated to the students.
- The programme's **access, transfer and progression arrangements** should be clear and fair.
- There are sufficient **qualified and capable programme staff** with expertise and experience in ECEC available to implement the programme as planned. Allied professionals may also engage with students for discrete aspects of the course (e.g., psychologists, nutritionists, etc.).
- **Face-to-face and online learning and teaching** contact hours provide opportunities for individual, group and experiential learning. This should develop students' knowledge(s) and practices and imbue them into the values of their professional role.
- There should be **significant opportunities for personal and professional development**. This should promote reflective practice, problem solving, intentionality and critical thinking and instil in students the capacity to become practitioner researchers with a disposition for lifelong learning.
- There should be **structured supervised assessed professional practice placement** for a minimum of 25%¹ of the overall duration of the course in appropriate settings. This professional practice placement experience should be incremental/ spiral in nature and be integral to each phase of the programme. Professional practice placement experience should provide students with an opportunity to:
 - Observe experienced professionals and be supported to reflect on these observations in a variety of early years settings
 - Integrate theory and practice
 - Apply knowledge in practice

¹ This time allocation is common across other professional disciplines (e.g., teaching, social care).

- Develop and demonstrate the required values, knowledge(s) and practices to work with young children in the context of their setting, family and community under the supervision of more experienced professionals
- Critically engage in self-reflection and self-evaluation of their own practice and engage in professional conversations with more experienced professionals (setting-based practitioners and supervisors) around their practice

Professional practice placement should be undertaken in a range of various settings spanning the early years age range (birth to six years) and catering for a diverse range of children, including children with additional needs. Placements in non-practice settings such as policy development agencies, research centres, City and County Childcare Committees and regulatory agencies should also be considered. Placement settings should be TUSLA-registered and criteria for the selection of settings should be developed. There should be support by both course-based staff and ECEC professionals based in the setting. Visiting tutors or supervisors should have suitable qualifications for and experience of the early years sector and work alongside co-operating educators within professional practice placement settings to support and assess students (Moloney, 2017). There should be structures in place to build active partnership and relationships between course providers and professional practice placement settings. This could be achieved through the development of a Memorandum of Understanding or an agreement that provides comprehensive information about respective roles and responsibilities.

- There should be a **range of assessment methods** that capture the incremental acquisition of values, knowledge(s) and practices of students. These assessment methods should be fair, transparent and consistent. A combination of formative and summative assessments should be included and there should be a clear relationship between learning outcomes, learning experiences and the assessment criteria. There should be a requirement that students must pass the professional practice placement element of the programme independent of all other elements in order to progress the next year of the programme or to graduate. Students who fail professional practice placement should be offered mentoring and support if they are afforded the opportunity to repeat the professional practice placement. Continuing professional development opportunities should be available to visiting tutors to ensure coherence and consistency of the institutional assessment processes and procedures.
- The programme's **written curriculum** should be well structured and fit-for-purpose.
- There should be **sufficient physical resources** to implement the programme as planned.
- The **learning environment** should be consistent with the needs of programme learners.
- Learners enrolled on the programme should be **well informed, guided and cared for** (including students with additional learning needs).
- The programme should be **well managed** and **meet highest governance standards**.