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### Where to now for early childhood care and education (ECCE) graduates? A study of the experiences of Irish BA ECCE degree graduates

Mary Moloney<sup>a</sup> & Jennifer Pope<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Mary Immaculate College, South Circular Road, Limerick, Ireland  
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## Where to now for early childhood care and education (ECCE) graduates? A study of the experiences of Irish BA ECCE degree graduates

Mary Moloney\* and Jennifer Pope

*Mary Immaculate College, South Circular Road, Limerick, Ireland*

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International definitions of early childhood locate the field with the care and education of children between birth and six years. In Ireland, this definition applies to both pre-school and the infant classes of primary school. While primary school teachers in Ireland must hold a Bachelor of Education degree, there is no minimum training requirement for those working within the early childhood care and education (ECCE) sectors in crèches, pre-schools and so on. Consequently, the ECCE sector is characterised by a mix of trained, semi-trained and unqualified teachers. Many third-level Colleges, Universities and Institutes of Technology offer a degree programme in ECCE. One such college is Mary Immaculate College, offering a BA degree in ECCE since 2003. Drawing upon a BA ECCE Graduate Occupational Profile Survey, distributed to all graduates from the programme between 2007 and 2010, this paper explores a graduate's experiences with regard to their experiences of working within the ECCE sector. Although the majority of respondents were gainfully employed within the sector, the overarching finding across all graduate cohorts from 2007 to 2010 was that in Ireland, 'ECCE is an undervalued under-appreciated profession' (2009 graduate).

**Keywords:** professional identity; training; remuneration; Ireland

### Introduction

Although the statutory school starting age in Ireland is six, all five-year-olds and half of all four-year-olds attend primary school (Taguma et al. 2009). These schools operate under the aegis of the Department of Education and Skills (DES), while the Department of Children and Youth Affairs holds responsibility for children from birth to four or five years. This dual system reflects and perpetuates a historical polarisation of the care and education sectors in Ireland where children's education commenced upon entry to primary school.

In 2010, the DES (2010) published a 'Workforce Development Plan for the ECCE sector' in Ireland. This plan acknowledged that the 'skills and qualifications of adults working with young children is a critical factor in determining the quality of young children's ECCE experiences' (DES 2010, 6). The overarching aim of the workforce development plan is to ensure that all staff engaged in the provision of early childhood care and education (ECCE) is 'appropriately qualified for their role and responsibilities' (DES 2010, 16).

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\*Corresponding author. Email: mary.moloney@mic.ul.ie

In addition, two practice frameworks: *Aistear*: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA] 2009) and *Siolta*: the National Quality Framework (Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education 2006) are intended to support ECCE teachers to support young children's learning and development. Both frameworks are dependent upon 'a highly skilled, knowledgeable and competent adult supporting children's early learning and development' (8).

The regulatory context in Ireland, further calls upon ECCE teachers to possess a certain level of knowledge and skills in order to facilitate children's learning and development. Thus, ECCE teachers must be 'pro-active in ensuring that appropriate action is taken to address each child's needs in cooperation with his/her parents and following consultation, where appropriate, with other relevant services' (Department of Health and Children 2006, 36). However, notwithstanding the growing recognition of the complexity of working in ECCE, while primary school teachers must hold a Bachelor of Education, there is no statutory minimum training requirement for those working or intending to work in the ECCE sector within crèches and pre-schools.

Yet, many ECCE teachers have attained a basic qualification at Level 5 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) (Appendix) with 41% of staff holding such a qualification (Department of Education and Science 2008). There is evidence also, of consistent growth in annual enrolments and graduations at BA ECCE Levels 7 and 8 (DES 2009).

In an historical move, the government introduced the Free Pre-School Year (FPSY) in ECCE Scheme in January 2010). The FPSY is designed to give children access to a FPSY of appropriate programme-based activities, in the year before they start primary school. Capitation funding payable to settings participating in the FPSY 'is differentiated based on the qualification profile of staff in ECCE services' (DES 2010, 15). Pre-school leaders working directly with the children must be qualified in childcare/early education at a minimum of FETAC (Further Education and Awards Council) Level 5. Anecdotally, the numbers of ECCE teachers attaining a Level 5 qualification have increased exponentially since the introduction of the FPSY. In an effort to incentivise higher skills levels among ECCE personnel, the scheme offers a premium for better-qualified staff. Accordingly, a higher capitation rate is payable where settings are led by staff with a relevant bachelor's degree (minimum of Level 7 on the NFQ) and have three years' experience. Crucially, the FPSY creates a direct link between quality ECCE and trained teachers.

Many third-level Colleges, Universities and Institutes of Technology in Ireland, offer a degree programme in ECCE. One such college is Mary Immaculate College. Founded in 1898, it is an autonomous university-level College of Education and the Liberal Arts. While the College is the largest provider of Initial Teacher Education for primary school teachers in Ireland, with an annual intake of up to 500 students, it has been offering a four-year honours Bachelor of Arts in ECCE since 2003. Drawing upon a BA ECCE Graduate Occupational Profile Survey, this paper explores graduates' experiences of working in the sector.

### **The study**

In autumn 2010, a self-complete 'Graduate Occupational Profile Survey' was distributed electronically to all graduates (209) from the BA ECCE programme in Mary Immaculate College between 2007 and 2010. The purpose was to explore graduates' experiences of working in the ECCE sector with particular reference to the relationship between graduate qualifications and professional identity within the sector.

The questionnaire was piloted among the early childhood lecturers (six) in the college, to identify any ambiguities in the questions, the range of possible responses to the questions

and to ensure that respondents could navigate their way easily through it. The final questionnaire comprised 18 questions. It was designed with question logic which ensured that respondents were only asked questions that were relevant to them based on their responses to previous questions. Questions 1–14 were concerned with statistical data, focusing on the number of graduates employed in the ECEC sector and remuneration levels.

Questions 15–18 were open-ended and directed towards attitudinal data. These questions were concerned with graduate perceptions of working within the field and the value of a BA ECCE. Space was also included to enable respondents to provide additional information and/or explanations for a response.

## Ethics

Approval for the study was granted by the Mary Immaculate College Research Ethics Committee (MIREC). In accordance with the MIREC approval, the questionnaire was preceded by a full account of the research study. Respondents were advised of the voluntary nature of participation, of confidentiality and anonymity and what the data would be used for. To minimise potential bias, the electronic distribution of questionnaires and the data collection process was facilitated by the Quality Office in Mary Immaculate College. Thus, respondents were not replying directly to the ECCE lecturing team.

## Data analysis

Statistical questions were analysed using SPSS (Statistical package for the Social Sciences) while the qualitative open-ended questions were analysed through an iterative process where responses were read line by line. Initially a series of preliminary codes were applied, following which more focused coding enabled units of analysis of the data to be fully developed. Finally, codes were clustered to establish links between codes and to identify additional categories. Throughout this interactive process, data were continuously integrated and reduced leading to the development of provisional hypotheses.

## Findings

### *Response rate*

Of the 209 questionnaires distributed, 80 completed questionnaires were returned giving an overall response rate of 38.3%. The response rate was highest for the 2007 cohort (44%)

Table 1. Distribution and response rate.

Year	No. of students	Gender	No. of responses	Year % response rate
2007	43	43 female	17	44.2
2008	58	56 female 2 male	26	44.8
2009	52	50 female 2 male	15	28.8
2010	56	54 female 2 male	20	35.3
Total	209	203 female 6 male	80	38.3

and lowest for the 2009 cohort (28.8%). Table 1 lists the distribution and response rate from each graduate cohort.

The majority of graduates, 94% ( $n = 191$ ) were aged between 21 and 23 years of age. The remaining 6% ( $n = 18$ ) were mature students aged 35–45 years of age. Geographically, graduates were primarily from the Midlands, the South, South West and South East of the country.

The findings are presented as a series of themes: current employment status, salaries, graduates' perceptions of working in the ECCE sector, recognition for the sector and hope for the future.

### Current employment status

In terms of current employment status, the majority of respondents (74%  $n = 62$ ) had gained employment either in Ireland (69%  $n = 58$ ) or overseas in Scotland, Australia, Canada and New Zealand (4%  $n = 5$ ). Only 7% ( $n = 7$ ) of respondents were currently seeking employment (Figure 1).

Of those in employment, 92% ( $n = 57$ ) were working directly with children aged from birth to six years within the ECCE sector. Respondents were employed in a variety of settings including Crèches, support agencies such as National Voluntary Childcare Organisations and the City and Childcare Committees, Special Needs Assistants (predominantly working with children with autism) and other state agencies. Although a majority of graduates were employed within the sector, the predominant discourse to emerge from the qualitative data findings was one of 'disappointment' and 'frustration'. This discourse was embedded within a multiplicity of conflicting challenges and issues within the ECCE sector all of which impact upon professional identity; salaries, recognition, confidence and self-esteem.

### Salaries

From the quantitative analysis, it is evident that though gainfully employed, the salaries tended to be low with only 16.3% ( $n = 13$ ) of respondents reporting salaries upwards of €30,000 (Figure 2). Of the 56% ( $n = 45$ ) respondents earning below €30,000, 76% of these ( $n = 34$ ) reported working in excess of 30 hours per week.

As expected, there was a trend for the 2007 graduate cohort to report marginally higher salaries commensurate with further experience and qualifications. Of the 27% ( $n = 22$ ) of

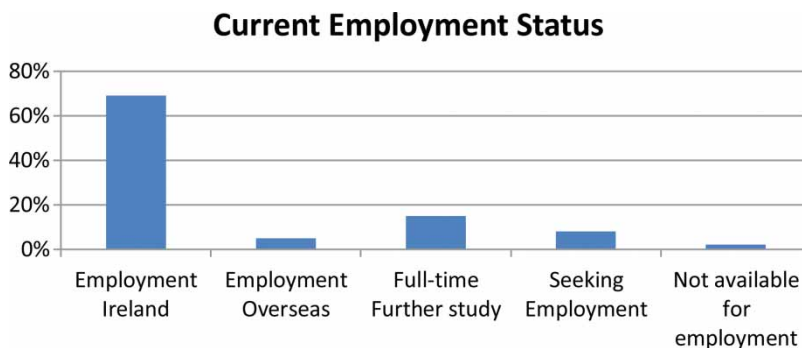


Figure 1. Current employment status.

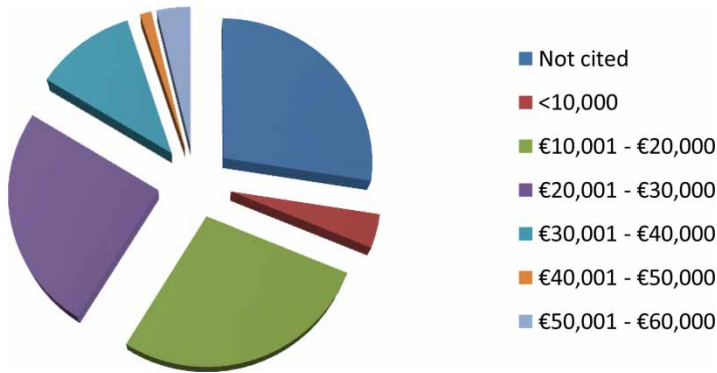


Figure 2. Annual salary level.

respondents that did not complete this question, nine were engaging in further full time study and six were seeking employment.

There was an overwhelming consensus that ‘pay is very low’ and, ‘the four years of hard work is not reflected in the rate of pay’. These 2007 sentiments were reiterated by 2008 respondents, ‘Even though I have a degree in ECCE, I didn’t get paid according to my qualification. This is very disappointing’; ‘I am so disheartened that people who had very little qualifications were getting very near the same pay as me’. Similarly, in 2009, respondents claimed that ‘there are many opportunities for part-time or low paid work in the ECCE sector’ and the ‘salary is the same whether you’ve done level 8 or nothing at all’.

### Graduate perceptions of working in the ECCE sector

The issue of remuneration impacted negatively upon graduate perceptions of working within the sector. It undermined graduates’ confidence and self-esteem in relation to the value of their work. Findings indicate that graduates diminished their professional identity, reducing their role to that of simply ‘settling’ for a position. Graduates described how their chances of ‘employment were greatly limited to just working in childcare settings’ (2007), likewise, a 2008 respondent ‘ended up in a crèche’. Moreover, indicative of the anomaly that exists in Ireland in relation to the absence of a mandatory academic qualification, a 2009 respondent claimed that ‘most graduates end up settling for jobs in crèches which do not require a degree’. In the words of a 2010 graduate, ‘it’s a pity that people interested in this area are not seriously recognised as highly qualified people within this sector’.

However, a 2008 graduate who had spent a year working in New Zealand following graduation, described how

the early years workers [in New Zealand] were very interested in their profession and it was a recognised profession where qualified educators were given recognition for their role within the community and as educators, this was reflected in the respect shown to them by other sectors and also in their pay and status as early years educators.

This positive perspective lies in stark contrast to the situation prevailing in Ireland where the sector was seen ‘an undervalued under-appreciated profession, long hours, hard work, poor pay’ (2007). These findings are contextualised within the context of the discourse of ‘recognition’ for ECCE as a profession.

**Recognition for ECCE as a profession**

As with the issue of salaries, respondents agreed that there was a lack of recognition for ECCE as a profession. Graduates suggested that this lack of recognition emanated from a macro-level, i.e. from government and, more specifically, the DES.

2007: Our government doesn't even value its importance ... Our profession is seen as more childcare providers than educators in the most important time of a child's life!! Sometimes I feel like and am treated as a glorified babysitter.

2008: Hopefully, the government will soon realise how important ECCE is and give a pay rise.

Graduates juxtaposed their position with that of teachers, expressing frustration with the lack of DES recognition for their qualification and a consequent perception that their work was less valuable than that of a primary school teacher.

2007: I would really love if this course was recognised by the DES. It is very frustrating that I am more qualified than any primary school teacher to do the job [work with young children] ... but the DES doesn't recognise this qualification and want primary school teachers to do the job.

2008: Graduates from the ECCE course should receive a teacher number with the Department of Education, to validate the importance of trained early childhood teachers in Ireland ... The department of education don't recognise the BA ECCE as a sufficient qualification for teaching 3–6 year olds.

Lack of recognition was not confined to government but, was also found at a micro-level within early childhood settings. Indeed, graduates felt that a degree held little, if any, value within the sector. Consequently, 'there are no employment opportunities out there for ECCE graduates unless you are willing to settle for working as a childcare assistant for a minimum wage. That's not what I went to college for four years for' (2009). There was considerable frustration with regard to the perceived lack of recognition for the value of a Bachelor in ECCE, 'it is sometimes very frustrating working with other staff who do not have the same level of quality training that I received' (2008), and in 2009, a respondent argued that a 'degree is almost worthless when you are working with people with Level 5 who don't value the importance of an ECCE degree'. Highlighting this point further, a 2009 graduate described how, following an interview for a position as childcare leader in a crèche ... 'A girl got the job that had two years' experience working in a crèche but she had no qualifications [it was] very disheartening'.

At one end of a continuum, graduates expressed the view that their degree was 'almost worthless', while on the other, there was an underlying belief that they were 'overqualified' to work in the sector. 'I found it extremely hard to get a job within this field as I was told I was either too qualified for the job I was applying for or that I did not have any relevant experience' (2008). Similarly, another respondent explained that 'for normal childcare worker jobs you are over qualified and for a manager's job you don't have the experience'. This perspective was reiterated by a 2009 respondent who 'attended an interview where they said that I was over qualified to work in the childcare setting'.

**Exiting the ECCE sector**

There was evidence that graduates did not intend to remain in the ECEC sector. Of 38 respondents who provided information in relation to further education, 8 (21.05%)

were undertaking a postgraduate diploma in primary school teaching. Clearly indicating their dissatisfaction with the ECCE sector, respondents explained ... 'I have applied for a Postgraduate in Primary School Teaching so I do not intend to work in the ECCE field' (2008). The issue of remuneration emerged yet again; 'without pursuing further education I do not feel my degree was sufficient for me to gain employment other than that of minimum wage' (2008). This respondent voiced disappointment with this situation, 'I feel this is such a pity given the importance of early education and the wealth of knowledge the degree has given me'. Other graduates claimed that a 'BA ECCE is a waste of degree. It will bring you nowhere' (2008). It was further suggested that graduates should 'Emigrate' (2009) or at least, 'consider working abroad because I have heard and seen many prospects for the course in other countries, especially Australia ...'. Indicating the level of frustration felt by graduates about the confusion surrounding the value of their academic qualification within the sector, a 2009 respondent explained how s/he was 'hoping to do a post grad in primary teaching. At least I'll know what I'm qualified to do after that'.

### **A glimmer of hope**

Although findings were predominantly underpinned by disappointment and frustration, there were indications that for some respondents, their experiences in the sector were more positive and that perhaps 'things are getting better in the sector' (2010). This viewpoint was linked to the FPSY in the ECCE scheme, as a result of which 'settings now are keen to take on graduates ... where they will get a higher capitation for staff with a degree' (2010). Another 2010 graduate felt that this scheme had greatly influenced attitudes towards him/her within the sector;

I am respected as a professional in the work place because of my BA ... also ... ECCE settings have a very positive attitude towards our degree because of the financial benefits it has for them, because it allows them to qualify for the higher ECCE capitation funding

Moreover, one respondent who clearly recognised the relatively embryonic state of the concept of professional identity in the Irish context advised graduates to 'be aware that this is the first step in a journey into a relatively young and previously unrecognised sector. We are laying the path for others to follow' (2010).

### **Discussion**

At an initial glance; the research data suggest that the situation is positive; the vast majority of graduates are in employment or pursuing postgraduate studies. However, beneath the surface, a different picture emerges; one of frustration and disappointment concerning the professional identity and status of the ECCE teacher.

Although the majority of respondents (74%  $n = 62$ ) were gainfully employed within the ECCE sector in Ireland or abroad, findings clearly point to the abysmal salaries in Ireland. The OECD (2006) signifies that salaries are a significant aspect of a profession. Despite respondents holding a BA ECCE and, that many were pursuing further training in the area, only 16% reported salaries above €30,000. Critically, the salaries of ECCE teachers remain well below those of teachers. For example, in 2011, when average industrial earnings in Ireland were €21.80 per hour (Central Statistics Office 2011), Early Childhood Ireland (ECI 2011) found that the 'average salary of a staff member in a service that is



an Early Childhood Ireland member is €14,180' ([www.ippa.ie](http://www.ippa.ie)). This equates to €7.00 per hour and supports the ECI suggestion that ECCE teachers may in fact be earning less than the minimum wage of €8.60 per hour or €17,542 per annum. Findings relating to remuneration concur with previous studies (Barry and Sherlock 2008; ECI 2011; Moloney 2010) in terms of poor remuneration within the ECCE sector in Ireland.

Traditionally, a profession is associated with rigorous and lengthy training (Blundell, Harrison, and Turney 2011); professional accreditation (Uhlmann, Schuette, and Yashar 2010); core values and principles (Rodd 2006); appropriate pay and working conditions (OECD 2006); the pursuit of excellence (Negrine 2007) and public appreciation and value (Black and Gruen 2005). With the exception of pay and working conditions, the ECCE sector in Ireland ticks all the boxes. As noted by the (DES 2009), there is consistent growth in annual enrolments and graduations at BA ECCE Levels 7 and 8. By its nature, a degree programme involves rigorous and lengthy training and by extension, professional accreditation. Equally, core values and principles are expressed through the practice frameworks *Síolta* and *Aistear* which also encourage ECCE teachers to pursue excellence. Why then, in the context of this study, are graduate perceptions of working in the sector predominantly negative?

There are a number of reasons for this finding, the most critical being that there is no mandatory training requirement for ECCE teachers in Ireland. As this study indicates, graduates established a clear link between training, remuneration and professional status and identity. However, irrespective of training levels, there are no financial rewards for higher qualification levels. Graduates found that people with minimum qualifications or no qualifications at all, but who had experience, were prioritised for employment within the sector. This is a major issue and most certainly acts as a disincentive to undertake training, let alone degree level training. One 2008 respondent who had worked as an ECCE teacher in New Zealand following graduation, articulated how s/he was recognised as a professional which was reflected in the pay and status of ECCE teachers. This finding is not surprising, for, in countries such as Denmark and New Zealand which require varying levels of tertiary pre-service training; ECCE teachers are permitted considerable professional autonomy and their remuneration reflects their qualification levels. Thus, Danish day care professionals (pedagogues) undertake three and a half years of training and graduate as Bachelors, holding 60% of the positions in early childhood settings (Jensen, Broström, and Hansen 2010). Average monthly salary for pedagogues is DKr 23,500 (€3157), or DKr 31,000 for managers (€4165) ([www.bupl.dk](http://www.bupl.dk)). Likewise, in NZ, the benchmark qualification for qualified ECCE teachers is a Diploma of Teaching or a Bachelor Degree (Early Childhood Education) both of which require three years of full time study. ECCE teachers are seen as professionals and allowed a level of autonomy (Education Review Office 2010). While kindergarten teachers have pay parity with primary teachers, they represent only 12% of the ECCE workforce (ECE Taskforce NZ 2010). Currently, a kindergarten teacher with a Bachelor degree earns \$NZ44,348 (€24,974) in their first year of practice (Ministry of Education, New Zealand 2009).

A disconcerting finding to emerge from this study is that graduates tended to diminish their role and identity. The belief that graduates had simply 'settled for' or, 'ended up' working in a crèche was reiterated throughout the study. This finding is indicative of embarrassment about working in the sector and a belittling of the importance of working with young children. It correlates with a 2008 study of ECCE teachers by Rike, Taylor, and Moberly. They found that ECCE teachers were not proud of their profession and were even 'ashamed they only work with young children' (22). Consistent with Rike, Izumi-

Taylor, and Moberly (2008), this study indicates that such negativity is shaped by ECCE teacher perceptions that society does not really appreciate what they do. It supports the notion that those who feel their professional expertise is under attack may become disengaged from the work they do (Forde et al. 2006). Findings provide evidence of a sectoral perception that graduates are 'over qualified to work' in the ECCE sector. Elsewhere, Moloney (2011) argues that such perceptions exist at societal, sectoral and political levels and, that they denigrate the importance of the early years on childrens' learning trajectory. Equally disconcerting is the fact that 20.51% of respondents were undertaking a postgraduate diploma in primary school teaching and did not intend to work in the ECCE field. These findings support Moloney's (2010) claim that highly qualified graduates are being lost to the ECCE sector in Ireland.

Respondents highlighted the need to 'validate the importance of trained early childhood teachers in Ireland' suggesting that BA ECCE graduates 'should receive a teacher number' from the DES. This suggestion resonates with others (Hakel, Keonig, and Elliot 2008; Uhlmann, Schuette, and Yashar 2010) who stress the importance of certification/licensure as a means of providing a public signal of the adequacy of and validity of training. Ultimately, Uhlmann, Schuette, and Yashar (2010, 468) describe licensure as the 'mark of a professional'. However, graduates in this study expressed an over-whelming sense of disappointment at the lack of recognition for the importance of the early years and those who work with our youngest children. Rather than recognising early childhood as the 'most important time of a child's life', graduates were concerned about lack of government recognition for their role as ECCE teachers. In common with Moloney (2011), findings indicate that ECCE teachers were 'treated as a glorified babysitter'.

## Conclusion

There is compelling evidence of a continued split between the care and education sectors in Ireland as reflected in pre-service training requirements and remuneration levels. Clearly highlighting the relationship between quality ECCE and positive child outcomes, Rike, Izumi-Taylor, and Moberly (2008) suggest that in answer to the question 'what do you do?' ECCE teachers must answer 'we grow brains'. Indeed, neuroscience would support this claim, that those working within the ECCE field do in fact 'grow brains'. Neuro-scientific evidence leaves no doubt that; we can 'no longer count on an army of young women with limited education to take up low status, poorly paid work in the childcare sector' (Littledyke 2008, 45). In developing this sentiment further, we argue that children's early development and education cannot be entrusted to disheartened, disillusioned, frustrated, disenfranchised albeit highly trained and skilled graduates. Working with young children demands the highest levels of teacher knowledge skill and competence, for, 'choices made and actions taken on behalf of children during this critical period affect not only how a child develops but also how a country progresses' (UNICEF 2001, 14).

It is time to draw a line in the sand. It is time to examine the choices made and the actions taken on behalf of children in Ireland. Nutbrown (2012) claims, that in the UK, colleges require more qualifications from those training to look after animals than they do for ECCE courses. While this is indeed a sobering thought, it could equally apply to Ireland where the work is clearly perceived as low status, low paid and low skilled.

Steps have been taken to redress some of the issues associated with the current status and identity of the ECCE sector in Ireland. For example, the workforce development plan for the sector (DES 2010) establishes Government commitment to ECCE. It highlights the need for all ECCE teachers to be appropriately qualified for their role and responsibilities. Building

upon the workforce development plan, the FPSY creates a direct link between quality ECCE and qualifications for pre-school leaders working directly with children in participating settings. This is indeed a step in the right direction and, it is apparent that BA ECCE graduates are increasingly in demand because of the financial benefits associated with employing somebody with higher qualification levels. However, we must be careful that ‘capitation’ does not become the dominant idea, that qualifications become a means to attract additional funding into settings, rather than having an intrinsic value.

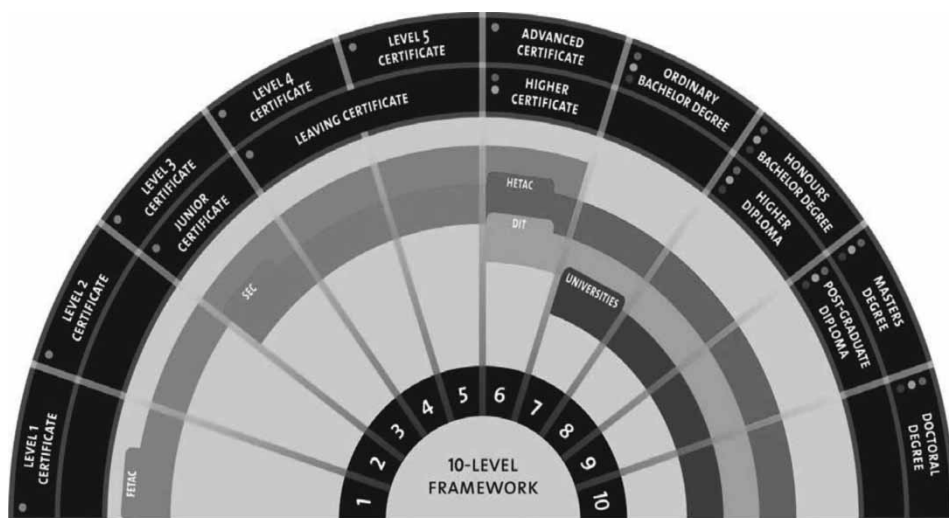
The fact that there is no statutory minimum training requirement for the ECCE sector cannot be ignored. If the Government believes, that early childhood ‘marks the beginning of children’s lifelong learning journeys’ (NCCA 2009, 6), it must give consideration to introducing a statutory minimum training requirement for anyone intending to work in the ECCE sector. The hair or care stereotyping (Nutbrown 2012) must be debunked. This is a political issue and warrants immediate government attention. As this study confirms, we cannot expect either an untrained workforce or a highly trained but disillusioned workforce to ‘grow brains’.

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## Appendix. National qualifications framework



Source: #2003, NQAI: Reproduced with kind permission.

The National Framework of Qualifications was introduced in 2003. This is a system of 10 levels encompassing the widest possible spread of learning. These range from Level 1 awards that recognise the ability to perform basic tasks, to Level 10 awards that recognise the ability to discover and develop new knowledge and skills at the frontier of research and scholarship.