**Introduction**

This consultation sought views on the Professional Award Criteria and Guidelines for Initial Professional Education (Level 7 and Level 8) Degree Programmes in ECEC in Ireland (hereby referred to as the Criteria and Guidelines), with a specific focus on the professional dimension of practice in the ECEC sector. The draft report aims to provide guidance and criteria on the journey from entry for a candidate onto a Level 7 or Level 8 undergraduate course to their exit as an early years professional graduate. It is also intended that the Criteria and Guidelines would enable initial professional education course providers to design and deliver a course (including professional practice placement) that develops the necessary values, knowledge(s) and practices in their graduates to enable them to practice as early years professionals and ultimately aims to improve the experiences and outcomes of young children in early years settings. These Criteria and Guidelines do not intend to standardise or homogenise the delivery and content of all Level 7 and Level 8 courses in Ireland; rather they aim to bring some consistency to the experiences and outcomes for students undertaking such courses.

The development of the Professional Awards Criteria and Guidelines was informed by a working group established in June 2017 by the Early Years Education Policy Unit (EYEPU). The working group was representative of key constituents of the education sector with a remit to authorise and implement the use of the draft Criteria and Guidelines in their various jurisdictions. Included were representatives from the Irish Universities Association (IUA) and the Technological Higher Education Authority (THEA). The working group met on 5 occasions over a 20 week span from June to November 2017. The terms of reference of the working group was shared with the wider early years sector in September 2017 and a public consultation on the draft Criteria and Guidelines began in November 2017. The findings from this consultative process will be presented in this document and will inform the final draft of the Criteria and Guidelines. Ultimately, the Minister for Education and Skills and the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs will have the final say in the sign-off of the Criteria and Guidelines.

**Context**

An increased understanding of the value of quality early education and care experiences for young children and an increased number of parents participating in employment outside of the home has led to significant developments in the ECEC sector in the past few decades, with a particularly fast pace of development in recent years. Accompanying this has been an increase in State involvement, regulation and investment in the sector and increased professional expectations of the early years workforce. This has led to the emergence of a wide range of initial professional education offerings for early years professionals and an associated rise in the number of graduates at all levels of the NFQ.

The aim of these professional education courses is to prepare early years professionals including setting-based practitioners, teachers, lecturers, inspectors/evaluators, mentors and many more to work across a broad range of role profiles within the sector. This work may involve early years professionals working directly with children, with parents, with co-professional colleagues or in the wider community (or indeed with all of the above in the complex daily role). However, research clearly indicates that there is variability in participants’ experiences of degree courses at present, depending on where the course is undertaken (DES, 2016; Urban, Robson & Saatchi, 2017). Given this variability in the experience of professional education courses, it follows that the experiences of young children in ECEC settings will also vary. In light of this, these Criteria and Guidelines aim to increase consistency for students undertaking Initial Professional Education at Level 7 and Level 8 ECEC degree programmes in Ireland.
Rationale

The rationale for the establishment of the working group and subsequent consultation with the sector was to clearly articulate, in a set of Criteria and Guidelines, national guidance for the development and review of ordinary and honours level (Level 7 and Level 8) degree ECEC courses in Ireland. These Criteria and Guidelines may be used in the development or review of programmes by individual institutions, by awarding bodies, by accreditation bodies or by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA). They will be of use to employers in clarifying the values, knowledge(s) and practices of a Level 7 or Level 8 ECEC graduate. It is also anticipated that they will have a positive effect in the development of a more cohesive professional identity among early years graduates and ultimately enhance the experiences of young children in ECEC settings.

A consultative approach was adopted in keeping with the long tradition of consultation on policy development in partnership with the sector and to ensure the draft Criteria and Guidelines that ultimately emerge from the development processes are balanced, comprehensive and reflective of the diverse needs of the sector.

Methodology

The consultation process was carried out in 3 phases.

Phase 1:

Higher Education Institutes and other representative organisations were invited to submit a response to the draft Criteria and Guidelines. Submissions were received from 13 organisations, namely:

- The Association of Childhood Professionals (ACP)
- The BA EYCS at University College Cork (UCC)
- NUI Galway (NUI)
- The National Childhood Network (NCN)
- Early Childhood Ireland
- The Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education, Maynooth (the Froebel Department)
- The LINC Consortium (LINC)
- The Letterkenny Institute of Technology (LyIT)
- Mary Immaculate College, Limerick (MIC)
- OMEP Ireland (OMEP)
- PLÉ
- The Technological Higher Education Association (THEA)
- Saint Nicholas Montessori College Ireland (SNMCI)
Thematic analysis was carried out on all responses. Findings will be presented under the following themes:

- Support and Recommendations for the Criteria and Guidelines
- Practicum Placement
- Quality Assurance and Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)
- Professionalism and Vision for the ECEC workforce

Phase 2:
Survey data was collected from 986 individuals (the average number of respondents per question was 196.) Quantitative data from the survey was analysed by frequency and percentages and qualitative data were thematically analysed and will be presented under the themes outlined above.

Phase 3:
Feedback from a consultation day in December 2017 was collated and used to inform the report. A brief summary of responses from the consultation day will be presented.

Section 1: Organisation Responses

1.1 Support and Recommendations for the Criteria and Guidelines

Overall, organisational responses were positive with a general agreement for the relevance and appropriateness of the Criteria and Guidelines. A number of organisations particularly praised the commitment to not standardise or homogenise delivery and content of all level 7 and 8 ECEC programmes (NUI; Froebel Department; OMEP Ireland; PLÉ) and the majority of the organisational submissions (n=10) expressed a general agreement with the professional competences in the CoRe report as being relevant for the Irish context. ACP, UCC, NCN, Early Childhood Ireland, LINC, LyIT, the Froebel Department and MIC also offered general support for the appropriateness of the CoRE competencies to inform the content of Irish Higher Education awards at level 7 and 8. ACP, NCN, UCC and Early Childhood Ireland argued they are also appropriate to inform level 5 and 6, to allow for progression and ensure consistency at all levels.

NUI Galway expressed concerns that the draft Criteria and Guidelines are only appropriate for full time, inexperienced students and fail to take into account the ‘unique challenges, models and approaches required in part-time degree programmes, designed for the experienced practitioner seeking to upskill to a degree, while maintaining employment in the sector’.

PLÉ expressed concerns about the competency basis of the draft Criteria and Guidelines and argued there is “a considerable lack of emphasis upon critical reflection, research and advocacy” and a lack of attention given to autonomous practice, the concept of policy development, management and engagement with/in research (including publication). They also suggested at level 7 and 8 further attention is given to preparing graduates for supervision and mentoring roles in an ECEC leadership context.
Whilst offering general support for the suitability of the draft Criteria and Guidelines and criteria, The Froebel Department warned against undergraduate programmes endeavouring to prepare graduates as specialists in any specific area as attempts to overload programme content would “likely result in a dilution of required key competences”. Similarly, PLÉ argues there is an implicit message within the current document that suggests that Level 8 graduates should seek work outside the direct work in the ECEC sector in what are considered more prestigious roles (i.e., inspectors, mentors). PLÉ argues this is beyond the scope of an undergraduate qualification and, therefore, recommends that all reference to preparing graduates to be anything other than early childhood educators (birth to 6 years) should be removed from the final document. OMEP Ireland raised a concern relating to the identification of children with special needs; expressing the need to differentiate between identifying and diagnosing and manage expectations of the level of SEN expertise that level 7 and 8 ECEC graduates would be expected to have.

UCC recommended a preliminary competency related to the ‘Development of the student as a critical learner’ be added. Other recommendations included placing a greater emphasis on:

- **Creativity (beyond the boundaries of art, drama, dance and music)** (ACP; UCC; OMEP). For example, OMEP suggest concepts and terms such as ‘providing creative experiences’, ‘learning opportunities’, ‘image of the child’ and ‘the environment as the third teacher’ ought to be highlighted in the Criteria and Guidelines. They also warn against separating expressions through different languages into silos such as painting, dancing and story-telling and suggest consideration should be given to rephrasing the relevant section on page 14 to read “Valuing and encouraging children’s meaning making and expression through different languages which acknowledge children’s potential, ability to wonder and inquire through a range of creative experiences”.

- **Applying theory, research and knowledge to practice** (Early Childhood Ireland; NCN; OMEP). Early Childhood Ireland suggest an internship following graduation to support graduates progress through linking practice to theory. NCN also highlight the need for graduates to be competent in interpreting the National Frameworks and able to implement them into practice.

- **Children’s participatory rights** (OMEP; UCC; NCN), including the right to access outdoor play experiences (OMEP). UCC suggest Children’s rights should be embedded across all key competences and that programmes should evidence that all aspects are informed by a children’s rights perspective, in line with the UNCRC.

- **Children’s Health and Wellbeing** (NCN; Early Childhood Ireland; UCC). NCN reported a lack of reference to this in the core competencies and view this as a major oversight given the important role ECEC plays in nurturing young children’s holistic development. UCC suggested the core competency of ‘Health and care of young children and basic knowledge of child protection’ be entitled ‘Wellbeing of young children’

- **Nurturing learning dispositions** (ACP; OMEP). For example, in relation to ‘Practices’ on page 14 OMEP said ‘Generating an appropriate curriculum that stimulates emergent literacy, maths and science skills’ should be changed to ‘Generating an appropriate curriculum that promotes positive learning dispositions such as creativity, curiosity and perseverance.’
Partnership (NCN; UCC). UCC recommend rephrasing the core competency on ‘Knowledge of the situation of ECEC in the broader local, national and international context’ and that as part of this competency a section should be developed on ‘Networking with other professionals and engaging in local political consultation’

Continued Professional Development (LINC; MIC) LINC strongly advised the acknowledgement and illumination of the continuum of IPE and CPD should be included in the final version of the Professional award Criteria and Guidelines, with specific delineation of the broad key areas early childhood professionals might pursue in the context of CPD.

Leadership and management (NCN; PLÉ)- including a focus on financial management and HR matters.

Diversity and Inclusion (UCC; Early Childhood Ireland)

Historical and philosophical perspectives on ECEC (MIC). MIC suggested an understanding of the history of early childhood education provides ‘rootedness’ for the sector and, therefore, strongly advised that the professional award Criteria and Guidelines include a reference to the importance of Level 7 and 8 programmes including content that addresses the historical and philosophical perspectives of ECEC.

Supporting Families (NCN)- including the ability to signpost to other support services.

Care and education of under 3s (Early Childhood Ireland).

Summary of Key Findings:

- Broad support for the guidelines and criteria for both the Irish Context and Level 7 and 8 ECEC programmes.
- Some support for the CoRE competencies to also inform level 5 and 6 ECEC programmes.
- Concern regarding the applicability for part time, practice experienced students and for the level of expertise/specialism level 7 and 8 ECEC graduates are expected to have.
- Recommendations for a greater focus on creativity; research; children’s rights; children’s health and wellbeing; learning dispositions; partnership; CPD; Leadership and management; diversity and inclusion; historical and philosophical perspectives on ECEC; Supporting families and Care and education for under 3s.
1.2 Practicum Placement

The general consensus among organisational respondents was that the proposed minimum of 25% supervised practicum placement is not sufficient (ACP; NCN; Early Childhood Ireland; PLÉ). Preferences for between 30 and 50% were expressed with the ACP recommending a minimum of 40%, NCN suggesting between 35-50% and Early Childhood Ireland advocating for 30% in year one of a level 7 or 8 ECEC programme and increasing to 50% by year 4.

UUC and OMEP recommend the minimum amount of supervised practicum placement should be expressed in hours, rather than as a percentage of the programme. UCC suggest -in the context of a four year course - one year should be spent in supervised practicum placement and OMEP recommend a minimum of 780 hours over the duration of the programme. OMEP and ACP added any placement carried out in a non-practice setting should be additional to the minimum supervised practicum placement requirement.

NUI Galway raised a concern regarding the implications of a minimum supervised practicum placement requirement on part time students, who are likely to be experienced in and/or currently working within the ECEC sector. They suggested a need for flexibility and creativity to accommodate these students and ensure the existing workforce are not deterred from upskilling.

A number of organisations made comment in relation to ensuring the quality, as well as the quantity, of practicum placement. With regards to the students, UCC and OMEP highlight the need to gain experience in a range of settings, including a placement with children under 2 years and school aged childcare. ACP, OMEP and UCC also suggest students should not be assessed on a pass/fail basis, rather assessment should be “formative as well as summative” (UCC) and “yield a grade that represents the student’s level and quality of practice” (OMEP).

With regards to the placement provider, ACP, UCC, NCN and MIC highlight the need for students to be supervised by qualified and experienced mentors in high quality settings. UCC recommend the development of a form of accreditation for host placements and a number of organisations (UCC, Early Childhood Ireland and LyIT) call for compulsory CPD training for placement supervisors. ACP and UCC also recommend financial remuneration for placement supervisors.

Summary of Key Findings:

Organisations recommended:

- An increase in the minimum amount of supervised placement from 25% to between 30 and 50% and called for clarification of what this means in hours/days/credits.

- Flexible practicum placement requirements should be considered for part time students currently working in the ECEC sector.

- Level 7 and 8 students should be given the opportunity to carry out placements in a range of high quality settings and be supervised by appropriately qualified and experienced mentors.

- Placement providers should undertake compulsory CPD training and financial remuneration be given.
1.3 Quality Assurance and Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)

A number of organisations (ACP; UCC; NCN) report a need to review the existing list of approved qualifications to ensure only those with significant practicum placement and adequate coverage of core competencies are included. UCC express concern for the large number (500+) of ECEC degrees that are currently recognised by the Department for Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) and the potential for inconsistency in quality and standards.

Organisations (ACP; Early Childhood Ireland; OMEP; PLÉ) were particularly concerned about the inconsistencies in the duration and credits of approved level 7 and 8 ECEC programmes. ACP and Early Childhood Ireland call for standardisation in the number of credits required to attain a level 7 or 8 ECEC qualification across all institutions. OMEP argue three years is not sufficient for delivering a level 8 programme and PLÉ question the feasibility of having both three and four year Level 8 ECEC degree programmes. They report the European Commission (2015) specifications that “ECTS credits express the volume of learning based on the defined learning outcomes and their associated workload. 60 ECTS credits are allocated to the learning outcomes and associated workload of a full-time academic year or its equivalent” and that “one credit corresponds to 25 to 30 hours of work”. Therefore, a graduate from a four year Level 8 degree programme would attain 240 ECTS credits (a minimum of 6,000 hours of work), while a graduate from a three year Level 7/8 degree programme would attain 180 credits (4,500 hours of work). PLÉ recommends that this information pertaining to ECTS credits is included in the final award Criteria and Guidelines.

The majority of organisational responses (ACP; UCC; NCN; Early Childhood Ireland; MIC; OMEP; PLÉ) also called for national guidance and uniformity in recognition of prior learning (RPL). UCC called for the development of a standard protocol for RPL and NCN and OMEP suggested a minimum achievement of distinction on level 5 and 6 courses should be required. NCN argued a review of courses at level 5 and 6 would be required to ensure there is consistency for progression between institutions. MIC supported this, raising concerns about current inconsistencies in the knowledge, practice and values of some candidates with level 5 and 6 qualifications.

NCN and Early Childhood Ireland also felt quality assurance could be enhanced by standardising the entry requirements to level 7 and 8 ECEC programmes to ensure they are stringent and fit for purpose. NCN recommend a pre-admission interview to assess the candidates career goals and suitability for the sector, warning particularly of candidates who view ECEC degrees as an entry into other careers (particularly Primary School teaching).

The need for further quality assurance with regards to level 7 and 8 ECEC degree tutors/lecturers qualifications was raised by Early Childhood Ireland, NCN and OMEP. They suggest all/the majority tutors/lecturers should have a qualification in ECEC (higher than the level they are teaching) and expertise and experience in working in the ECEC sector.

ACP, UCC, NCN, Early Childhood Ireland and MIC expressed many of these quality assurance measures would benefit from external oversight, potentially in the form of an accreditation body. NCN argues the current system is too vulnerable to the discretion of individual institutions and tutors/lecturers, resulting in a lack of consistency of delivery. MIC suggest the Teaching Council could play a role in setting professional standards in the ECEC sector, arguing it would contribute to an alignment in expectations of professionals from early years to post primary education.
1.4 Professionalism and Vision for the ECEC Workforce

A number of organisations (ACP; NUI; Early Childhood Ireland; PLÉ) support the minimum qualification level for the ECEC workforce but view it as largely insufficient, expressing a preference for a graduate-led workforce (ACP; UCC; NCN; LyIT; PLÉ). NUI note the tension created in the current workforce where the majority of practitioners are highly experienced but with low levels of formal qualifications and where new entrant-graduates can join a setting in a leadership role, with an expectation that they will act as agents of change, to effect transformation in more experienced but less qualified fellow practitioners. They therefore recommend supporting committed practitioners already embedded in settings to upskill through flexible, accessible and creative models of study as a means of professionalising the sector. Early Childhood Ireland offered some support for this, acknowledging a willingness among practitioners to upskill but this willingness is not always actioned due to high costs and time constraints.

With regards to which professional roles should be qualified to level 7 or 8, NCN placed particular emphasis on the need for graduates in supervisory and management positions and LyIT suggest leadership positions should be undertaken by a level 7 or 8 graduate, with room assistants being qualified to level 5 and 6. However, a sense of frustration regarding the statement ‘there is currently no occupation within early years settings that can only be filled by a higher education graduate’ was communicated by PLÉ, the Froebel Department and UCC. PLÉ suggests this statement is removed from the Criteria and Guidelines or expanded on to provide context and UCC recommend the Danish Social Pedagogue as a potential model from which a professional title may emerge.

Further frustration was communicated by UCC and PLÉ with regard to the criteria for the requirement for level 8 graduates to have three years’ experience before the setting in which they work is paid the higher capitation. They suggest this should be reconsidered as it creates an obstacle for graduate employment, which does not exist elsewhere in the education system.

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Summary of Key Findings:

Organisations reported a need for enhanced standardisation and quality assurance with regards to:

- Approved level 7 and 8 ECEC course providers
- The duration and credits of a level 7 and 8 ECEC qualification
- Recognition of Prior Learning
- Entry requirements for level 7 and 8 ECEC programmes
- Qualification of ECEC tutors/lecturers

Organisations felt external oversight, potentially in the form of an accreditation body, would enhance quality assurance.
Overall, concerns about the increasing expectations of professionalism within the ECEC sector without associated changes to pay scales and working conditions was communicated by the majority of organisations (ACP; UCC; NCN; Froebel Department; LINC; MIC; PLÉ; THEA; SNMCI). UCC argue more and more is being asked of those working in the ECEC sector with very little in return. ACP argue this has led to a current staffing crisis with high levels of staff turnover and difficulties in retaining graduates in the sector. Therefore, NCN calls for a national salary scale for the sector and the Froebel Department and MIC recommend this is brought in line with primary and post primary school teachers. PLÉ advocates ‘until issues of remuneration, appropriate salary scales, terms and conditions of employment, and support for professionals to advance their qualifications are addressed graduates will enter a sector where their work feels undervalued and under rewarded which will impact on their capacity to practice and develop professionally.’ SNMCI acknowledge addressing these issues is a shared responsibility for all with an interest in the ECEC sector and so it is vital these complement and support each other to ensure coherence and greater ownership and professional identity in the sector. By 2030, ACP, NCN, Early Childhood Ireland and OMEP envision a professionally remunerated graduate-led workforce, with adequate government support for nationally agreed salary scales and professional terms and conditions of employment (ACP). ACP and NCN acknowledge a phased approach is most realistic to achieve this vision.

Some organisations (ACP; UCC; NCN; LyIT; MIC; PLÉ; THEA) felt the development of a professional registration body would be an effective means of addressing some of the challenges that currently exist in professionalising the ECEC workforce. MIC advise “Rather than initiating a separate registration system and body for early childhood teachers, it is advised that due consideration be given to allocating the Teaching Council a role in setting professional standards for the early years sector and promoting the work of early childhood teachers.” In contrast, PLÉ cite Moloney and McKenna’s (2017) call for the establishment of an Early Years Specific council that would act as an autonomous single agency for the professionalisation of the ECEC sector.

### Summary of Key Findings:

- Organisations are concerned for the increasing expectations of professionalism on the ECEC workforce without the associated changes to pay scales and working conditions.
- There is a general consensus for a graduate led ECEC workforce by 2030, provided the issues of pay scales and working conditions have been addressed.
- Some organisations called for a professional title.
- Some organisations suggested the criteria for the requirement for level 8 graduates to have three years’ experience before the setting in which they work is paid the higher capitation be reconsidered.
- Generally organisation responses support the establishment of a professional registration body.
2.1 Profile of Respondents

Figure 1 demonstrates the majority of survey respondents were Early Years practitioners, 31% (N=303), Early Years providers, 19% (N=183) or Early Years Specialists, 17% (N=154). A smaller number of respondents were Government employees, 1% (N=12), VCO employees, 1% (N=11) or CCC employees, 4% (N=12). A number of respondents worked in higher and further educational settings, including Higher Education Academics, 5% (N=51), Head of higher Education of Schools/departments, > 1% (N=6), further education managers, 1% (N=12) and further education teachers, 3% (N=29). A small number of post-primary, < 1% (N=4), and primary, 2% (N=21), teachers responded. There were also responses from a number of students; 4% (N=35) were full time higher education students, 1% (N=8) part time higher education students, 1% (N=10) full time further education students and > 1% (N=5) part time further education students. Respondents that selected other included pre-school/Early Years teachers (N= 15), Early years managers (N= 17), Montessori teachers (N= 7), parents (N=2), special needs assistants (N=5), childminders (N=5), a child & youth worker (N=1) and an administrator in an early years childcare facility (N=1).
2.2 Support and Recommendations for the Criteria and Guidelines

Survey respondents were overwhelming supportive of the professional competences in both the Irish context and at Level 7 and 8.

Figure 2: Relevance of Professional Competences in CoRe in Irish Context

Figure 2 indicates a large majority of respondents, 90% (N=284), agreed that the professional competences in CoRe are appropriate to inform the content of Irish Higher Education Awards at level 7 and 8.

Figure 3: Appropriateness of professional competences to inform the content of Irish Higher Education awards at level 7 and 8

Similarly, 91% (N=284) of respondents agreed that the professional competences are appropriate to inform the content of Irish Higher Education Awards at level 7 and 8.

However, as demonstrated in figure 4 below, almost a third of respondents, 32% (N=96), thought the core content was also appropriate to inform other levels of awards.
The majority of those who commented felt they were also appropriate to inform Level 5 and 6. Others suggested they were also appropriate to inform levels 4, 5 and 6 and some suggested all levels, including 9 and 10. Reasons provided were to enable consistency and progression throughout. For example:

“The content could be used to inform level 5 and level 6 in less detail. By doing this it would ensure consistency at all levels with higher level awards, achieving deeper understanding of same topics.”

“There should be consistency across higher education awards, as the students progress they should be building on previous learning.”

Despite the large number of respondents who thought the professional competences were appropriate in the Irish context and to inform higher education awards at level 7 and 8, 61% (N=176) of survey respondents thought additional core content should be included in the Criteria and Guidelines. Recommendations for additional content were varied with limited consensus among survey respondents. Suggestions included a greater emphasis on:

- Leadership and Management (n=16)
- National Frameworks (n=13)
- Children’s Health and Wellbeing (including child protection) (n=11)
- Special Educational Needs (n=9)
- Creativity (n=6)
- Care and education for children under three (n=2)
- Irish Language (n=2)
- Outdoor play (n=2)
- Continued Professional Development (n=2)
- Research (n=1)
2.3 Practicum Placement

Figure 5: Do you consider the recommended minimum of 25% supervised practicum placement to be an appropriate amount as a central component of the core delivery of the overall programme?

![Pie chart showing 66% agree and 34% disagree]

Figure 5 indicates two thirds of respondents, 66% (N=162), agreed with a minimum of 25% supervised practicum placement. Of the 34% (N=85) who did not, suggestions ranged from 30-50% with some respondents suggesting it should be 30% in year one and increase to 50% in year four. Other suggestions included stating the practice requirements in days/hours rather than percentage due to the variance in the length of courses. For example:

“Depends on how long the programme is. Some programmes are very short. It should be fixed hours and about 200 hours per year of a 4 year degree.”

Survey respondents also raised the issue of adapting this requirement to meet the needs of part time students who are currently employed in the early years sector.

“This does not take into consideration the many practitioners who are working and doing the course part time. They already may have years of experience in the field.”

Summary of Key Findings:

- Broad support for the Criteria and Guidelines for both the Irish Context and Level 7 and 8 ECEC programmes.
- Some support for the CoRE competencies to also inform level 5 and 6 ECEC programmes.
- Recommendations for a greater focus on Leadership and Management; National Frameworks; Children’s Health and Wellbeing; Special Educational Needs; Creativity; Care and education for under 3s; Irish Language; Outdoor play; CPD and Research.
As seen in figure 6, almost half of the respondents, 48% (N=117), thought there are additional criteria that need to be added to the supervised practicum placement. Suggestions from survey respondents included additional hours and extra monitoring, training and vetting for placement providers, variety in setting type and age group, completion of learning portfolio, assessment of placement and mandatory visits from college supervisor.

Summary of Key Findings:

Organisations recommended:

- The majority of survey respondents supported a minimum of 25% supervised practicum placement.

- Those who did not agree (approx. a third) suggested an increase in the minimum amount of supervised placement from 25% to between 30 and 50%.

- Some respondents expressed a preference for the minimum amount of practicum placement to be expressed in days/hours.

- Some respondents expressed the need for consideration to be given to part time students already working in the sector.

- Suggestions from additional criteria included additional hours and extra monitoring, training and vetting for placement providers, variety in setting type and age group, completion of learning portfolio, assessment of placement and mandatory visits from college supervisor.
2.4 Quality Assurance and Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)

With regards to how ensure access to professional awards in higher education are consistent, transparent and ensure the learner is capable of success, 137 survey respondents made suggestions. The suggestions most frequently reported included:

- Monitoring and Support
- Standardised content of courses
- Standardised entry requirements, including an interview
- Additional funding and evening courses
- Establishment of a professional body for the sector

Figure 7: Do current quality assurance processes sufficiently address the delivery of professional awards at higher education level?

Figure 7 suggests 57% (N=88) of respondents agreed that current quality assurance processes sufficiently address the delivery of professional awards at higher education level. For those who thought additional quality assurance measures needed to be developed, suggestions included:

- Oversight from a governing body
- Standardisation of tutors/lecturers- to include qualifications and experience specifically in ECEC (not teaching, nursing etc.)
A large majority of survey respondents, 90% (N=144), thought a standard protocol for recognition of prior learning should be developed and used by all higher education institutions for major awards in ECEC holders at NFQ Level 5 and 6. Comments related to the standardisation of level 5 and 6 and also to reflect experience.

With regards to who should be responsible for the development of this protocol, the most common response was DES and QQI. Other responses included:

- An overarching body
- DES should lead in collaboration with QQI and HEA
- DCYA
- QQI

Some respondents also highlighted the need to work with all stakeholders, including current higher education providers in the development of a protocol for the recognition of prior learning. For example:

“Establish a working group with stakeholders and Continue to consult with the sector. There are current systems employed by teacher training colleges for access to higher education programme and these could be considered, reflected upon and used to guide the development, learning from their success and mistakes.”
Summary of Key Findings:

- Survey respondents thought quality assurance could be enhanced by increased monitoring and support; the standardisation of course content; the standardisation of entry requirements, including an interview and additional funding and evening courses.
- In general survey respondents supported the establishment of a professional body for the sector.
- In general survey respondents supported the establishment of a standard protocol for RPL.

2.5 Professionalism and Vision for the ECEC workforce

Figure 9: What is the minimum level of education that all professional Early Years practitioners should be expected to achieve?

The largest percentage of respondents, 40% (N=58), thought all professional early years practitioners should be expected to achieve a minimum of a NFQ level 6. 29% (N=42) thought level 5 should be the minimum level of education that all professional early years practitioners should be expected to achieve and 22% (N=32) thought it should be level 7. A small number, 9% (N=13), thought it should be level 8.
Almost a quarter of respondents, 23% (N=34), thought all of the early years workforce in centre-based services should have a higher education qualification. Slightly fewer, 19% (N=27), thought half of the early years workforce in centre-based services should have a higher education qualification. 16% (N=23) thought 70% of the workforce should have a higher education qualification and 13% (N=19) and 12% (N=17) thought 80% and 60% respectively. A minority of respondents, 5% (N=7) thought 20%, 30% and 40% of the early years workforce in centre-based services should have a higher education qualification.

Figure 11: Which occupational role(s) in Early Years services should require a professional education and of these which should require a level 7+ professional qualification?

With regard to professional qualifications and occupational roles, the majority of respondents thought all of the occupations listed, other than childminders, should be required to have achieved professional education (either further education or higher education) in order to work directly with children aged 0-6 years. This was most true for preschool room leaders in an ECCE programme, with 86% (N=124) of respondents reporting they should have a professional education. Similarly, 81% (N=117) of respondents...
thought Managers and Team leaders in Early Years services and the room leader in non-ECCE programme rooms should have a professional education. Slightly fewer, 77% (N=111) and 76% (N=110), selected childcare assistant/early years practitioner and inclusion coordinator, respectively. 48% (N=69) thought childminders should have achieved a professional education. Suggestions for other occupational roles that should require a professional qualification included: “anyone employed to work with children in the Early Years”, “anyone working directly with children”, “Owners, tutors, workplace supervisors” and “Special Needs Assistants”.

Similarly, with the exception of childminders but also childcare assistants, the majority of respondents thought these professional qualifications should be at least level 7. Over 80% of respondents thought Managers of Early Years services, Team leaders in Early Years services and Preschool room leaders in a ECCE programme should hold a higher education (level 7+) professional qualification, 86% (N=121), 81% (N=114) and 80% (N=112) respectively. Slightly fewer, 71% (N=100) and 65% (N=91), thought this should be the case for room leaders in non-ECCE programmes and inclusion coordinators. A minority of respondents, 29% (N=40) and 15% (N=21), thought childcare assistants/early years practitioners and childminders should have a level 7+ qualification.

Some reasons provided included:

“Managers and team leaders need to have a Higher Education to support other practitioners in developing their practice and promoting quality in the service as a whole. Room leaders should have a higher education award as they are the leaders for learning in that room and are responsible for the children’s health, safety and learning experiences. This person should act as a model of good practice for the childcare assistant. Ideally - a childcare assistant should hold a level 7 also but I know there is a way to go yet.”

“The knowledge obtained at level 5 or 6 is not really sufficient for caring and educating children from a young age. Higher qualifications means an increase of the quality of care for some of the most vulnerable in society.”

Figure 12: Do you think that the sector needs to develop an Early Years Educator graduate role (specialist) to provide leadership on educational provision/curriculum to children (age range 0-6)?
Figure 12 demonstrates the majority of respondents, 86% (N=124), agreed the sector needs to develop an Early Years Educator graduate role to provide leadership on educational provision/curriculum to children (age range 0-6). Comments included:

“The sector is currently undervalued and ensuring a qualified and informed workforce will assist in ensuring a quality foundation for children’s early years care and education. This can only be positive in supporting their care and development through early childhood and beyond.”

The 14% (N=21) who did not think this role was needed reported concerns that this role could undermine the existing early years workforce and felt an overall reform of qualifications and associated pay scales should take priority. For example:

“The leaders should exist in ECEC services so external specialists shouldn’t be needed.”

“Just employ graduates and pay properly.”

Figure 13: If you think that a graduate EY Educator role is necessary should there be a person in that role? Please pick one option.

Figure 13 demonstrates 37% (N=49) of respondents thought this role should exist in every setting. Slightly fewer, 32% (N=42) thought there should be someone in this role in every room. Less than a quarter, 23% (N=31), thought this role could be carried out across a cluster of settings and a minority, 8% (N=10), selected in every ECCE programme room.
Some respondents made suggestions for other specialist occupational roles that could improve Early Years services for children. These included specialities in:

- Business Management
- Policy development
- Pedagogical leadership
- Access and inclusion
- Behaviour management
- Second language acquisition
- Creative arts
- Outdoor play
- Therapeutic specialists
- Under 3 specialist
- Play specialists
- Child mental health specialists

However, a preference for focusing on raising the qualifications and associated pay scales of the larger workforce, rather than developing specialists roles, were reiterated by a number of respondents.

Figure 14: Vision for the early years workforce by 2030 in centre-based services

Almost half of respondents, 43% (N=63), held the vision of a graduate-led workforce with every room being led by a graduate EY Educator by 2030. 28% (N=41), held the vision of a fully graduate workforce and 20% (N=29), of a graduate workforce where every setting has a graduate EY Educator. A minority of respondents, 9% (N=13) held the vision of the current situation with NFQ level 5 and 6 as the qualification requirement with an incentive for graduates to be employed.
However, many respondents made comments relating to how this would need to be reflected in pay scales. For example:

“I would also like to see it as a sector that is accorded the same respect, remuneration and conditions as first and second level education. I would like to think that the higher capitation would be a thing of the past because a pay scale which see’s Early Years Educators with degrees paid the equivalent of primary school teachers would be in place. This would also incentivise those with Level 5/6 to continue with their studies and improve their qualifications as well as encouraging graduate EYE’s to remain in the sector.”

With regards to comments relating to a realistic timeframe for the selected vision to be achieved, answers varied from 5-30 years, with many noting funding would determine how long it took. For example:

“The unknown variable here is government investment. If the government were serious about this profession then this vision could be achieved in 5 years. As it stands it will be closer to 50 years.”

Regardless of timescales, the majority of respondents, 84% (N=114), favoured a phased approach to changing the workforce. Comments acknowledged the need to give current practitioners, with level 5 and 6 qualifications, the opportunity to upskill.

Transition takes time and there are many experienced educators who do not have the qualification and will never attain that level of qualification however they do an excellent job, by introducing a phased approach it is more gentle and allows the sector time to adjust and prepare.”

“A phased approach seems to be the only way as there are so many services with practitioners with QQI level 5 and 6 (and no formal qualification) to give these practitioners a chance to upskill.”

A large majority of respondents, 94% (N=136), would support a professional register of early years practitioners. The primary reason given was to professionalise the sector. For example:

“This is necessary to professionalise the sector. There should be an Early Years Registration council for graduates who must agree to code of ethics to ensure they have the values and beliefs needed to ensure good practice and be held accountable if found not to be of a standard required to ensure high quality ECCE.”

Figure 15: Would you support a professional register of early years practitioners?
With regard to professional registration 81% (N=117) of respondents thought Garda vetting should be a condition for professional registration. Similarly, 72% (N=104) and 68% (N=98) of respondents thought a minimum qualification at higher education level and specified continuous professional development requirements should be conditions for professional registration. Respondents were split on a specified induction process and a minimum qualification at further education level as conditions for professional registration, with 50% (N=73) and 48% (N=71) indicating support respectively.

11% (N=16) of respondents selected other. Responses included ascribing to a code of ethics and regular standardised supervision.

When given the opportunity to make further comments, the primary issue raised was that of professionalism and pay in the sector. The majority of respondents commented on difficulties gaining and retaining quality practitioners due to the pay and lack of professionalism and called for parity with primary school teachers. For example:

“Graduates with an ECEC degree should be paid at the same rate as teachers”

“Developing high quality programmes will not necessarily lead to a high quality ECEC workforce because we know that our graduates are leaving the profession and so all this talent is being lost. Need to plug the leaks by ensuring that our graduates are suitably paid and respected. These need to be respected as professionals and not as technicians as is the case currently.”

“As a mark of quality, qualifications need to mean something in terms of professionalization and reflected in salary.”

“Working conditions in the sector needs to improve if the current level 8 and 9 graduates are to stay. This needs to happen now before they jump ship. Pay scales, working hours, holiday entitlements, pension schemes, sick and health benefit packages all need to be considered. As well as recognition as professionals through registering with the teaching council. Parity with primary school teachers.”
A smaller number of respondents commented on the risks of over professionalising the sector. For example:

“We need to be careful not to exclude those who may not be very academic. We are in danger of making qualifications in early years unattainable for a lot of people by pushing the qualifications too high.”

It was queried whether those with degrees are “willing to do things like change nappies and serve food and these are all part of the job early years.”

However, the overwhelming response was that an increase in professionalism, both in qualifications and working conditions, would ultimately lead to an increase in quality in early years settings and, therefore, improved early education and care experiences for young children.

Summary of Key Findings:

- Survey respondents were supportive of a graduate led ECEC workforce but demonstrate limited consensus of the specificity of this, including the percentage of the workforce that ought to be qualified to degree level and at which level in a setting a practitioner should be qualified to level 7 or 8.

- Survey Respondents were supportive of the development of a professional registration body

- Survey Respondents were generally supportive of increasing the professionalisation of the ECEC sector, both with regards to qualifications and working conditions.
Section 3- Summary of Responses from Consultation Event

In general, participants at the consultation event viewed the professional competences in the CoRe report as relevant in the Irish context; however, they reported concerns that they were not currently influencing all courses and that some development would be required to make them suitable, particularly with regard to the Irish Language.

With regard to suggestions for additional core content, participants suggested a greater emphasis on:

- Evidence-based practice
- Children’s rights
- Outdoor play
- Learning Dispositions
- Special educational Needs (awareness and identifying)
- Philosophy for children
- Pedagogical Relations
- Irish context – frameworks, legislation, relevant policies.

Participants generally viewed 25% practicum placements as suitable as an absolute minimum but expressed a preference for a higher percentage of supervised practicum placement at level 7 and 8, specifically between 30 and 40%. However, participants acknowledged quality was at least as important as quantity. Suggestions for quality measures included:

- Ensure placements are carried out in quality settings
- Ensure practice mentors are suitably qualified
- Ensure students have the opportunity to undertake a practicum placement with a variety of age groups
- Ensure college and placement providers follow a set criteria/standardised guidelines
- Provide incentives for services to engage with student placements
- Provide ongoing CPD for mentors of students
- Ensure all students are observed on placement by college/institution tutors
- Place more emphasis on leadership and management
Suggestions about the minimum duration/number of credits needed to constitute a level 7 or 8 programme participants included:

- 180 at level 7 and 240 at level 8.
- Minimum 2 year at level 7 (but not online only) and minimum 3 years Level 8
- Minimum of 3 years plus supervised practice

Overall, participants thought current quality assurance processes were not sufficient and that additional criteria for degrees must be developed as a matter of urgency. Participants were also broadly in favour of the development of a standard protocol for the Recognition of Prior Learning but raised concerns with regards to what level of qualification and type of experience would constitute as appropriate for this. They also argued standardisation of level 5 and 6 qualifications is a necessary precursor to a standard protocol for the Recognition of Prior Learning.

Other feedback from participants focused on the identity of the ECEC workforce, the need to value Early Years as a sector in its own right and for greater development in the workforce.
Summary of Findings

In conclusion, the consultation of the draft Criteria and Guidelines indicated broad support for the appropriateness of the Professional Competences in CoRe in both the Irish context and for level 7 and 8 degree programmes. Several suggestions were made by both organisation and survey respondents for additional core content with some overlap; for example, placing a greater emphasis on creativity and children’s participatory rights. However, the survey respondents reported a stronger preference for more attention to be given to National Frameworks and issues relating to leadership and management.

Overall, the recommended 25% of supervised practicum placement was viewed as insufficient, with respondents reporting a general preference for a minimum of 30-50%. Some participants would prefer for the minimum amount of supervised practicum placement to be expressed in hours/days. Attention was also given to the need to consider part time students who are currently working in the ECEC sector.

Participants were in general agreement that additional quality assurance measures were needed and that a professional registration body may be a suitable means of achieving this. Limited data was collected on the minimum duration of level 7 and 8 ECEC degree programmes, however those that did comment suggest 180 credits in 3 years for level 7 and 240 credits in 4 years for level 8. There was broad support for the development of a standard protocol for recognition of prior learning; however consultation day participants felt the standardisation of level 5 and 6 ECEC courses was a necessary precursor to this.

Finally, respondents were supportive of moving towards a graduate-led workforce, however, little consensus was reached as to which professional roles require a graduate qualification and what percentage of the overall ECEC workforce should be qualified to degree level. Furthermore, significant concerns were expressed by survey respondents (and particularly organisation submissions) about the negative consequences of increasing expectations of professionalism on the ECEC workforce without adequately addressing pay scales and working conditions. Therefore, it was felt additional and sustainable funding is required to bring ECEC pay scales in line with other educational professionals (primary and post primary teachers) in order to develop a professional ECEC workforce and ensure young children receive high quality early education and care experiences.
Professional Award Criteria and Guidelines for Initial Professional Education (Level 7 and Level 8) Degree Programmes in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in Ireland

AN EVALUATION OF THE CONSULTATION FINDINGS

SUZANNE FILLIS