

Early Years Leading Education in Ireland

An exploration of the evidential base for Early Childhood Education and Care professional practice placement in Higher Education Institutes in Ireland



Mary Moloney



NATIONAL FORUM
FOR THE ENHANCEMENT OF TEACHING
AND LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Glossary of Terms

CAEP	Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation
CAO	Central Applications Office
CCC	County Childcare Committee
CECDE	Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education
CFA	Child and Family Agency
ECEC	Early Childhood Education and Care
ECCE Scheme	Early Childhood Care and Education Scheme
EYEI	Early Years Education Inspection
EYEPU	Early Years Education Policy Unit
DES	Department of Education and Skills
DCYA	Department for Children and Youth Affairs
HEI	Higher Education Institute
NAEYC	National Association for the Education of Young children
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NFO	National Framework of Qualifications
NVCO	National Voluntary Childcare Organisation
PLÉ	Pedagogy, Learning and Education
SPSS	Statistical package for the Social Sciences
UCC	University College Cork
U.S	United States
QQI	Quality Qualifications Ireland

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Literature Review



Early Years Leading Education in Ireland





Introduction

Globally Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) is located at the nexus of lifelong learning, early intervention, eliminating child poverty, and social inclusion (Moloney & Pettersen, 2017). Accordingly, early childhood educator qualifications, knowledge and skills are increasingly in the spotlight, with many countries introducing pedagogical and regulatory frameworks to guide and inform practice (e.g., *The Early Years Learning Framework, Australia*; *the Early Years Foundation Stage, UK*, *Síolta: the National Quality Framework*; *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*, the *Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Charter and Guidelines*, and *the Early Years Services Regulations, Ireland*). Educators must have a sound working knowledge of these frameworks, use them to support childrens' needs and interests, plan for future learning (Moloney, 2015; Moloney & Pettersen, 2017), and engage in intentional leadership within an increasingly diverse sector (Moloney with McCarthy, in press). The introduction of the Early Childhood Education and Care Scheme¹; the initial phase of the Affordable Childcare Scheme² in September 2017, and concomitant State investment, creates considerable government, parental and societal expectations of those working with young children aged from birth to school going age (five years approx.), within what has become, a high-stakes ECEC sector.

Given the complexity of working with young children, it could be argued that degree level training is essential to equip educators with the requisite values, knowledge, skills and competencies. However, to successfully perform any task, Bandura (1982, 1986, 1997) suggests that a person needs two resources: the requisite skill (or knowledge), and self-efficacy. Degree programmes are directed towards enabling students to master particular theory, and knowledge, and to acquire a set of skills that are the basis for quality practice (Ryan & Grieshaber, 2005). Although these programmes strongly influence the way that future early childhood educators impact the nature and quality of young children's interactions and experiences within settings (Ackerman, 2005); this study indicates that classroom-based learning alone does not equip educators with the knowledge, skills and competencies required to work in the field, nor, does it instil, develop or enhance an educator's sense of self-efficacy.

The report of the Early Years Education Policy Unit (EYEPU) working group (2017) in Ireland, asserts that the 'professional dimension of practice in the ECEC sector must be integral to the professional formation' of degree level graduates (p.3). This report further underscores the need for undergraduate ECEC degree programmes to provide rich and diverse learning experiences for students that enable them to develop their values, knowledge and practices. Students not only require a body of knowledge, but the ability to translate that knowledge into action (Ibid.p.18), as well as the capacity to construct knowledge and engage in deep and meaningful reflection (Urban, Robson & Saatchi, 2017). As the findings from the present study indicate, the ability to translate knowledge into action, construct knowledge, engage in deep reflection and, develop self-efficacy is best developed through practical hands-on experience of working with children, families and communities, as well as other professionals and organisations over the duration of the early childhood educator's pre-service training.

¹ The ECCE scheme was designed to give all children aged three and upwards access to two years of free Pre-school before they start primary school

² The Affordable Childcare Scheme comprising a universal and a targeted subsidy supports all parents with childcare costs

Becoming an Early Childhood Educator in Ireland

The Early Childhood Education and Care sector in Ireland is highly complex and fragmented. This is directly related to how ECEC is delivered and funded, as well as the involvement of multiple Government Departments and Agencies (e.g., Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA); Department of Education and Skills (DES); the Child and Family Agency: TUSLA; Pobal and Better Start). Within this construct, there is a parallel system of inspection, where:

- All ECEC settings catering for children from birth to school going age, are inspected by TUSLA, to ensure compliance with the Childcare Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations, 2016;
- Settings participating in the ECCE scheme are required to also undergo DES Early Years Education inspections (EYEI) (DES, 2016)

In addition, ECEC is delivered through a market model comprising independent (65% approx.) and community-based provision (35% approx.). It is characterised by a mix of early childhood degree level graduates, and staff with a mix of other qualifications. In fact, more than 500 qualifications from across thirty seven countries³ are acceptable for working in ECEC (Moloney & McKenna, 2017, p. 97) which compounds the inordinate fragmentation within the sector in Ireland.

Further adding to the complexity and fragmentation is the historic absence of a mandatory training requirement. Although the relationship between qualifications and quality ECEC provision is well documented (e.g., Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons et al, 2004; Barnett, 2004; EU, 2011; Kelley & Camilli, 2007; Whitebook, 2003), regrettably, the notion that anyone can mind a child has prevailed until very recently (Moloney, 2015; Moloney & Pope, 2015; Moloney & McKenna, 2017). Therefore, notwithstanding the fact, that the sector in Ireland, has been regulated since 1996, early childhood educators have only been required to hold a qualification to work with children aged from birth to six years, since January, 2017.

Under the provisions of the Childcare Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations, 2016, each employee working directly with children must hold at least a major award in ECEC at Level 5 on the National Framework of Qualifications⁴ (NFQ), or a qualification deemed by the Minister to be equivalent. The fact that this minimum qualification requirement is now embedded in policy, represents a major step forward, in terms of how working with young children is perceived, and in progressing the professionalisation of the sector.

A multiplicity of training programmes, ranging from the minimum QQI Level 5 qualification through to Level 8 (hons Bachelor degree), help to prepare early childhood educators to work in the ECEC sector. With regards to degree level training, University

³ The full list of recognised qualifications is available at www.dcy.gov.ie.

⁴ The National Framework of Qualification (NFQ) is a system of ten levels used to describe the Irish Qualification System. It is based on standards of knowledge, skill and competence. Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) has responsibility to develop promote and maintain the Irish NFQ. For further information see: www.nfq-qqi.com

Literature Review

College Cork (UCC) was the first Higher Education Institute (HEI) to offer a Bachelor of Arts in Early Childhood Education and Care in 1995. This was followed by the Dublin Institute of Technology in 1999, Carlow Institute of Technology in 2002, and Mary Immaculate College, Limerick in 2003. Throughout the past fifteen years, the number of undergraduate ECEC degree programmes has increased exponentially. Presently, seventeen HEIs offer twenty nine full-time undergraduate degree programmes in early childhood. Critically, each of the twenty nine undergraduate programmes is included on the list of DCYA Early Years Recognised Qualifications.

While all early childhood educators are now required to hold a minimum QQI Level 5 qualification (Government of Ireland, 2016), higher qualification levels are required of those working directly with children in settings contracted by the DCYA to provide the ECCE scheme. The initial objective of this scheme, which was established in 2010, was to enable all children to avail of one year of free pre-school provision in the year before starting school. As part of budget 2018, the scheme will be expanded from September, 2018; enabling every child in Ireland to avail of 15 hours per week of free pre-school at age 2 years 8 months. Children can remain in pre-school until they transition to primary school, provided that they are not older than 5 ½ years at the end of the pre-school year (www.dcy.gov.ie).

In accordance with the ECCE scheme, higher capitation grants are paid to settings employing early childhood educators with higher qualification levels (QQI Level 7 or 8 on the NFO), and who also have three years paid post-qualification experience. Of the 17, 841 staff currently working directly with children in settings in Ireland, only 18% (i.e., 3,211) hold a Bachelor's degree in ECEC (POBAL, 2017). While this is an increase of 7% since 2011, when only 11% of early childhood teachers held a Bachelor's degree (Pobal, 2016), it is a long way from the CoRE (2011) recommendation that 60% of the workforce should be trained to this level. Even though the DCYA has expressed concerns with regards to the challenge of securing degree qualified staff (www.dcy.gov.ie) no targets have been set for the number of degree level graduates for the sector in Ireland (Moloney, 2015; PLÉ, 2016). As argued by Whitebook, Gombay, Bellm, Sakai, & Kipnis (2009) however, simply knowing that an early childhood educator has a degree; tells us very little about the course content, or the practicum experience that helps students to apply learning to practice. Therefore, if the sector 'is to live up to the promise of early care and education, quality educational experiences for ECE teachers are essential' (Ritblatt, Garrity, Longstreth, Hokoda, & Potter, 2013, p. 48) including 'supervised, reflective field experiences [which] are critical to high quality professional preparation' (National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), 2009, p.6).

Defining Practicum

Practicum, also known as placement or field work, has long been considered an essential aspect of pre-service teacher education in the primary and secondary school sectors. As interest in, and awareness of the relationship between quality provision and child outcomes gathers momentum, practicum is equally central to early childhood educator preparation programmes (Girod & Girod, 2008).

The NAEYC (2012) describe practicum experiences as 'planned and sequenced so that [students] develop the knowledge, skills and professional dispositions necessary to promote the development and learning of young children across the entire developmental period of early childhood (birth to eight years) and in the variety of settings that offer early education (child care centres and homes, Head Start programs, and early school grades). Building upon this description, the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) state that it is concerned with early and ongoing practice opportunities to apply content and pedagogical knowledge in ECEC settings to enable students to progressively develop and demonstrate their knowledge, skills, and dispositions (www.caepnet.org). Concurring with the CAEP, Dillon, Bullock, O'Connor, Martin, Russell & Thomas (2014) state that 'practicum experiences should be early, extensive, interspersed, and varied' (p. 99), and the key to successful practicum involves the inclusion of coursework and the ability to apply coursework in the field (Kennedy, Cavannaugh & Dawson, 2013).

Practicum is typified by a supervision triad, consisting of a field supervisor, the pre-service educator, and a mentor teacher (Cohen, Hoz & Kaplan, 2013). Grossman (2011) notes that historically, the triad model has been the preferred method of delivery for practicum experiences in education. In this triad method, the preservice educator is placed in a classroom within an ECEC setting, and works with children under the supervision of the mentor teacher, who also serves as the classroom teacher. The field supervisor is typically the college instructor for that preservice teacher (Cohen et al., 2013).

The field supervisor facilitates the practicum experience through overall management of the experience, observing the pre-service educator in the setting working with young children, provides feedback on his/her performance, and facilitates managerial work with the mentor-teacher and the student (Ibid. 2013). The mentor teacher engages in day-to-day supervision, mentoring and performance assessment roles with the field supervisor (Ibid, 2013). However, there are varieties of alternate ways to facilitate with a triad, including using the mentor teacher also as field supervisor or using an outside field supervisor who is not the instructor of the course (adding a fourth person to the triad).

In fact, the NAEYC (2009) suggest that 'excellence in early childhood teaching [is dependent upon] a continuous interplay between theory, research and practice' (p.6) which as the findings in this study signify, is gained through a finely balanced combination of classroom-based learning and practical experience in the field. Moreover, social cognitive theory holds that an individual's behaviour is primarily learned through his/her observations of others, as well as through interactions with his/her environment. Bandura (1986) depicts a bidirectional triadic relationship between personal factors, environment and behaviours, in which each element has a reciprocal relationship.

Benefits of Practicum

In the context of preparing early childhood educators, practicum is a critical component of pre-service training programmes. It provides an opportunity for students to see, experience, and apply what they are learning in university/college coursework in an authentic setting (Mullen, Beilke, & Brooks, 2008). It helps students to:

- Experience an authentic classroom/setting,
- Learn by doing,
- Create emotional connections,
- Enhance personal development,
- Undertake individual teaching opportunities, and
- Get exposure to the education and care environment (adapted from Mullen et al., 2008).

It is evident that practicum involves reciprocity with regards to the setting context (environment) and educator efficacy (personal beliefs). As mentioned previously, a person needs two resources to successfully perform any task: the requisite skill (or knowledge), and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1982, 1986, 1997). Practicum contributes to pre-service educator's sense of efficacy, which is defined as an educator's belief that s/he can effectively complete the tasks required to enable children to acquire the skills required for learning (Dimopoulou, 2012), or their belief in their ability to accomplish goals by using their own skills and abilities (Bandura, 2001).

Self-efficacy is not to be confused with confidence. Bandura (1986) describes self-efficacy as being concerned not with the skills one has, but with the capacity of what one can do with whatever skills one possesses.

Perceived self-efficacy concerns people's beliefs in their capabilities to mobilise the motivation, cognitive resources, and courses of action needed to exercise control over events in their lives

(Wood & Bandura, 1998, p. 364)

Self-efficacy therefore is an assessment of one's capabilities in three complex areas: motivation, resources and action. Moreover, it is not a generalised trait (Bandura, 1982, 1986), rather, it is a person's belief in his/ her ability to perform a specific task. While most people can identify goals they want to accomplish, things they would like to change, and things they would like to achieve, putting these plans into action can be challenging. Bandura suggests that self-efficacy plays a major role in how goals, tasks, and challenges are approached.

It follows, that people with a strong sense of self-efficacy can:

- View challenges as tasks to be mastered
- Develop greater interest in the activities in which they participate
- Form a stronger sense of commitment to their interests and activities
- Bounce back from setbacks and disappointments

By contrast, those with a weak sense of self-efficacy:

- Avoid challenging tasks
- Believe that difficult tasks and situations are beyond their capabilities
- Focus upon personal failings and negative outcomes, and
- Quickly lost confidence in personal abilities (adapted from Cherry, 2017).

Bandura identifies four major sources of self-efficacy as shown in figure 1.

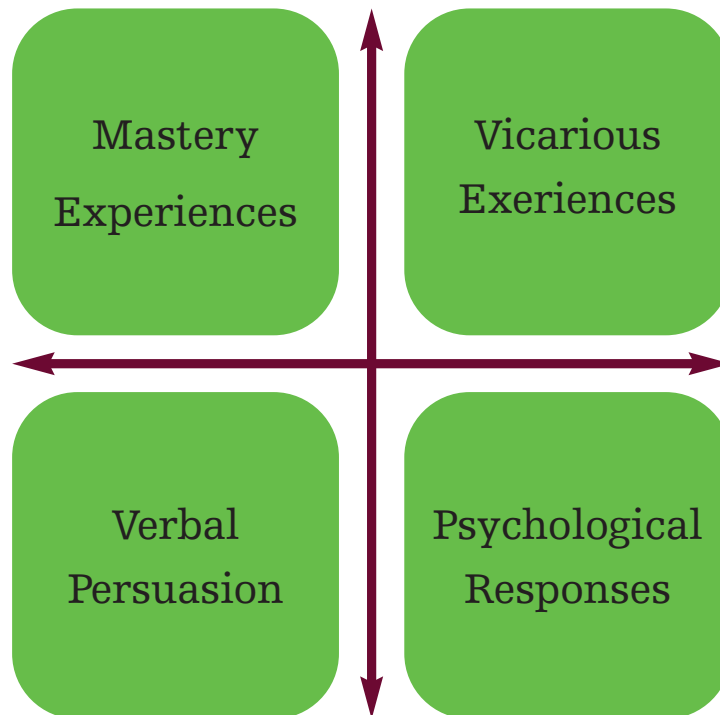


Figure 1. Four Sources of Self-Efficacy

It is commonly thought that people's beliefs about their efficacy can be strengthened through these four principles:

1

Mastery Experience

is considered the most powerful source of self-efficacy. Accordingly, Dimopoulou (2012) suggests that performing a task successfully, strengthens a person's sense of self-efficacy, while failing to adequately carry out a task can have a negative impact on, and weaken self-efficacy

2

Vicarious Experience

is believed to be the second most effective way to develop self-efficacy. It involves observing others successfully completing a task. Modelling is seen as an indispensable aspect of learning. Therefore, "seeing people similar to oneself succeed by sustained effort raises observers' beliefs that they too possess the capabilities to master comparative activities to succeed" (Bandura, 1991 in Agu, 2015, p.24)

3

Verbal persuasion

is concerned with persuading people to believe that they have the skills and capabilities to believe. Dimopoulou (2012) describes how "contemplating on an occasion when someone said something positive and encouraging that encouraged a person to complete a task or getting positive feedback and verbal encouragement from others helps people overcome their self-doubts and instead focus on putting their best effort on a task or action". (p.613). However, as noted by Bandura (1997) the impact of verbal persuasion on self-efficacy may vary considerably depending upon the perceived credibility, trustworthiness, expertise and assuredness of the persuaders

4

Psychological Responses

relates to how people's responses and emotional reactions to situations play a role in developing a sense of self-efficacy. Psychological, physiological and emotional states, situational circumstances and stress levels can all impact how a person feels about their personal abilities under certain circumstances (Dimopoulou, 2012, p.613). Somebody who becomes anxious before beginning a task, a student who becomes extremely nervous before or during practicum, for instance, may develop a weak sense of self-efficacy in these situations. Bandura (1994) notes however, that it is not the sheer intensity of emotional and physical reactions that is important. Rather it is how one copes with, and eliminates stress, and improves their emotional state when facing challenges that helps people to improve their self-efficacy.

It is apparent that practicum experiences could be crucial for pre-service educators. Indeed, research suggests that while preservice teacher self-efficacy can increase during course work, it often decreases during practicum (Woolfolk Hoy & Burke-Spero, 2005).

It is essential that pre-service early childhood educators undertake supervised work in ECEC settings with children aged birth to 6 years of age (Whitebook, Bellm, Lee & Sakai, 2005). Dillon et al (2014) advocate for practicum supervisors to model desired teaching practices throughout the practicum experience and actively help pre-service teachers embrace theory-based teaching practices.

The practical component of pre-service training enables students to practice new skills in the ECEC field, as a critical component for promoting and enhancing their ability to positively influence children's learning and development (Hyson, Tomlinson & Morris, 2009) and where they can engage in reflection; making sense of their practice (Waddell & Vartuli, 2015; Whitebook, Gomby, Bellm, Sakai & Kipnis, 2009). In addition, Lim & Kwon (2009) claim that pre-service educators 'gain their future image as educators through their practical experience of early childhood teaching' (p.87) which enables them to develop an understanding of what a 'real' teacher is (Pietsch & Williamson, 2005, in Cevher-Kalburan, 2014). This includes working with different socio-economic levels, cultural environments with linguistic and cultural differences; Working with and communicating with children, including children with special educational needs, trying different teaching approaches, and communicating with parents (Cevher-Kalburan, 2014).

Congruent with the NAEYC (2009), Bonnett (2015, p.197) highlights the benefits of practicum experience in offering opportunities for students 'to engage in a theory-to-practice model as they work directly with children, families, agency mentors and community partners'. Studies undertaken by Zeichner (2010) and Ritblatt et al., (2013) underscore the critical importance of practicum for students. Ziechner (2010) for example, indicates that students recall their field experiences as the most influential aspect of their preparation.

While Ziechner (2010) indicates that students recall their field experiences as the most influential aspect of their preparation, Ritblatt et al., (2013) claim that practicum has the greatest impact, compared to coursework or programme faculty and staff on student's experiences. Similarly, Cohen et al., (2013) suggest that field experiences have more influence on the development of pre-service teachers in comparison with other educational experiences, and are seen as key to producing competent early childhood educators. Furthermore, it is thought that practicum may influence a student's career choice. For instance, Thorpe, Boyd, Ailwood & Brownlee (2011) found that students who had a positive experience during their practicum placement were more likely to consider entering the ECEC workforce.

Challenges Associated with Practicum

Unfortunately while practicum enables pre-service early childhood educators to practice new skills in the ECEC field, engage in reflection, make sense of their practice, and 'build communities of practice' (Moloney in press), it is not always a positive experience. For example, studies highlight the importance of the relationship between pre-service and co-operating educators (Appl & Spenciner, 2008; Chung, 2003; O'Brian, Stoner, Appel, & House, 2007). An uncomfortable relationship between a pre-service educator and cooperating mentor/teacher can lead to student frustration, and thus, Lim & Kwon (2009) suggest it presents one of the biggest challenges in practicum. Accordingly, O'Brian et al., (2007) indicate that the relationship between the practicum student and cooperating educator is fundamental to the pre-service educator's development. Another challenge for students relates to being placed in an unfamiliar environment, and asked to undertake work they have never experienced before (Chung, 2003).

Based upon a study of early childhood educators in Ireland, Moloney (2011) for example, found that students may find that the reality of working in an ECEC setting during practicum is at odds with the ideology portrayed in class-room based learning at university. Similarly, Girod & Girod (2008) note that 'practicum experiences too often do not meet the needs of candidate learning in their efforts to become independent professionals' (p.309). In relation to pre-service teacher education in the US for elementary and secondary education, Zeichner & Bier (2013) discuss 'the lack of connection between course work and clinical experiences' (p. 155), which creates disconnect between the theory learned in the college courses and actual practice in a classroom. In addition, Girod & Girod (2008) suggest that what pre-service educators are learning in the university/college classroom and what they are seeing in an authentic setting can vary greatly depending on the practicum setting, the co-operating teacher, and the learning environment. Agbenyega (2012) signifies that this may be attributed to pre-service early childhood educators not knowing what to expect in an ECEC setting.

Among the challenges associated with practicum, in common with others (e.g., Moloney, 2011; Whitebook et al., 2005; Whitebook et al., 2009; Whitebook, Austin, Ryan, Kipnis et al, 2012), findings in the present study, also point to the lack of quality early childhood education and care settings. Citing Lim (1998), Lim & Kwon (2009) indicate that

the quality of educators in early childhood have a higher impact on the overall development process of children than those at higher courses of education due to the development characteristics of young children and the specificity of the educational process at that stage (p. 97).

Koc (2012) therefore highlights the need for students to practice their teaching skills in high quality classrooms, while Lim & Kwon stress the importance of selecting a good quality lead educator for a pre-service educator. These mentor-teachers leave a lasting impression on students, representing the model teachers that students would like to become in the future (Aldemir & Sezer, 2009).

As mentioned earlier, students who have a positive experience during their practicum placement are more likely to consider entering the ECEC workforce (Thorpe et al., 2011). Conversely, the varied experiences of students in the field leads to considerable inconsistency in the quality of practicum experiences (Hickson & So, 2009, Moloney, 2011) and may result in students exiting the field (Moloney in press). A further challenge relates to the absence of a universal approach to practicum in terms of the types of placements, the number of practicum hours required, the level of student involvement, and the nature of supervision/mentoring, all of which provides the backdrop against which this study was undertaken.

The Study





Context and Rationale

As indicated, throughout the past fifteen years, the number of undergraduate ECEC degree programmes has increased exponentially. Presently, seventeen Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) offer twenty nine full-time undergraduate degree programmes in early childhood education and care. Based upon their research relating to the variability in higher education ECEC programmes in the U.S, Whitebook et al., (2012) found that these programmes are varied, and there is little research that compares and contrasts them. Likewise in Ireland, in spite of the proliferation of undergraduate ECEC degree programmes, there is a scarcity of research relating to these programmes, and little is known about how they prepare early childhood educators for work in the field. In particular, little is known about the practicum component of these programmes; length of practicum; student or host placement setting expectations; relationship between third level institutions and practicum settings etc. At the time of the study, no national guidelines were available to offer direction and, or support to educational institutions offering ECEC degree programmes, reviewing and amending programmes, or developing new programmes. However, in November 2017, an Early Years Education Policy working group published draft Professional Award Criteria and Guidelines for Initial Professional Education (Level 7 and Level 8) Degree Programmes in Early Childhood Education and Care in Ireland. It is intended that the development of these criteria and guidelines will 'lead to the formation of early years professional graduates who are fully prepared to take on the complex challenges of practice 'in the ECEC field (EYEP, 2017, p. 4-5).

Methodology

Funded by the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education © this qualitative sequential exploratory research study (Creswell, 2013) sought to examine practices and perspectives related to the practicum component of full-time undergraduate ECEC degrees (QQI Level 7 & Level 8 on the NFO) across the PLÉ membership, comprising seventeen HEIs in Ireland. In doing so, it sought to undertake an exploration of practice across the HEIs from the perspective of HEIs, final year undergraduate ECEC students and, ECEC providers facilitating practicum for these students (Figure 2).

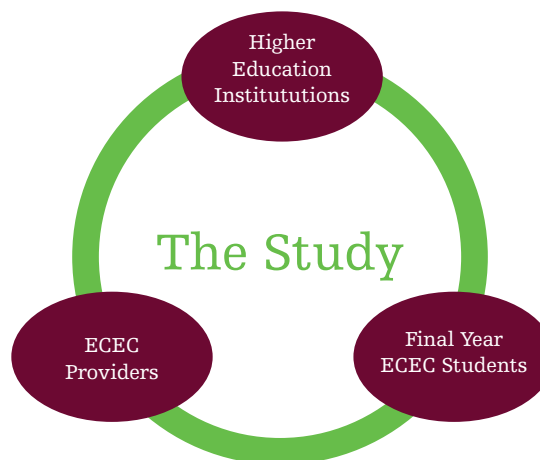


Figure 2. Overview of study participants

The study which involved two distinct research phases was undertaken between October, 2016 and May, 2017. It was concerned with the following aspects of practicum including:

Structure and duration	(i.e., organisation, and mode of delivery across the HEIs: 1 year/ 2 years/ 3 years; block weeks vs days every week etc.);
Focus	(e.g., skills and competencies being targeted; care and pedagogical strategies utilised, interpreting and implementing National Frameworks);
Assessment	(personnel, supervision, reflective dialogue between students/supervisors, professional portfolios etc.);
Student and ECEC provider/manager's experiences	(including preparation, consultation, support and follow-up).

Phase 1

Phase 1 of the study was undertaken between October and December, 2016. It involved administering an online questionnaire survey to the fourteen Higher Education Institutions offering full-time Level 7 (ordinary) and Level 8 (honours) ECEC degree programmes. This survey generated both statistical (e.g., length of degree, and award type (Level 7/8); number of students registered on the degree programme; duration of placement; supervised visits undertaken during the placement period etc.) and qualitative data relating to how practicum is organised, criteria for selecting host placement settings; and supervision and assessment processes. Thirteen completed questionnaires were returned giving a response rate of 93% (n=14).

Phase 2

Analysis of phase 1 data was used to inform, the development, of a second online questionnaire survey which was distributed in phase 2. Consequently, in February, 2017, each of the thirteen participating HEIs in phase 1 was asked to distribute an online questionnaire to:

- Their final year undergraduate ECEC students, and
- The ECEC providers facilitating practicum for these students

As with phase 1, this questionnaire yielded both statistical (e.g., ages, duration of degree programme; duration of practicum; number of supervised visits) and qualitative data relating to the purpose of assessment, assessment procedures; involvement of mentor teachers in student supervision; benefits of facilitating practicum for settings and so on.

Phase 2 of the study generated 101 ECEC student responses, and 80 ECEC provider responses.

Ethical approval for the entire study (phase 1 and 2) was sought through, and granted by University College Cork (UCC) on behalf of PLÉ, prior to the commencement of the research. The link to the online survey in phase 1 and 2 was distributed via email to each HEI, ECEC student and host placement setting. The link was accompanied by an accompanying information letter explaining what the study was about, who was undertaking it, and why, and what the findings would be used for. Participation was entirely voluntary, and respondents were advised that they could exit the survey at any point. They were also advised, that should they wish to erase their responses before exiting, they would need to go back through the survey. In order to preserve anonymity and the confidentiality of responses, the option to collect computer IP addresses was switched to 'No', and all identifying information was removed from the responses to ensure that no research participant, HEI or host placement setting could be identified.

Data analysis

Two independent researchers who did not have any connection with PLÉ were commissioned to undertake preliminary analysis of both the quantitative and qualitative data from both research phases. All statistical questions were analysed using SPSS (Statistical package for the Social Sciences). For instance, questions 1, 2, 7, 8, 15, and questions 17 – 19 on the HEI survey were analysed in this way. SPSS produced descriptive statistics. It also generated tabulated reports and charts using the quantitative data from all three online questionnaires (HEI, ECEC students, and host placement settings). As the questionnaires were designed to include some matched questions across all three surveys, it was possible to examine and extrapolate commonalities and differences between participants.

In relation to the qualitative data, a qualitative comparative approach to analysis was adopted based on the techniques and procedures recommended by Braun & Clarke (2012). In the first instance, responses to each question were entered onto three excel spreadsheets, one for HEIs, one for ECEC students and, one for ECEC host placement settings. A coding system was used to assign units of meaning to the data (Glaser & Strauss 1967; Lincoln & Guba 1985). Using a highlighter, sections of the responses were highlighted and codes were assigned under a column marked 'Codes' on each spread sheet to signify patterns in the data. Parallel to this, analytical notes were written separately into a notebook to track initial thoughts relating to possible meanings attached to the codes. Using an iterative process, each spread sheet was reviewed several times, and codes were collapsed into broader emerging categories. For example in the case of student responses, codes such as 'working with toddlers', and 'experience with pre-schoolers' were refined into an overarching category called 'breadth of placement experience'. Written notes were updated accordingly. This inductive process of reviewing and refining the categories was repeated until there were no new insights into the data. At this point, the coded responses were highlighted and sorted through Excel by 'Ascending: A to Z' order so that all the data was automatically grouped by the codes allocated. Following this process, the codes were

examined for convergence, and to determine a fit between the data and the categories assigned. In this way similarities and differences between respondent's attitudes, experiences and expectations were identified.

Phase 1 Findings: Higher Education Institutions





Introduction

This section focuses upon the findings from phase 1 of the research study undertaken with the Higher Education Institutes (HEIs). It begins by providing an overview of the Level of undergraduate degree programmes on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ), and presents statistical data relating to the numbers of students accessing full-time undergraduate ECEC degree programmes within the participating institutions. The duration and nature of practicum, selection criteria for host placement settings, how students are prepared for, supervised and assessed while engaging in practicum is discussed in detail. Although findings are focussed upon HEIs, because each study cohort (HEIs, final year undergraduate ECEC students, and host placement setting providers) were asked about the role of practicum, a comprehensive overview of all respondent's perceptions of placement is also included. This section concludes with a discussion of what works well, as well as the challenges for HEIs with regards to practicum.

Findings

Participating HEIs were asked to indicate the level of their full-time undergraduate ECEC degree on the NFQ, and the duration of the programme in years. Analysis of the completed questionnaires indicates that a total of eighteen undergraduate programmes were being offered across the participating HEIs at the time of the study (Oct-Dec, 2016). Of the thirteen participating HEIs, five offer a 3 year Level 7 (ordinary Bachelors) degree, four of these institutions also offer a 3 year Level 7 (Honours Bachelor) degree, and one indicated 'other' in response to this question (Table 1). As indicated, eight institutions offer a four year Level 8 (Honours Bachelor) degree.

Table 1. Level of ECEC Undergraduate Degree Programmes across Higher Education Institutions

	3 years duration	4 years duration	Other
Level 7	5	0	0
Level 8	4	8	1

HEIs were also asked to indicate the numbers of students accessing their full-time undergraduate ECEC degree programmes. Figure 3 provides an overview of the numbers of students undertaking an undergraduate ECEC degree in each institution.

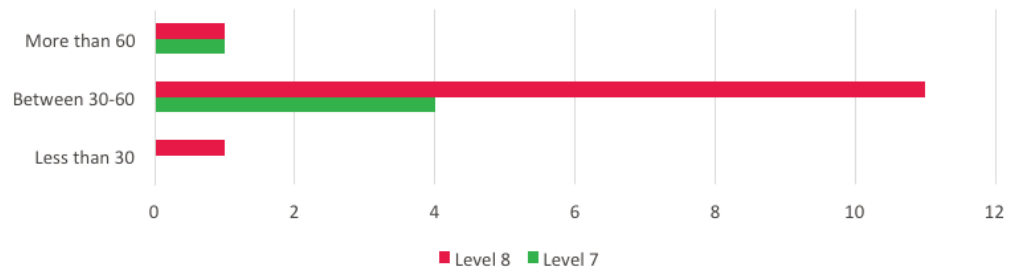


Figure 3. Numbers of Students Undertaking an Undergraduate ECEC Degree

In response to a question about how placement was organised in their institution, HEIs indicate that there is no single approach to how placement is organised. Rather a combination of methods is used. In one of the twelve institutions that provided this information; students self-select and organise all of their own placements. In four institutions (n=12) the college select and organise all the placements for the students, similarly, in four other institutions, the student selects placement and the college organises it. In the remaining three, the students self-select some of the placements and the college select some of the placements for the students (see figure 4).

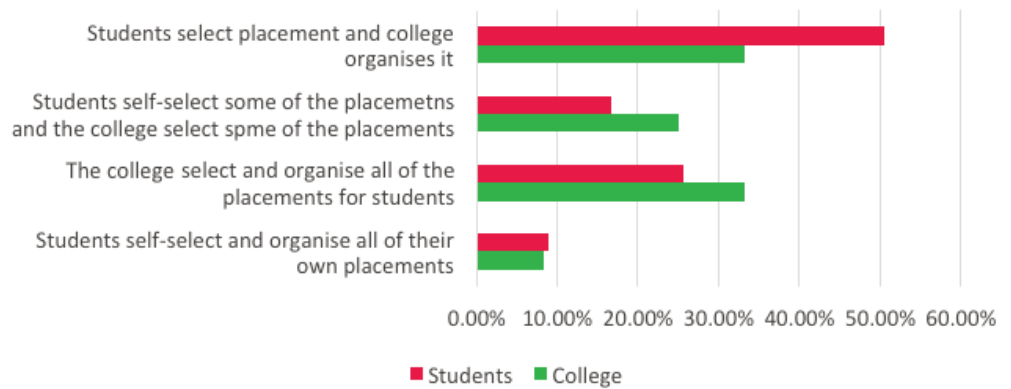


Figure 4. How Practicum is Organised

As shown in figure 4, analysis of student responses in phase 2 of the study, indicates that the majority, i.e., 50.5% of students (n=101) select their placement and the college organise it. In contrast 25.7% of students indicated that the college both selects and organises student placement. A smaller percentage, 16.8%, noted that they select some placement and the college select some of the placement. Moreover, a relatively small percentage (8.9%) indicated that they are responsible for both selecting and organising their practice placement.

In addition to determining how practicum is organised, the study also sought to identify how host placement settings are selected for practicum. Guided by a list of options including a category 'other' on the questionnaire survey, the HEIs were asked to indicate how host settings are selected. As indicated in Figure 5, the quality of the host placement setting is of paramount importance. Of the eleven HEIs that responded to this question, nine (n=11) indicated that the 'Host settings have been identified as high quality settings by the institution or by other bodies'.

Phase 1 Findings: Higher Education Institutions

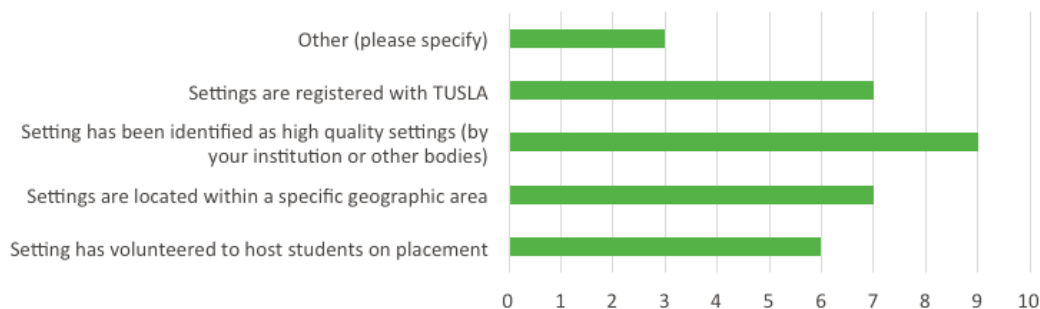


Figure 5. Selection Criteria used by HEIs for Host Placement Settings

As shown, seven respondents also considered it important that host settings 'are registered with TUSLA'. Three HEIs selected the category 'other'. In one instance, the HEI explained that 'rooms must be graduate led', in another, 'placements are vetted by the college using a set of criteria and a visit by the college tutor', and the remaining HEI, 'comply with the legal requirements and, all placements are vetted e.g. insurance, staff, protection'.

When asked if their institution offered any support to host placement settings, six HEIs indicated that they provide 'initial training'. One respondent explained that 'we have a 5 ECTs supervisory programme starting this year [2016], already, we have two intakes'. In another instance, the HEI 'provided supervisory training in the past but there has been little demand for it in recent times [however] tutors give training to new supervisors in person or by phone'. Of the six HEIs that provide initial training, two also offer 'ongoing training'. Seven HEIs indicated that they do not offer training to host placement settings. However, in one of these institutions, 'placement providers are invited to attend liaison meetings [and] there is some discussion around providing training and support for placement providers in the future'. Another institution that does not provide training for host placement settings, articulated how 'there is a memo of understanding with the year head available for consultation/support as required by the setting supervisor'.

Two respondents selected the category 'other'. In both cases written information in the format of a handbook is provided to host placement settings. In one case, 'handbooks are provided prior to the placement and a member of staff is identified for communication', and in the other, 'written information and advice is provided in a handbook for the host setting'. One HEI described how 'training in supervisory methods was provided in the past but not on a regular basis. We are currently developing a blended learning unit for this purpose'. Another invites 'placement mentors into the college once a year for a meeting with placement staff'.

Duration and Types of Practicum



Practicum differs from institution to institution in terms of when it is undertaken and, the number of hours students are required to spend on placement. Table 2 provides an overview of when students engage in practicum across the twelve HEIs that provided this information.

Table 2. Overview of When Students Engage in Practicum

	No practicum	One day/week for semester	Short block (2/3 weeks)	Extended block (6+ weeks)	Full semester	Total
Year 1	4	3	1	2	0	10
Year 2	1	2	1	2	6	12
Year 3	1	1	2	2	6	12
Year 4	3	2	1	2	0	8

As indicated, there are considerable variations in relation to when students undertake practicum across HEIs. In two institutions, students do not undertake any practical placement in year one. However, in three institutions, they undertake one day per week for the entire semester in year one, a short block of 2/3 weeks in another, and in two institutions, students undertake an extended block, i.e., 6 weeks plus. In six institutions, students are required to undertake a full semester of placement in years 2 and 3.

One HEI providing a three year Level 8 programme explained that ‘First Year students attend placement for one day (6 hours) per week in Semester 2; second year students attend for two days a week all year, and third year students also attend for two days a week all year’. A second HEI, also providing a three year Level 8 programme, described how in year 2, students undertake practical placement ‘2 days per week - October to April, plus 2 weeks block in a policy setting’. One HEI providing a four year Level 8 programme explained that

Year 4 placement is for 6 weeks only. Placement is elective in year 4 in that the student may choose to undertake an Independent Learning Project in lieu of placement. The majority of students elect to take placement’, whereas another HEI which also provides a four year Level 8 programme stated that their ‘model is 2 week block + followed by 2 days per week for 8 weeks + 2 week block (36 days approx.)

Findings suggest that regardless of when practicum is undertaken, students engage in lengthy field experience, ranging from 540 hours (3 year Level 7 ordinary Bachelors) to 1,000 hours over the duration of the degree programme (Figure 6). As shown, students in three HEIs are required to complete 1,000 hours of practical experience. In two of these institutions, the students undertake a four year Level 8 honours degree programme, while in the third, they undertake a 2-year Level 8 Higher Diploma. In one institution, ‘analysis of practice seminars’ forms part of the required 1,000 hours. In another HEI, the requirement is for students to undertake 576 hours of practicum (3 year Level 8); and in a further two institutions providing a 3 year Level 8 programme, the requirement is 600 and 900 hours of practical experience respectively. Two HEIs providing a 3 year Level 7 degree,

Phase 1 Findings: Higher Education Institutions

require students to undertake 660 and 700 hours of practicum. With regards to the remaining four HEIs providing Level 8 degree programmes, one requires students to undertake 600 hours, one 660 hours, and in the remaining two, students undertake 800 hours of practicum over the four years of the programme.

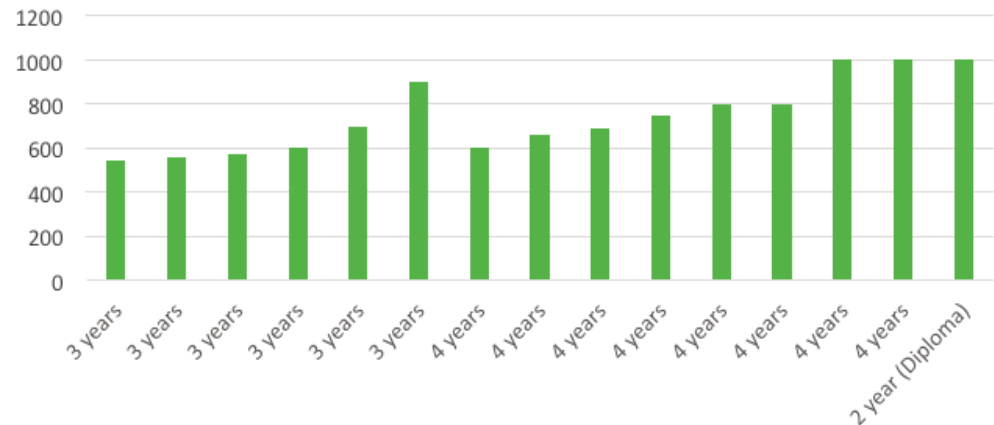


Figure 6. No. of Hours Spent on Practicum

Further analysis of data relating to the hours spent on practicum highlights the variation between institutions in relation to the percentage of course time students spend in the field gaining practical experience. For example, the percentage of time spent on practicum while undertaking a 3 year Level 7 degree ranges from a minimum of 25% to a maximum of 31.94%. During a 3 year Level 8 degree, the percentage ranges from 26.38% to 41.66%, while during a 4 year Level 8 degree, students spend between 22.91% and 34.71% of time on practicum (see figure 7).

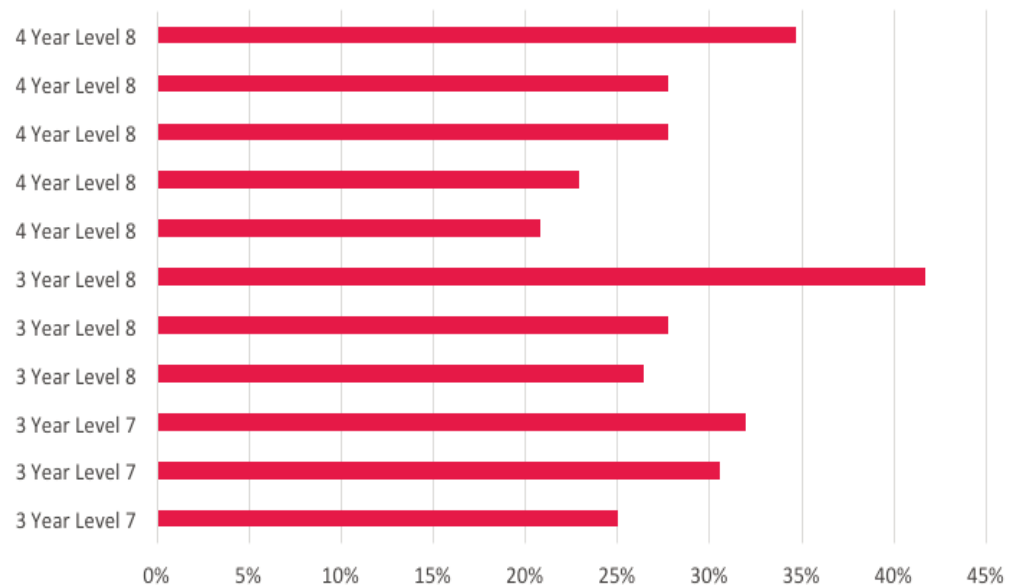


Figure 7. Percentage of Time Spent on Practicum

As mentioned earlier, the study seeks to determine the nature of practicum over the duration of the degree programme, and whether students are required to gain experience in a diverse range of settings, and with different age cohorts. To this end, a multiple choice question, which included the overlapping age ranges in *Aistear*, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (i.e., birth to eighteen months; twelve months to three years, and two and a half to six years) (NCCA, 2009) was asked; to enable respondents to indicate the types of practicum undertaken by students. Of the thirteen participating HEIs, the majority (8) indicate that students are required to undertake mandatory placements (*Table 3*).

Table 3. Overview of Mandatory Placement Requirements

Mandatory Placement	No. of HEIs
Children with Special Educational Needs	2
Babies (birth to 18 months)	1
Young children (2½ - 6 years)	1
Community setting, family resource centre	0
Infant classes in primary school	1
Full daycare	0
Sessional pre-school	0
Private setting	0
Early Start Programme	1
Other:	
Toddlers 12 – 36 months	1
Children under 4 years (any setting)	1
Total	8

Seven respondents provided additional information which provides insight into the scope of practicum experiences undertaken:

1. Working with young children (2½ to 6) and working with toddlers (12 - 36 months). The 3 *Aistear* age groups must be worked with. No infant classes;
2. Working specifically with children with special educational needs and working with toddlers;
3. Working with babies (birth to 18 months). Students are required to gain experience in working with children across the birth to six years age range;
4. Placement one – generalised; placement 2 more specialised, e.g., Special Educational Needs, disadvantage, addiction services, refuge etc;
5. One mandatory placement with children under four which can be in any type of setting. The second placement is their choice which is mainly in Junior/Senior infant classes or Special Needs;
6. Working in EY policy setting (L8 H Dip) and working with children from 6 to 12 (L8 BA Hons);
7. Students are facilitated to gain a wide variety of placement experiences regarding age, abilities and social contexts.

Phase 1 Findings: Higher Education Institutions

In addition to mandatory placement, and the various other requirements outlined, seven HEIs also provide opportunities for students to undertake practicum in other European countries, and in countries outside of Europe including Manchester, Northern Ireland, Norway, Sweden, Germany, Finland, Spain and Australia. Across the HEIs, students gain practical experience in an array of setting types: Hospital play rooms, national schools special needs rooms (children must be under 6 years); Early Intervention Services (HSE); hospital schools; forest schools; children's wards in hospitals; children's arts centres; Orphanage in Africa, opportunities to work abroad at all levels in Early Childhood; Montessori; HighScope; support organisations, e.g., County Childcare Committees (CCC) or National Voluntary Childcare Organisation (NVCO), TUSLA inspection team, and Naíonraí.

Students have the opportunity to go to Norway on study and placement in year 3 for the full semester (HEI respondent).

Students are offered options of placements in early years settings, schools, county childcare committees, management agencies, hospitals, special needs centres and social agencies such as Focus Ireland (HEI respondent).

In instances where students undertake practicum overseas, they either self-fund, avail of Erasmus funding or use a combination of self-funding, Erasmus and part-funding by the host placement setting.

Purpose of Practicum

As mentioned earlier, each study questionnaire asked about the role of practicum for students. The predominant response from all three study cohorts (HEI; student and host placement provider) was that it enables students 'to put theory into practice'. The frequency of this response is shown in Figure 8, which indicates that 9 HEIs (n=13); 63 students (n=101) and 31 providers (n=80) highlighted the role of practicum in this regard

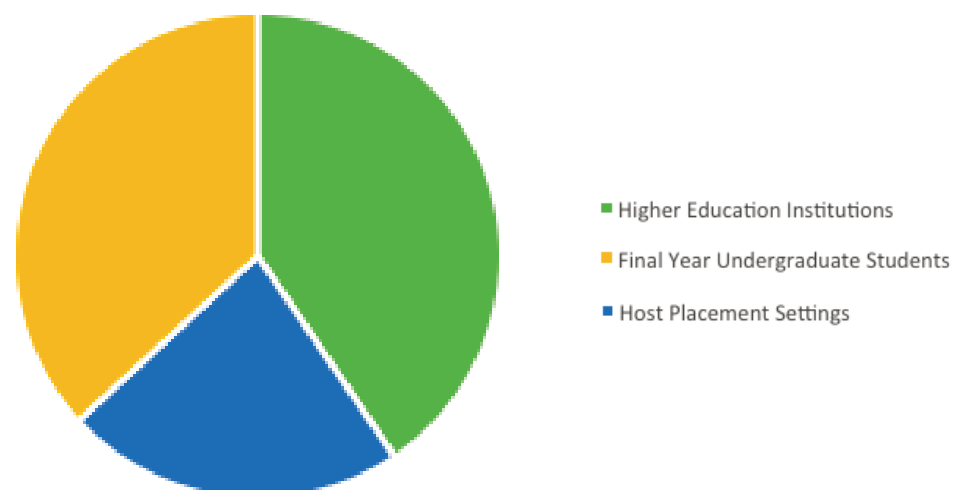


Figure 8. Purpose of Practicum

HEIs described practicum as ‘very significant’, ‘integral’, ‘central to’ and ‘underpinning the whole programme’. Accordingly, practicum helps students with ‘linking theory to practice; developing competencies and skills that can really only be gained in practice’ (HEI respondent). Likewise, students and host setting providers described it as ‘invaluable’ (student); ‘the most vital part of their training’ (provider), and as ‘vital in any good training’ (provider). Furthermore, it was considered that students ‘can’t learn how to work with young people at lectures alone’ (provider). Mirroring this perspective, a student respondent articulated how ‘a lot is learned on placement that cannot be learned from books and lectures alone’. Table 4 provides insight into the purpose of practicum from the perspective of the HEIs, students and host placement providers.

Table 4: Purpose of Practicum

Higher Education Institute	Student	Host Setting Provider
It underpins the whole programme as it allows students to integrate theory with practice experience.	To use the theory we learn in lectures and put it into practice on placement working with children	Placement is an opportunity to link theory to practice, develop competencies, identify preferred areas of practice, develop critical reflective skills
It is hopefully where theory and practice merge for the student in a meaningful way.	Gain first-hand knowledge of how to put theory into practice.	For the students to gain knowledge in a practical way so they can relate theory to practice
It is an opportunities for students to bridge with gap what they learn in college (theory) with practice.	The purpose of placement is to gain real life experience and to implement the theory you’ve been learning during your degree	It gives the student the opportunity to put into practice what they have learned in college
It gives the student a chance to gain hands on experience and see the reality of the theories they have been learning	It’s very good as some specific theories in lectures don’t make sense at the time and you think ‘what does that have to do with anything!’ It all makes sense then out on placement when you are able to put theory to practice.	It gives the student a chance to gain hands-on experience and see the reality of the theories they have been learning
Key to bridge theory to practice, this are applied programmes and must have a link between the two	To put the theory we have learnt into practice. Theory can be different from practice, it gives us the opportunity to see what practice is like	To expand their knowledge and experience from a theoretical base to reality

One student summarises the application of theory to practice stating that ‘the theory makes sense when witnessed first-hand’.

Preparing Students for, and Supervising Students on Practicum

Each of the thirteen participating HEIs prepare students for practical placement. Figure 9 provides insight into the various approaches used.

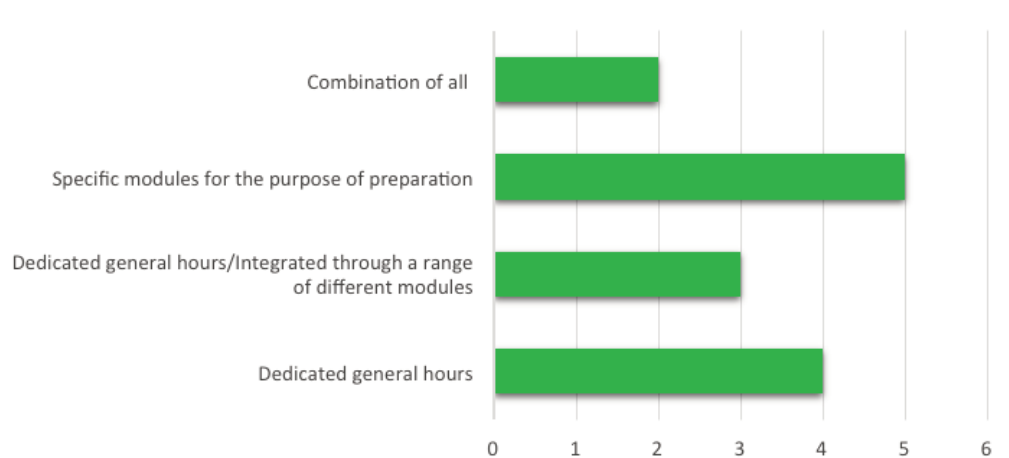


Figure 9. Overview of How Students are Prepared for Practical Placement

As indicated, nine HEIs provide dedicated general hours for the purpose of preparing students for practical placement. Of these, four provide dedicated hours only, three also integrate preparation through a range of different modules, while two combine dedicated general hours, preparation through integrated modules, as well as specific modules for the purpose of preparation. 'We have a combination of [preparation strategies], they get placement prep [sic] classes, one to one support and specified modules that they must pass before they go out'. Another HEI offers 'pre-placement seminars and tutorials...as well as ongoing placement tutorials on a group and individual basis'.

Each institution appoints a mentor/supervisor to students during practical placement. In five cases, a member of college staff is appointed, while in eight institutions, both a member of college staff and a member of the host placement setting is appointed. This joint supervision points to the positive and collaborative relationship between HEIs and host placement settings that emerged from phase 2 of the study, and is discussed in greater detail later in this report.

Of the twelve institutions that responded to a question asking whether training is provided for mentors who assess students on practicum, four confirmed that training is provided. In two cases, ongoing training is also provided by the institution. Eight HEIs indicate that 'no formal training is provided, the mentors are provided with written documentation only'. Additional information provided by six HEIs suggests that an eclectic mix of training strategies are used, ranging from 'workshops/lectures/seminars and written documentation' to preparing a 'blended learning unit' for host placement settings.

Initial training in the college, comprehensive range of documentation. CPD sessions offered to placement tutors during the year (HEI respondent).

We have a designated placement committee which monitors and supports. New visiting tutors will shadow more established colleagues (HEI respondent).

Training for members of host placement provided in 2 hour workshop (voluntary and not always well attended). Training for institute mentors collaborative meetings before, during and after placement (HEI respondent)

Supervisors are invited to attend 4 x 3 hour sessions on the content of the BA ECE programme, the roles of the supervisor, tutor and student and assessment practices (HEI respondent).

The college staff member allocated as mentor is provided with information and ongoing support by the placement coordinator (academic staff member). No regular training is provided currently for host placement setting but a blended learning unit re same is being developed (HEI respondent).

Assessing Students

It is evident that the HEIs play a significant role in visiting and assessing students undertaking practicum. The majority of respondents (9, n=13) stated that students are visited and assessed on site by college staff and, through coursework submitted to the college. Indicative of the collaborative nature of the relationship between institutions and host placement settings mentioned earlier, and further highlighted in phase 2 data garnered from host placement settings, both a member of college staff and a member of the host placement setting is appointed in eight institutions. Moreover, seven of these institutions assess students in collaboration with the host placement setting.

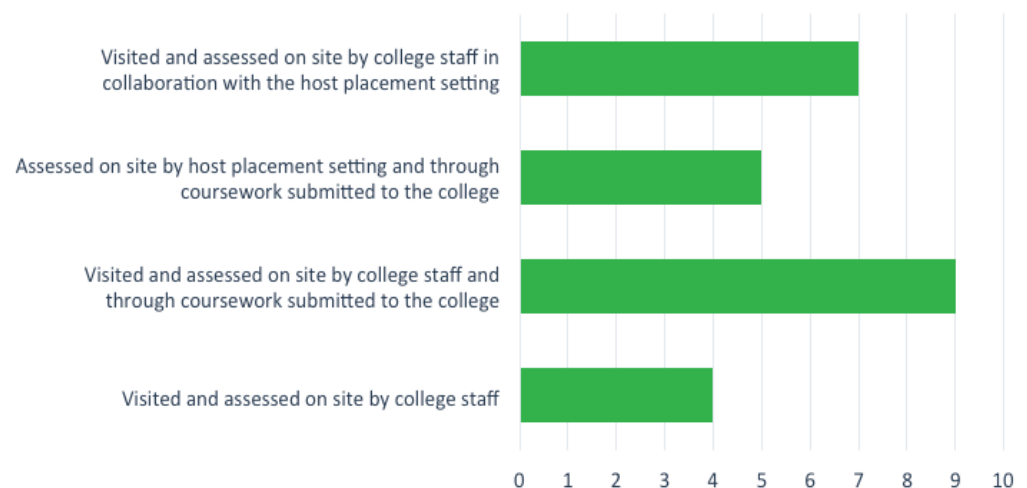


Figure 10. How Students are assessed on Practicum

Observing students working directly with children is a common practice across the HEIs. The data indicates that college staff in eight institutions (n=13) observe students working directly with children. One respondent explained that 'in addition to the observation,

Phase 1 Findings: Higher Education Institutions

students, supervisors and college tutors participate in a three-way discussion about the student's progress'. Additional information was also provided by two institutions where students are not observed by college staff working directly with the children. One described how 'from time to time staff will visit students on placement if an issue arises or if the placement service or student requires a visit'. In the second setting, 'students are visually assessed by host supervisor who completes an evaluation form and also provides verbal feedback to college supervisor on assessment visit'.

Each of the thirteen institutions provided information relating to written work required of students while undertaking practicum. Although the written work varies from institution to institution, there is a strong emphasis on learning portfolios and reflective journals (Table 5).

Table 5. Written Requirements while Students undertake Practical Placement

Respondent	Requirement
1	Reflections. Short activities arising out of the interests of the children
2	Placement 1 : Reflective paper (3000 words) Placement 2 : Intervention (3000 words)
3	The student undertakes a range of practical projects such as 6 activities with the children, a Síolta reflective exercise, Behaviour support project (year 2), Transition project (year 3) and personal reflections.
4	Portfolio. which includes reflective learning, observations, case studies
5	Observing, Planning and evaluating learning opportunities Reflective diaries
6	They have a field placement folder which includes documentation of specific tasks related to current module content.
7	Predominantly - Observations; Curriculum Plans
8	Materials used/ developed during placement; Lesson plans etc. for those in placement in primary schools; Portfolios for assessment etc.
9	Yes a placement portfolio aligned with HETAC level requirements
10	Students are required to complete a learning portfolio (floor book) documenting learning experiences, children's voices, links to theory and frameworks and reflection on skills development
11	A portfolio is completed consisting of many elements, some on activities with the children which have been observed by the college supervisor, other areas include observations, skill development etc.
12	Students complete a placement reflective journal and many assignments on other modules are placement-based.
13	Students develop a portfolio of learning that includes reflections on weekly key learning, observations, planned learning opportunities and reflections on construction and implementation of learning opportunities

As table 5 indicates, twelve institutions require students to undertake reflective exercises; a portfolio of learning, or a combination of both. The remaining institution requires 'predominantly - Observations; Curriculum Plans'. Clearly, institutions utilise a wide range of assessment tools directed towards enabling students to observe and document children's learning, develop curriculum plans, and reflect upon their learning, all aspects of professionalism, while undertaking practicum.

As with other aspects of practicum, variations emerged in how placements are graded. In three institutions therefore, all placements are graded, in three instances, 'some are graded and some are pass/fail', and in the remaining seven, all are pass/fail. One respondent provided contextual information relating to why placements are graded pass/fail, stating that it is 'due to the variety of settings and placement supports'. Another respondent explained how different weightings apply to various elements of practical placement. Consequently, 'placement is pass/fail (20 credits), while the learning portfolio is graded (10 credits) in each year'.

What works well for HEIs with regards to Practicum?

In response to an open ended question about what works well in terms of practicum, the HEIs highlighted a range of factors including 'preparation for placement', 'good organisation', 'block placement' and having a 'full-time academic position and administrative support'. Findings suggest that of the ten institutions that provided information relating to placement coordination, there is a full-time placement coordinator (academic position) in place in five institutions. It is thought that having a full-time academic post 'recognises and values professional practice'. In two institutions, the position is described as 'part-time academic', and in three institutions, the post is 'administrative'.

Five of the thirteen respondents emphasised the need for student preparation 'prior to actual placement'. Aligned to this, three respondents spoke of how students are prepared. In particular, these respondents focussed upon 'approved allocation of hours for tutoring and coordination', the 'allocation of a module (5 credits) which prepares students for placement', and in another case, 'students are well prepared through dedicated general preparation'. Signifying the importance attached to student preparation, one respondent stated that in his/her institution 'preparation classes are mandatory. Any placement hours missed for any reason have to be made up'.

Other strategies highlighted in terms of what works well include having the mentor/supervisor 'call in one day a week during placement, [this] works well for linking theory to practice, and provides support'. In one institution 'students return to college for dedicated workshops on one day each week'. In the words of the respondent 'this is considered essential to the success of the programme'.

Two respondents referred to the benefits of 'block placement [which is] beneficial to both students and host services [providing] students with good grounding in the realities of being

Phase 1 Findings: Higher Education Institutions

an early childhood practitioner'. It was suggested also, that where 'lecturers undertake placement supervision and teach the students involved [it] gives them a rounded view of the student and the student knows the tutor well'.

Additionally, two respondents referred to the relationship between the institution and the host placement setting, with one noting that 'visits encourage connection with the college', and the second, stating that the 'Institute has valuable partnership with some local schools and preschools'. The need for 'having specific guidelines in place for students, mentors and host placement settings' was mentioned by one respondent.

Student satisfaction, and enjoyment of the placement experience was mentioned by one respondent who asserts that 'students appear to enjoy their placements and report that they gain a lot from their experiences'. As discussed in phase two findings, a recurring theme within the student and host placement setting data is the considerable benefits of practical placement, not just for students, but also for the host setting.

Challenges Associated with Practicum

The most significant challenge relates to the quality of host placement settings. This issue which also emerges within the student data (see phase 2 findings) was identified as a key concern by nine (n=13) HEI respondents, and alluded to in commentary by three others. In the words of one respondent, 'the key challenge is finding high quality placements'. Signifying the issue of staff turn-over within the sector, s/he further explained that it is difficult to find a quality setting 'with staff who are permanently there and with whom we have built up a professional relationship'. Another highlighted concerns about students 'managing [in settings] where staff are not motivated', 'quality assurance of the learning environment for students' was further mentioned, with another respondent suggesting that 'sometimes for various reasons, there is a conflict of values, poor on-site mentoring etc.'. The need to 'find a shared understanding of the role of the student' was identified by one HEI who felt that 'Level 5/6 practitioners resent Level 8 students - seeing them as a threat'. Indeed, as discussed in phase 2 findings, students also identified this as an issue.

Student supervision and assessment was highlighted as an issue by four HEI respondents. This was directly related to 'consistency in supervision', 'mentoring and support of students when on placement', and 'training and support of placement site mentors'. The question of being assessed by the 'host supervisor' was mentioned by one respondent who stated that 'not seeing the students in action is a challenge in terms of assessment'. The issue of student supervision, and in particular, the need for HEI lecturers to supervise students while engaging in practicum emerged as a significant concern for host placement providers. Equally, the preferred method of supervision from the student's perspective, and as discussed in phase 2 findings, is 'having a lecturer assigned to assess you'. Furthermore, another HEI respondent stressed the challenge associated with 'placement owners completing assessment paperwork but not working directly with the student'. One HEI respondent expressed concern with regards to the absence of 'training for host supervisors' while two stressed the need for adequate resourcing for placement, noting that 'placement is an integral part of the BA ECEC, and must continue to be adequately resourced'.

There were specific challenges for students undertaking undergraduate Montessori Education degrees, where it was felt that they are 'competing for access to infant classes in primary schools where B.Ed. students are the preferred choice'. Pointing to issues within the ECEC sector generally, one respondent felt that 'limited understanding of ECEC' was an issue. This respondent further suggested that 'students wish [the focus of the degree] to be broader than early education, as that is where the jobs are'.

Additional challenges identified by HEIs relate to the need for students to achieve a work/study balance. 'So many students have to work to support themselves, and sometimes spend between 20 to 30 hours working outside of 30 placement hours, so become exhausted'. One respondent raised a concern that 'some students have very little experience interacting with young children and lack confidence particularly in relation to feeding/changing etc.'

Geographic location of host placement settings was also mentioned as an issue by two respondents in relation to the challenges associated with practical placement. In this respect, 'the expense of travel to the location' for students was identified as problematic. In response to a question asking respondents to include any further information about practical placement that they considered important to the data collection process, two HEIs stressed the need to develop guidelines to inform professional practice placement. In the first instance, the respondent articulated a 'hope that this research would form the basis for an agreed placement experience to be offered to students', while in the second, the respondent stated:

I would welcome the introduction of clear policy regarding the duration, credits and types of experiences that undergraduate ECCE students should obtain. Standards for learning environments for ECCE students are necessary. Additionally it would be really useful if a mentoring programme for placement services was introduced.

Phase 2 Findings: Part 1

Practice Placement Providers





Phase 2 Findings: Part 1

Practice Placement Providers

Introduction

This section is presented in two parts. Part 1 presents the findings relating to host placement providers. It presents statistical data relating to how long host placement providers have been facilitating undergraduate ECEC degree Level students; the types of placement experiences offered; when and how they first meet students, communicating with HEIs, involvement in mentoring, supervising and assessing students. Drawing upon qualitative responses to certain questions on the online survey, it provides insight into provider perspectives of, and attitudes towards supporting students on practicum, the benefits of, and the challenges associated with practicum for host placement providers.

Facilitating Practicum

Of the 77 practice placement providers (n=80) that responded to the online survey, 27.3% (n=21) noted that they have been facilitating practicum for 1-5 years. Among the sample (n=77), 29.9 % (n=23) facilitated students for 6-9 years and 42.9% (n=33) have been facilitating students for more than 10 years (see Table 6).

Table 6. Number of Years Providers have been Facilitating Students on Practicum

	n	%
1-5 years	21	27.3
6-9 years	23	29.9
10+ years	33	42.9
Total	77	100.0

Note: three providers did not provide data.

Types of Experience Provided for Students in Settings

Among the sample (n=80), 78.5% of placement providers enable students to gain experience of working with children in the ECCE scheme between the ages 3-5 years, while 50.6% provide them with experience of working with pre-school children aged 2-3 years. A number of providers (29.1%) provide students with hands-on experience of working with children below 2 years of age, whereas 24.1% provide an opportunity to work with babies from birth to 1 year. Findings indicate that only 11.4% of settings provide an opportunity to gain experience of working with children who have Special Educational Needs, with a similar number, 11.4% providing experience of working with children in the infant classes in primary school (see Figure 11).

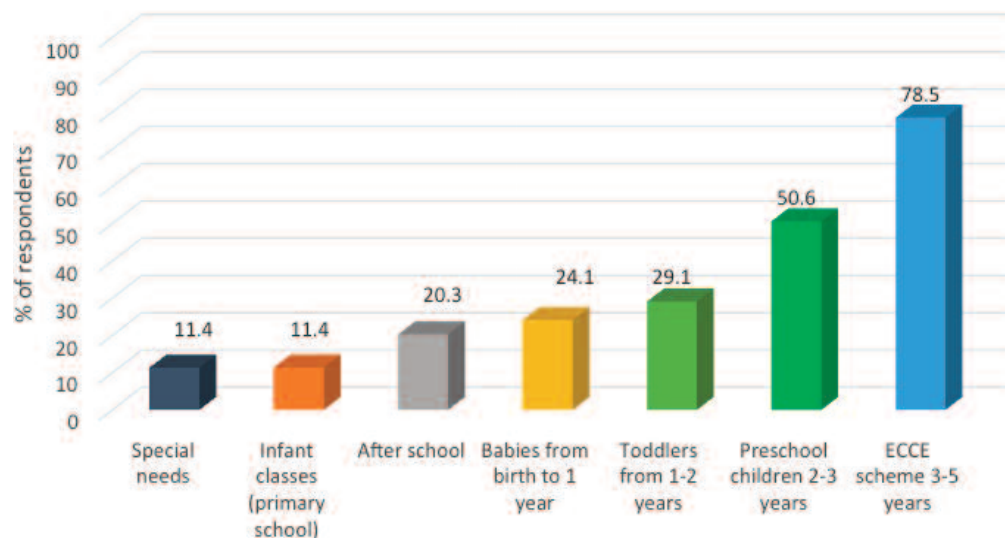


Figure 11. Type of Practicum Experience Provided for Students by Host Settings

It is obvious from figure 11, that of the sample (n=80), the majority of providers enable students to gain experience of working with children aged three to five years participating in the ECCE scheme. However, as discussed later in this section, this can limit student's breadth and depth of experience, leaving them unprepared for the diversity of children within the ECEC sector.

First meeting with students

Host setting providers were asked to indicate when they first meet the students undertaking practicum in their setting. Of the 76 providers who responded to this question, a majority 76.3% (n= 58) suggested that they meet students during a visit to the setting before they commence the practice placement, with 22.3% (n= 17) noting that they meet students when they start in the setting. A small number, 2.6% (n=2) of providers identified other arrangements for meeting students (see Figure 12).

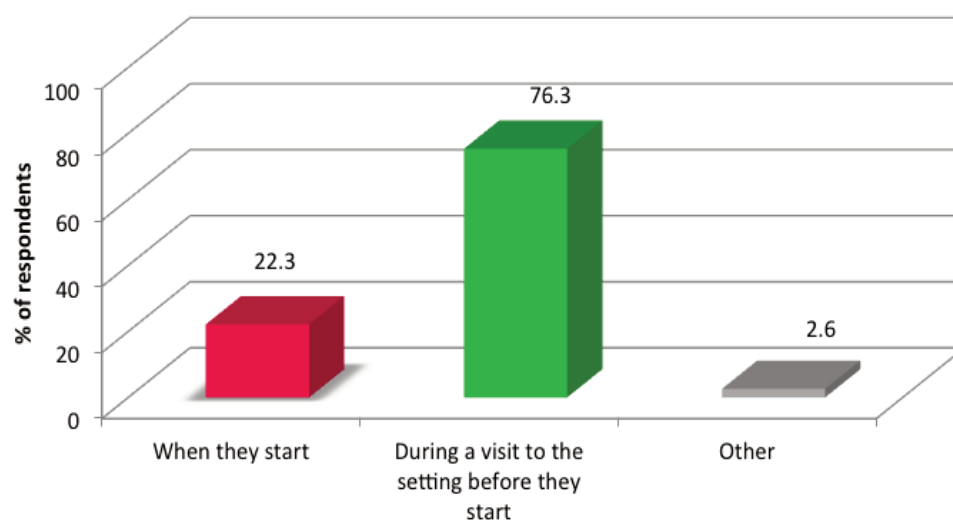


Figure 12. Overview of When Placement Providers Meet Students

Phase 2 Findings: Part 1

Practice Placement Providers

Among the participants, 51.9% indicated that students take part in induction training prior to beginning practicum. Only 3.8% of respondents noted that they do not prepare students prior to the beginning of practice placement.

Consultation between Higher Education Institutes and Placement Providers

As indicated earlier, this study sought to determine the nature of consultation and collaboration between HEIs and host placement providers prior to students commencing practicum. The majority of respondents, 78.5% (n=62) indicated that the third level institution communicates with them prior to students commencing practicum, 15.2% (n=12) noted that the institution sometimes communicates with providers and only 6.3% (n= 5) indicated that the institution does not communicate with them prior to students commencing practicum.

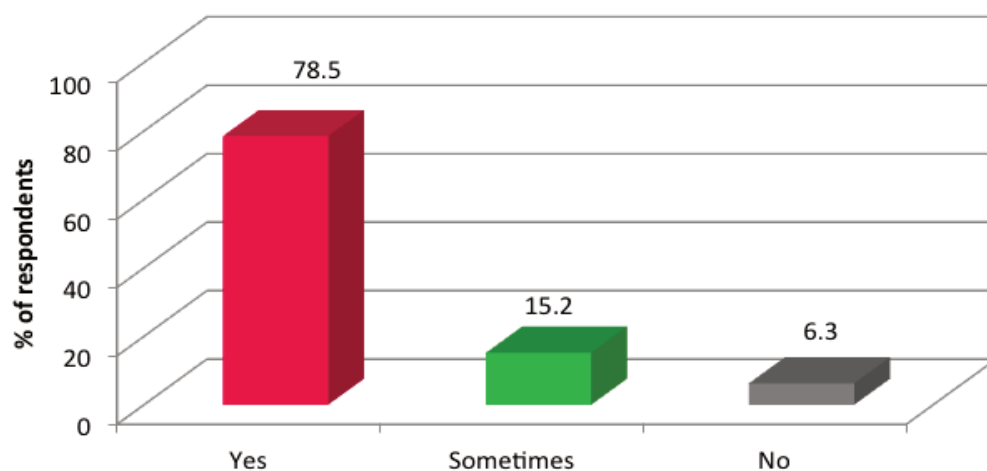


Figure 13. Consultation between Institutions and Providers Prior to Practicum

In response to a question asking about the nature of consultation between the HEIs and the host placement settings, findings indicate that in the majority of cases (78.5%), consultation takes place via email, followed by phone (45.6%) and post (17.7%). Only 8.9% of providers facilitating students on practicum meet in the institution (see Figure 14).

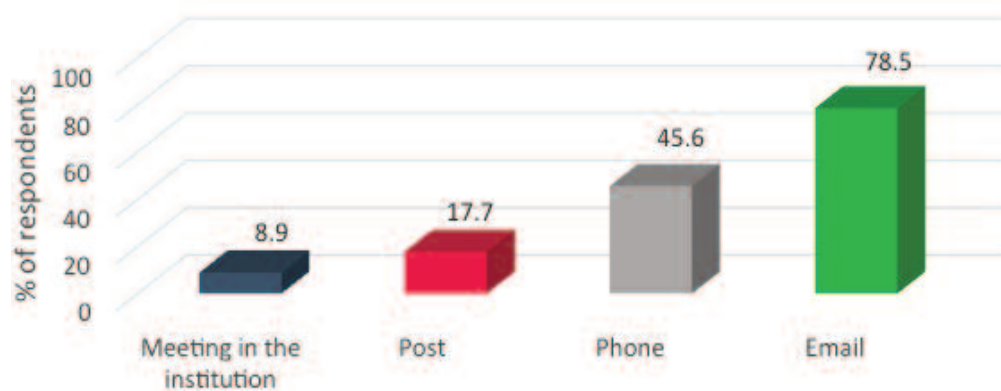


Figure 14. Nature of Consultation between Providers and institution

The benefits of consultation were emphasised by providers, with 30 respondents stating that it led to consistency in terms of expectations and requirements 'consistency for the student, a clear predictable understanding of learning expectations/outcomes', 'there is a clear outline of expectations', 'to have a clear understanding of what is required of both parties to the arrangement', 'provides clarity around placement expectations and introduces the student profile'. Furthermore, 27 respondents stressed that the mutuality of communication between HEIs and placement settings:

It allows both parties to be clear on the focus and purpose of the placement, with both objectives and goals for both sides laid clearly to avoid misunderstandings during placement

It creates a contract of agreement between college and service, develops rapport, mutual agreement of expectations

It is important that practice placement providers are aware of the progress their students are making on placement. Consulting with each other means we have clear, defined supports and goals for students, resulting in better outcomes for all

In common with the findings from the HEI survey, providers also highlighted the importance of establishing positive relationships with the institutions, which they suggest, can be realised through consultation and communication. One provider notes that consultation 'builds up a relationship which allows for honest exchange of information'. Another stated 'we build a relationship with tutors and can communicate freely if any issues arise'. Another respondent summarises the benefits of communication in the following commentary

It affords a good working relationship and gives insight into what is expected of the institution providing the placement and the expectation of what the student should gain during through placement.

Establishing and maintaining positive relationships between HEIs and host placement settings benefits all stakeholders including children. In the words of one provider, 'it maintains a healthy channel of communication open, to the benefit of both college and placement setting and of course the student, and ultimately, the children'.

Meeting between Student's Supervisor and Placement Providers

Host setting providers were asked whether they meet with student's supervisor/mentor during practicum. Of the 77 respondents to this question, only 1.3% (n=1) of providers meet the student's supervisor before practicum begins. However, an overwhelming majority; 96.1% (n=74), meet the student's supervisor/mentor during practicum. Findings suggest that only 2.6% (n=2) of providers never meet the student's supervisor at any time before or during practicum.

Phase 2 Findings: Part 1

Practice Placement Providers

With regards to the frequency of meetings between the HEIs and host setting providers, 37 providers (48.1%, n=77) indicated that they meet the student's supervisor during each supervision visit, 27 (35.4%) meet with the student's supervisor once during the placement period, and 12 (15.2%) twice during the academic year. Only 2 providers (2.5%) noted that they never meet with the student's supervisor (see Figure 15).

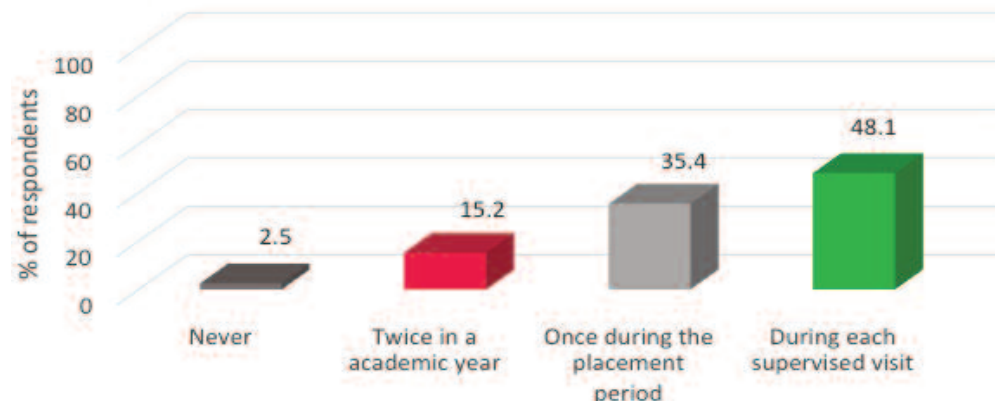


Figure 15. Frequency of Meetings between Student Supervisor and Providers

Qualitative commentary provides further insight into provider perspectives with regards to meetings between host settings and HEIs. Of the twenty eight providers that gave additional information, two indicated that they meet the student's supervisor 'once' only during the placement period. A further twelve providers meet the supervisor 'at least twice'. One host setting has an 'open door policy, available to meet whenever needed', whereas, another respondent indicated that 'the supervisor/mentor chooses the number of meetings required'. In common with the findings from the HEI survey in phase 1, two providers mentioned 'tripartite meetings'. In one instance, 'there are 2 tripartite meetings during the placement period' and, in another, 'the crèche supervisor and room leaders meet twice for tripartite meetings during placement with the student's supervisor'.

There are indication of some dissatisfaction with the nature and number of meetings between student's supervisors and host placement providers. In one case, a respondent claimed 'I never meet them [supervisors], in another, it was claimed 'some colleges do not send out their student supervisor to meet us' while one provider suggested that 'we have colleges that never came for meetings'. In this case, the provider stated 'we do not take their students anymore'. While another setting 'used to see the mentor for a placement visit...these have ceased in recent years'. This provider regretted not having an opportunity to meet college supervisors, explaining

We found these valuable and if any issues had come to the fore such as a student lacking understanding in course work, these could be discussed... [Issues] could have been resolved through placement visits

One provider was critical of student supervision, suggesting that 'there is not enough supervision of students'. Moreover, s/he stated 'we are not their supervisors and need to see the supervisors coming to visit much more regularly'.

Role of Providers in Supervising, Mentoring and Assessing Students

Findings in phase 1, suggest that eight HEIs (n=13) appoint both a member of college staff and a member of the host placement to supervise and mentor students undertaking practicum. Furthermore, one HEI respondent explained that 'students, supervisors and college tutors participate in a three-way discussion about the student's progress', whereas in another institution, 'students are visually assessed by host supervisor who completes an evaluation form and also provides verbal feedback to college supervisor on assessment visit'.

In phase 2 of the study, 71 host placement providers proffered information relating to their role in supervising, mentoring and assessing students undertaking practicum. Accordingly, 83.1% (n=59) of placement providers indicated that they play a role in supervising or mentoring students during practicum in the setting. Only 16.9% (n=12) of providers suggested that they do not supervise or mentor students undertaking practicum (see Table 7).

Table 7. Role of Providers in Supervising or Mentoring Students undertaking Practicum

	n	%
Yes	5	83.1
No	12	16.9
Total	71	100.0

Note: Data were not provided by 9 providers

Findings indicate that host placement providers are committed to mentoring students engaged in practicum, and that they take this role seriously. One provider described her approach to mentoring

I work to be a positive role model for the students in my service. I ensure professionalism as well and being at ease with students...I ask regular questions of students but I also delegate specific tasks to students during their time here. I place responsibility on them also in relation to coming back to me with a suitable activity plan or an idea as to how we can for example, build a certain support strategy in the room.

Clearly this provider has high expectations of students relating to taking responsibility for curriculum/activity planning. Overall, providers expect students to actively engage in all aspects of the setting, to 'do almost everything we do'. Students are expected for example, to have the ability to 'plan activities for children', 'help prepare the environment', 'lead different parts of the routine as their confidence and ability increases', 'run a full ECCE session from start to finish', 'assist with mealtimes', 'work with the staff team' and 'share in housekeeping – cleaning and tidy up'.

Phase 2 Findings: Part 1

Practice Placement Providers

Among the many expectations that providers have of students, is their ability to 'use their own initiative'. One provider noted that 'practitioners are incredibly busy and need a student to be independent, and if they're not sure of something, then ask'. Another stated that 'using your initiative is a vital aspect of being able to work in the early years'. Among the sample, 67.5% (n=78) of providers noted that they have a role in assessing students while undertaking practicum compared to 32.5% of those that suggest they do not assess students (see Table 8).

Table 8. Provider's role in assessing students during practice placement

	n	%
Yes	53	67.9
No	25	32.1
Total	78	100.0

Note: Data were not provided by two providers

Again, qualitative commentary provides contextual information relating to the provider's role in assessing students on practicum, and the various approaches to student supervision within placement settings. The data indicates a high level of provider commitment to the students as evidenced by the self-reported input they willingly undertake in order to support students on practicum.

In the main, host settings appoint a member of staff, i.e., room leader, to supervise students undertaking practicum, and the provider liaises with them in order to complete HEI assessment forms. 'The student is assigned a supervisor and we would discuss the student's progress on a regular basis'. In some instances, the supervisory role is shared 'between 2-3 of the management staff'. This is especially the case where settings 'facilitate a large number of students'. Table nine provides an overview of the two predominant levels of assessment: college requirements and, provider's own initiative.

Table 9. Level of Student Assessment within Host Placement Settings

College Requirements	Associated with
	Assessment Forms
Own Initiative	Observations Records from feedback meetings Consultation with staff Consultation meetings with students Feedback and encouragement

In relation to college requirements, the need to complete assessment forms was mentioned by nineteen placement providers who spoke of having ‘to complete an assessment form at the end of the placement’, ‘filling in assessment and time sheets for college tutors’, and ‘filling out review forms for college’. In terms of using their own initiative to assess students undertaking practicum, providers utilise a range of assessment techniques. Of the 51 providers that provided additional information relating to how they assess students, ten indicated that they observe students working directly with children in the setting, three providers liaise with setting staff working directly with the students on practicum, eight providers engage in meeting with students, while three meet with both students and setting staff.

Assessment Criteria

Although twenty five providers mentioned their role in completing assessment forms and templates provided by the HEI, ten providers provided additional information with regards to how they assess students on practicum. In each case, these providers specified particular criteria used by them to assess students. Table 10 provides an overview of the assessment criteria used, as well as commonalities across settings.

Clearly, relationships/interactions with children/parents and staff are considered critical when assessing students undertaking practicum. As noted by one provider ‘their interactions with the children are the most important part of this assessment as they are the basis for early years education’ (see Table 10).

Table 10. Assessment Criteria Utilised by Host Placement Providers

Provider	Work Ethic	Relationships with children/staff/parents	Participation in supervision meetings	Engagement with curriculum	Engagement with room routine	Professionalism	Interest	Ability	Enthusiasm
1	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
2	✓	✓					✓	✓	✓
3	✓	✓				✓			✓
4		✓		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
5	✓	✓		✓		✓			
6	✓	✓				✓			
7		✓							
8	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓			
10		✓		✓		✓			

Phase 2 Findings: Part 1

Practice Placement Providers

Table 10 indicates that providers place considerable emphasis upon professionalism when assessing students.

I assess a student on commitment, initiative, and relationships with children and staff, interest in the curriculum, level of enjoyment within the room and attendance and punctuality

In instances where providers meet with students during practicum, they provide 'lots of encouragement', 'talk about any challenges they have encountered and support them to resolve the issue'.

The findings point to a certain tension between the need for 'personnel from the college to do the assessing and supervision' and a belief among a small number of provider respondents (3) who felt that they should not have any involvement in supervision or assessment. Indicative of the lack of training for supervisors by some HEIs as highlighted in phase 1 findings, one provider felt that placement providers 'are not trained supervisors. We do not know the expected standard for the students'. A second respondent would not countenance provider involvement in assessment, explaining, that in her opinion, 'it is a very dangerous avenue to go down. If a student were to challenge an assessment on our part, I don't think we would have a leg to stand on'.

Benefits of Practicum for Host Placement Settings

The perceived benefits of practicum as articulated by HEIs, providers and students were presented in phase 1 findings. As indicated, each study cohort agreed that practicum helps students to bridge the theory practice divide, enabling them to 'gain knowledge in a practical way so they can relate theory to practice' (provider), and to 'gain valuable experience carrying out tasks and getting first-hand experience of theory and learning gained in college' (student). The need for students to gain first-hand experience of working with children and others within an ECEC setting was articulated by one student who summarises the application of theory to practice stating that 'the theory makes sense when witnessed first-hand'.

From a provider perspective, practicum also results in many benefits for the host placement setting, primarily in terms of student knowledge of the practice frameworks *Síolta* and *Aistear*, capacity to establish a community of practice within the setting through knowledge sharing and discussion with staff members and, in some instances, 'it is a way of finding new employees'.

It is apparent that providers appreciate students' knowledge of *Síolta* and *Aistear*

They are very knowledgeable about *Síolta* and *Aistear* and have the skills needed to put these in place in the setting; observing, reflection, assessment, all the skills I would look for as a manager of a setting

From experience, I have found students from degree level programmes very knowledgeable about what is expected from an early years educator. They are familiar with Aistear, and well able to implement it in their work with the children. This is an essential aspect of work in the early childhood sector now, and degree students bring that knowledge with them

Providers further highlight the centrality of practicum to developing students' ability to relate to, and work with young children. One provider noted that

All the theory in the world and distinctions are not enough if you cannot relate to children. To work in a childcare setting you have to be child centered, the child will always be first. It is not an easy job, it can be quite demanding both mentally and physically and you must want to work with children and be with them.

With regards to how students work with children, providers stressed the diversity of pedagogical strategies utilised by students including 'supporting children's oral language development', 'actively listening to children', 'observing children and other practitioners', 'reflective capabilities', 'role modelling and questioning', and 'they can really scaffold children's learning'. Similarly, students articulated the role of practicum in terms of gaining experience in 'managing challenging behaviour', 'work with children with varying disabilities', 'observe the parent-staff connection and ways of communicating', 'build confidence in your abilities', and 'develops a person's understanding and improves critical thinking'.

Students further articulated the role of practicum in terms of gaining experience in a number of areas such as behaviour management and working with children with Special Educational Needs. The following commentary provides insight into the many areas of work students engage in during practicum, while simultaneously, pointing to how practicum serves to consolidate their knowledge base, pedagogical practices, and ability to identify emerging new theories, knowledge and understanding(s)

You can visibly see different theories emerge, build relationships with children, learn about different curriculum styles, partnership with parents also helps you to develop as an educator yourself and learn how to critically reflect and learn what quality standards are what best practice is, and what not to do

When commenting upon the benefits of practicum, providers provide unique insight into how students inadvertently support communities of practice within ECEC settings. It was suggested that students 'can bring something new and fresh to a setting with vibrant and creative ideas', 'often students contribute fresh interesting ideas which can themselves extend the learning', 'they often bring new ideas and we all get the chance to learn from one another enriching our community of practice'.

Some students bring an eagerness to the setting, a sense of progressiveness and an openness to new knowledge...This enlivens a desire for collective learning and expansion in the setting

Phase 2 Findings: Part 1

Practice Placement Providers

Findings suggest that during their practicum, students informally prompt discussion among existing ECEC teachers, and that both students and teachers share and examine their praxis. Students 'often incite interest and reflection for ourselves in the setting', they

Share their knowledge with staff, and staff share their experience with students. Each gains an insight into their abilities, ways of doing things and they learn from each other

One provider noted that students

Know the theory of best practice, they are fresh eyes on our kids and sometimes question things we take for granted. They keep us up to speed with best practice and help us to reflect on our ways

Similar sentiments were expressed by another provider who claimed that 'a student can often provide an injection of new ideas approaches or enhancing staff theoretical understanding'. Furthermore, settings can learn from students' 'ideas, observations and previous experience...we also gain feedback both as a setting in general and in terms of our professional practice'. From another perspective, it 'great to have young people work with the older hands-on experienced worker on the floor... [students] get to share their experiences with others who may want to progress to a higher level'

Students seemed equally keen to learn from those already working in the profession; 'it provides that opportunity to learn from fellow practitioners already in the field', 'I get the chance to implement what I have learned in college in a setting where other practitioners can support me, and I can learn from them'. This co-participation which is central to communities of practice is encapsulated in the following student commentary

Across the four years of the degree programme, there is a huge emphasis on the student continuing and developing their professional development within the field of early childhood, in my opinion, practice placement is the best way of doing that

What works Well for Providers with Regards to Practicum?

To this point, the many benefits of practicum in terms of student theoretical knowledge, ability to implement the practice Frameworks: *Siolta* and *Aistear*, and co-participation with setting staff leading to communities of practice have been highlighted. With regards to what works well for providers, 'preparing students for placement before they start' was highlighted as being of 'enormous benefit'. Congruent with the HEI in phase 1, who stressed that 'preparation classes are mandatory. Any placement hours missed for any reason have to be made up', a provider believed that

Preparation for placement is most important... I would suggest that a student should not be allowed on placement unless they attend orientation in college before they set foot in placement. The role of mentor should not have to include such basic reminders (as abstaining from use of social media while in practice)

This respondent concluded by saying however, that ‘overall, most students take their professional responsibilities seriously and are a joy to support’

It is noteworthy that students and providers alike expressed the view that ‘longer blocks of practicum’ (e.g., an entire semester) are more beneficial than shorter practicum experiences. From a provider perspective, longer practicum is more beneficial for children and staff ‘we find that it takes very long for the children, staff and students to bond throughout the year’. In addition, it was felt that ‘students need a long period of time to become familiar with the routines and to have confidence in their work with the children’. Likewise, in the case of students, the ‘block placement experience provides students with an excellent opportunity to learn. They get to know the children, parents and staff and can get a real feel for working full time in childcare’ (student). Moreover, block placement is less complex from an organisational perspective for providers; ‘it’s easier all round when students come for 10-12 weeks, it’s less disruption for the setting, and we don’t have to organise different weeks for different students’ (provider).

Challenges associated with Practicum for Providers

Statements such as ‘there have not been any challenges’, ‘we rarely encounter any challenges with degree level students’, ‘there are generally no negative aspects to having a degree level student’ and ‘the benefits far outweigh the challenges’ suggest that overall, providers’ experiences of facilitating students are generally positive. That said, findings also point to a number of challenges for providers primarily relating to time commitment and administration (20 respondents); student disposition and suitability to work in the ECEC sector (12 respondents), types of experience gained (6 respondents), and the need for more visits by college supervisors/mentors (20 respondents) as well as training for host settings mentors/supervisors (5 respondents).

As indicated twenty respondents spoke of the ‘time commitment’ involved with practicum. In some instances the time commitment related to ‘organisation, planning and timetabling involved’ in others, it was about the Level of supervision and paperwork attached’. One provider noted

Finding time to give as much support and supervision as I would like can be a challenge at times. Under performing students can take up a lot of time and are hard for team members to deal with

This latter commentary is closely linked to the issue of student disposition, and suitability to work in the ECEC sector. In this respect, twelve provider respondents spoke of student disposition as being of concern to them: ‘uninterested students with bad attitudes, poor attendance and time keeping can be time consuming to deal with’. Student attitude towards ‘the level of menial tasks required of them, e.g. cleaning etc.’ was of concern to some providers, who asserted that they expect students to undertake ‘all tasks that we would ask of paid employees, except dealing with parents and writing assessments on children’. One provider justified asking students to undertake ‘cleaning’, stating that ‘students gain experience in all aspects of the work within the setting, and are treated as equals’.

Phase 2 Findings: Part 1

Practice Placement Providers

Consequently therefore, 'students are not used as domestic help and are challenged to take on all the roles of the worker, with support, and commensurate with their abilities and confidence'

It was felt that if students 'come with the right attitude there is a positive atmosphere, what more could you want? However, provider frustration with student attitude is palpable in the following commentary which alludes to lack of motivation, unprofessional dress, and a superior attitude

Students are sometimes not motivated. They don't think of it as professional, and turn up in a tracksuit. Some don't show a lot of interest in developing. Some think they are superior because they are doing Level 8... they are not qualified or experienced to deal with parents. They need to be supervised.

While this commentary serves as a reminder that final year undergraduate students are still students, and have a lot to learn about working in the sector, this provider references wider sectoral challenges relating to how the sector is perceived, noting that 'they are only doing childcare because it's all they could get with low points in the CAO⁵'

Also indicative of broader sectoral issues, and offering further insight into provider frustration, is the fact, that in some case, graduates leave the ECEC sector to pursue a teaching career

One source of frustration for staff is the fact that the vast majority of students gain valuable EY experience year after year in our setting – then go on to finish their degrees and continue into further training for primary teaching.

The source of frustration for this provider is that

We feel as if our service, input and support all act as a stepping stone on their journey. We do understand that conditions and prospects are more attractive in the state sector, but this does not alleviate our frustration...

There was frustration also with regards to one particular student who appeared to dislike working with children while on practicum, apparently exited the sector, but returned as a POBAL inspector to the host placement provider who had facilitated her practicum. 'A girl I had on placement 3 years ago felt that playing on the floor was not for her. This year she arrived as a Pobal inspector to inspect my compliance!'

A small number of providers (6) were critical of the limited nature of student's experiences while engaging in practicum. The need for students to 'change at least a couple of nappies' and to get experience of working with children across 'all the Aistear age groups' was highlighted. One provider felt that 'at present placement seems to target ECCE children. It would be better if students did not have to worry about what age child they work with, and become accustomed to working between age groups which would be more realistic'. Another provider noted that 'Early Years students should be allowed flexibility in their placements. Confining the student to one age group is detrimental to their learning and

⁵ The Central Applications Office (CAO) is the organisation responsible for overseeing undergraduate applications in the Republic of Ireland.

development, and it develops silo thinking which does not reflect the needs of the workforce'. This respondent further believed that students need a breadth and depth of experience to enable them to work 'in a complex and changing work environment' students should therefore 'be equipped to work in an integrated way across disciplines, for example, early years and family support'. The benefits of this approach to gaining broad experience across disciplines was described in terms of

Ensuring that the students see the whole child not just the child in the early years setting. This promotes deeper theoretical and practical development for the student and give them additional skills to take into the work place

The timing of practicum, and the number of students seeking experience within a setting can also be problematic for providers. For example, one provider explained that because 'the closest 3rd level institution to my service send 2nd/3rd years students in term two, this creates a student crowding of services and insufficient supply of suitable early years services to meet the student need'. This provider had obviously given consideration to how this issue could be resolved, and therefore suggested a 'staggering of placement term two'.

Year two is very late for the first placement. These students have had a lot of theory before being introduced to the service. I suggest term one placement in year two. Term one placement would enable services to have access to students during the difficult settling transition period in preschool and the busy September enrolment & administration period this would provide great support to services

As mentioned earlier, the need for more visits from college supervisors/mentors and the need for training supervisors/mentors was also highlighted as a challenge for providers. It was stated that 'colleges need to liaise more with services and be more involved through the placement period. There should be 'more communication between mentor/supervisor and the setting', maybe the college needs to check in more'.

The importance of 'having suitably qualified supervisors to supervise students on placement to make sure the student is getting the most from their work experience' was also noted. Some providers articulated the view that 'we are not trained or qualified to train or mentor the students. We don't know what standards are expected during placement. We definitely are not qualified to grade students'. Consequently, five providers called for 'some training in mentoring and supervision that would be broadly recognised'. One provider who had 'engaged in the supervisor preparation for placement student's course' emphasised the benefits of such training, noting that before:

Completing the course, my role was unclear and it basically involved showing students around the classroom, and training him/her to work with one or two specific students. It is now clearer what role I have to play. Goals and objectives. Also to discuss how placement and work load are going. This format will change however since I recently completed [the course] which was so informative.

Phase 2 Findings: Part 1

Practice Placement Providers

Of the 80 providers completing the survey, 95% (n=76) suggested that they will continue providing practice placement for third level students compared to 3.75% (n=3) of providers who were not sure. Notwithstanding their positivity, providers proposed a number of changes which they felt would enhance the practicum experience for them, the students, and ultimately children's experiences in settings. Among the changes that providers would like to see are the following:

- I would like to see colleges having a data of quality settings and for them to take a lead in practice placement base
- Contact from the college supervisor before placement so that s/he can outline exact goals and expectations for of learning for the students
- A guide from the colleges on the aims and objectives expected from the provider in undertaking students in their childcare settings and also more regular supervised visits from the college
- Training in mentoring and supervision
- Preparation of students before they set foot in a setting
- More block placements rather than one or two days a week
- Reduce the amount of paperwork required for both providers and students
- Require students to gain experience across age-groups and disciplines



Phase 2 Findings: Part 2

Final Year Early Childhood Education and Care Students





Phase 2 Findings: Part 2

Final Year Early Childhood Education and Care Students

Introduction

In this section, the findings from the student questionnaire survey are presented. In keeping with sections one and two, where possible, both quantitative and qualitative findings are integrated. Quantitative findings relate to the numbers of students studying at Level 7 and Level 8, age and gender of students, previous qualification levels, length of practicum experience, and nature of assessment, structure and timing of practicum and so on. As with the HEI and host placement provider surveys, the qualitative findings relate to preparation for practicum, information considered by students as essential prior to undertaking practicum, assessment, benefits of practicum, what works well, and the challenges associated with practicum for students.

Findings

Level of Student's Training

Among the final year Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) student sample (n=101), 66.3% indicated that they were currently undertaking a 4 Year Level 8 Degree in the third level institution, 16.8% were completing a 3 Year Level 7 Degree. An equal number of respondents: 16.8% were undertaking a 3 Year Level 8 Degree (see Figure 16).

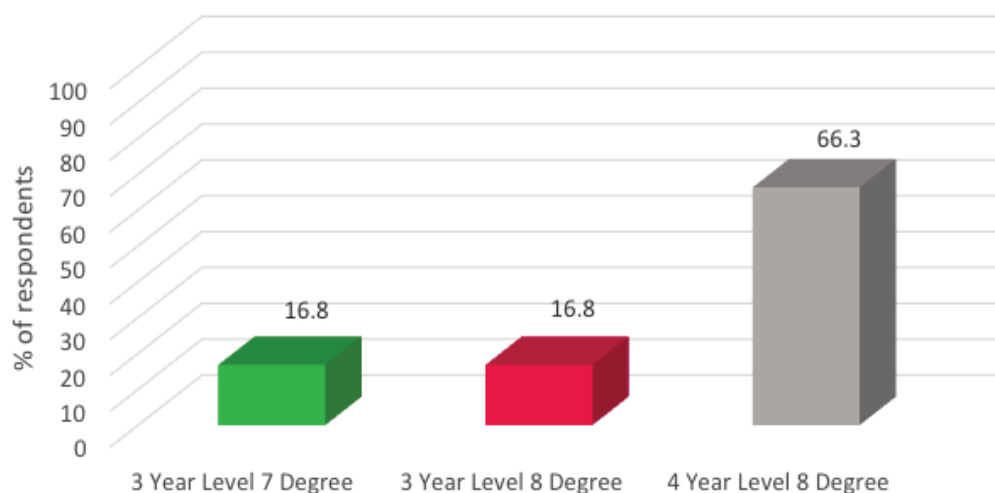


Figure 16. Level of Student's Training

Typifying the predominantly female composition of the ECEC workforce internationally, the sample (n=101) comprised 98 female and 3 male respondents.

Previous Qualification in the Area of Early Childhood Education and Care

In response to a question about previous ECEC qualifications, 61.4% of students indicated that they did not have a previous qualification. Of the remaining respondents (n= 36), 21.8% (n=22) noted that they held a QQI Level 6 ECEC qualification prior to undertaking their

third level Degree training, while 13.9% (n=14) held a QQI Level 5 ECEC qualification. Only 3% (n=3) indicated 'other' in response to this question (see Table 11).

Table 11. Students' Previous Qualification

	n	%
No	62	61.4
QQI Level 5	14	13.9
QQI Level 6	22	21.8
Other	3	3.0
Total	101	100.0

Findings indicate that the majority of degree level students commenced their third level studies upon completing their secondary school education. Accordingly, among the respondents (n=101), 83.2% started their degree training under the age of 23 years, compared to 16.8% of respondents who started their training over the age of 23.

When do Students Engage in Practicum?

Congruent with HEI findings relating to when students engage in practicum, figure 17 illustrates that of the sample (n=101), students spend a full semester in practice placement in Year 2 (69.3%) and Year 3 (73%). By contrast 49.5% of students in Year 1 do not have any practice placement, while in year 4, 45.5% of respondents (n=101) do not engage in practicum. Only 11.9% of students in Year 1 and 6.9% of Year 4 students complete extended block placement (more than 6 weeks).

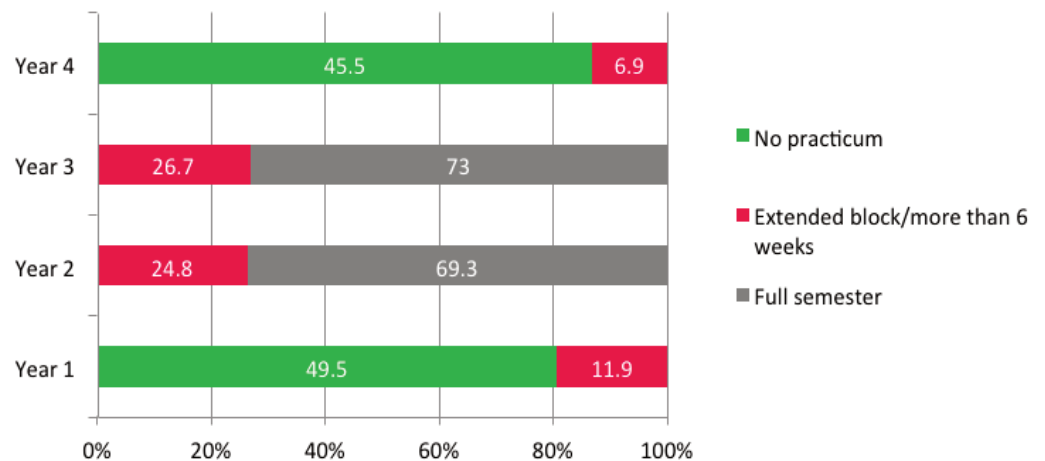


Figure 17. Overview of when Students Engage in Practicum

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Final Year Early Childhood Education and Care Students

In response to a question which asked 'In terms of the time that you should spend on practice placement, do you feel that this is a suitable amount of time to spend on practicum? A majority 78% (n=78) of students indicated that the right amount of time is spent on practice placement, '12 weeks is perfect because you are able to really get to know all the children even the children who tend to be shy', with 13% (n=13) noting that more time is needed, 'it is important to gain more experience in order to link theory to practice', and a relatively small percentage (9%, n=9) of students suggested that less time should be spend on practice placement.

Does the Structure and Timing of Practicum Promote Student Learning?

When asked whether the structure and timing of practicum promotes student's learning, most (59.4%, n= 60) respondents noted that the structure and timing of their practice placement promotes their learning, followed by 31.7% (n=32) who indicated that the structure and timing somewhat promoted their learning. A small percentage (8.9%, n=9) of students indicated that the structure and timing of their placement does not promote their learning (see Figure 18).

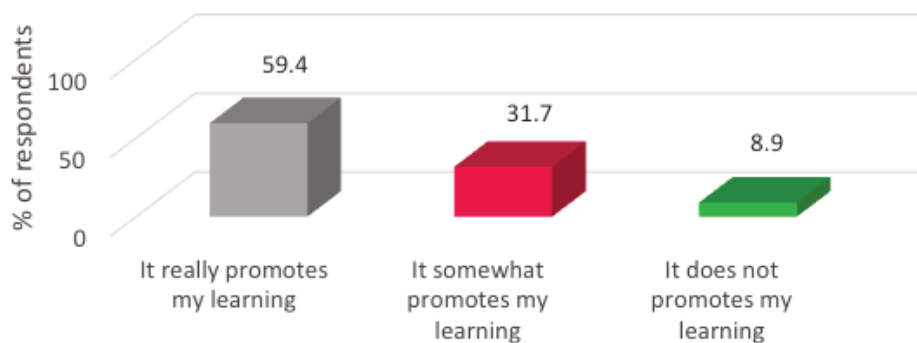


Figure 18. Perceptions on How the Structure and Timing of Practicum Promotes Learning

One student proposed an alternative to the current structure and timing being used in his/her institution, noting that 'being out on two block placements back to back is too much'. It was therefore suggested that 'it would be better if we were out on one semester, back in college the next semester, and out then again'. Similarly, another student suggested to 'break up the semester to five week placement, two weeks college, then more time on placement'. Yet another proposed that 'if the 11 weeks were split over two semesters we may get a better depth of knowledge from our time spent on placement'. The difficulty for students, which is discussed in greater detail later in this section, is that 'it is hard to come back to lectures after such a long time out of college'.

Requirement to Complete Specific Practicum

Among the respondents (n=99) that answered a question relating to a requirement to complete specific placements, 61.6% of students indicated that there is no specific requirement in place for them to complete specific placement experience, 30.3% (n=30)

noted that there is a requirement in place, followed by 8.1% (n=8) of students that 'don't know' about any specific requirements (see Table 12).

Table 12. Requirement to Complete Specific Practicum

	n	%
Yes	30	30.3
No	61	61.6
Don't know	8	8.1
Total	99	100.0

Note: Data were missing from two respondents.

Mirroring closely the HEI data relating to mandatory placement experience, Figure 19 which provides an overview of specific practicum requirements, shows that 23.7% of student respondents indicated that they are required to undertake practicum working with children with Special Educational Needs, followed by working with young children 2 ½ to 6 years (15.8%) and 10.5% of students are required to work in primary school setting with junior and senior infants. An equal number of students (10.5%) are also required to work with babies from birth to 18 months. Almost 8% of students are required to work in community settings and full day care centres (7.9%). Only 2.6% of students are required to work in Early Start programmes.

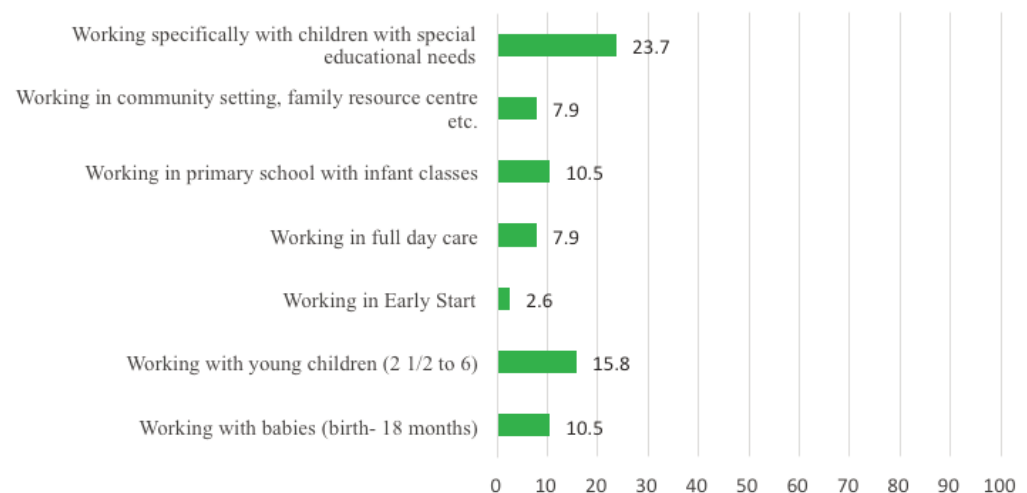


Figure 19. Overview of Specific Practicum Requirements.

Further reflecting the findings in the HEI phase 1 study, student respondents provided insight into the breadth of practicum undertaken including 'paediatric unit in hospital, primary school up to first class', Early Intervention Centre', 'Childcare Committee', 'Barnardos, Women's Aid', 'Crèche and Pre-school', 'Family Resource Centre' and 'parent and toddler groups' for example.

Phase 2 Findings: Part 2

Final Year Early Childhood Education and Care Students

Preparation for Practicum

When asked how students are prepared for practicum, findings correlate with Phase 1, HEI data. Therefore, 47.5% of students noted that preparation for practicum is integrated through a range of different modules; followed by 44.6% of students who are prepared through specific modules with the purpose of preparation for practicum. A significant percentage (29.7%) are prepared through dedicated general hours for preparation tutorials/classes (see Figure 20).

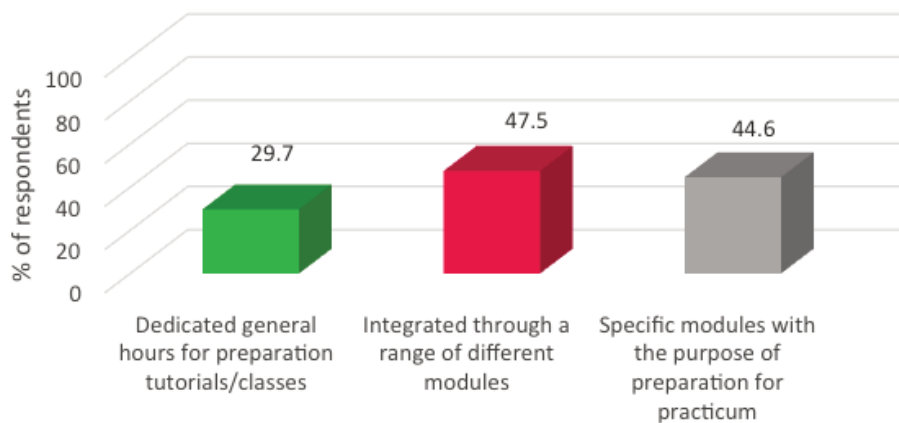


Figure 20. Preparation for Practicum

In terms of preparing for practicum, students were asked what information they feel is key for students to have covered before undertaking professional practice placement? A recurring theme in this regard is the student's need to be well informed about expectations and assessments while undertaking practicum. Equally respondents stressed the need for information relating to personal professionalism.

Of the 80 students that responded to this question, the need for in-depth knowledge of Special Educational Needs was highlighted by 26.25% (21) of respondents. One respondent noted that 'when working with children, you need to be aware of all the additional needs, conditions, disorders etc., that children can have as you need to know how to manage and cope if you're not sure'. Figure 21 provides an overview of the range of information students consider essential prior to undertaking practicum.

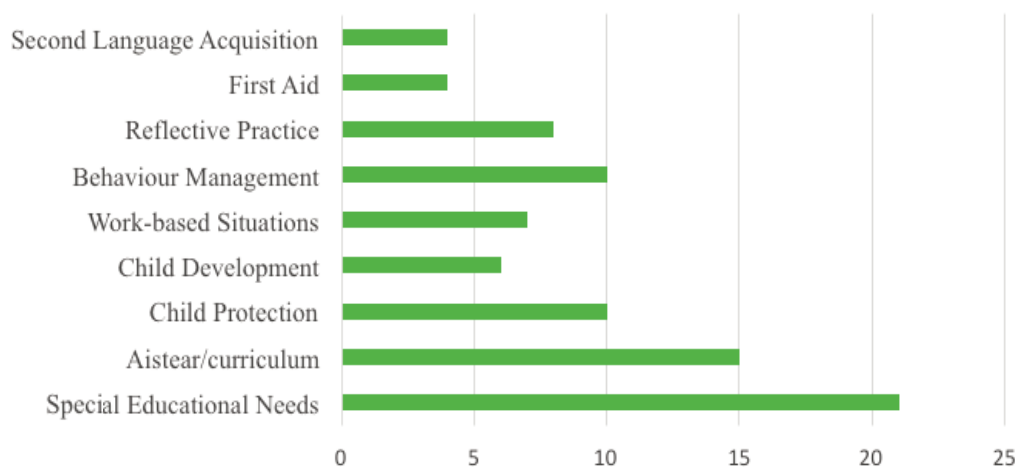


Figure 21. Essential Information Prior to Practicum

In addition to knowledge of Special Educational Needs, fifteen students, 18.75% (n=80) stressed the importance of having 'a working knowledge of Aistear' as well as information on 'emergent and inquiry based curriculum'. Ten students, 12.5% felt that it was necessary to have information with regards to 'promoting positive behaviour', how to deal with challenging behaviour and conflict resolution'. An equal number of respondents (12.5%) felt that it was important that students were knowledgeable about child protection. 'We should know about Children First and how we as professionals are bound by this document'.

10% (8 students) indicated the need for reflective practice: 'it is vital to have learned how to reflect effectively before placement', not just in terms of 'what works for children, but also critical reflection on professional practice'.

A relatively small number of respondents (8.75%) suggested that they should 'have relevant information on how to deal with certain situations that may arise [in settings] and be prepared'. These respondents expressed concern about relational difficulties within the placement setting, for example, 'if a student is not happy within the placement and feel they are not being treated appropriately, they should know how to go about resolving the situation in order to develop their learning'. This issue is discussed further later in this section in relation to the challenges associated with practicum for students.

Type of Assessment

Again, mirroring phase 1, HEI findings, the majority of students at 66.3% (n=101) indicated that they are visited and assessed in their practice placement by college staff and, by coursework submitted to college. 34.7% of students are visited and assessed on site by college staff in collaboration with the host placement with 28.7% of students visited and assessed on site by college staff. Of the sample, 13.9% are assessed by the staff in host placement and through coursework submitted to the college. Only 2% of students indicated that they are assessed by staff in host placement (*see Figure 22*).

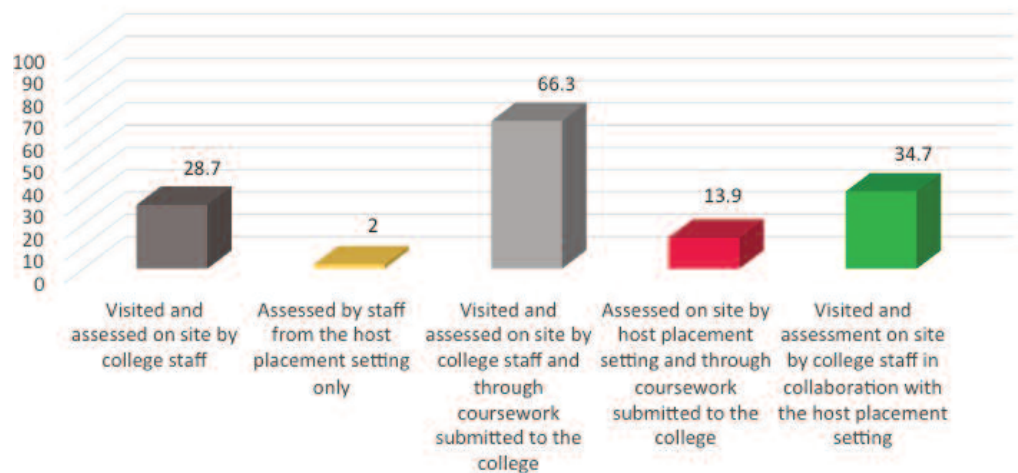


Figure 22. Type of Student Assessment

Although phase 1 findings pointed to variation in written work required of students from institution to institution, they also highlighted a strong emphasis on learning portfolios and reflective journals. Likewise, of the 87 students that responded to question 18 which asked:

Phase 2 Findings: Part 2

Final Year Early Childhood Education and Care Students

Do you have to complete any written work while on practice placement? 60% (i.e., 53 students) stated that they are required to complete a reflective exercise, such as a 'reflective paper', 'reflective account', 'personal reflection', 'reflective diary', 'reflective log', 'daily reflections', or a 'reflective journal'

Other examples of written requirements that were described by students point to a focus upon the practice Frameworks *Síolta* and *Aistear*:

We have to do a floor book which shows all the activities and experiences and activities you have done throughout placement usually with pictures, links to theory, and input (drawings) from children

Written work took the form of activity plans with the inclusion of *Aistear* and *Síolta*. Daily reflections. Placement project in year 3 whereby on the setting's needs a project was developed over the course of six weeks and the process was continuously written up and developed, and accompanied by photographs

Six activities based on learning goals of *Aistear* which have to be documented in written form, evaluation of two *Síolta* Standards in the setting, a behavioural management project/transition project which are documented in written form and draw from literature

Table 13 provides an overview of student responses (n=98) with regards to whether they are observed working directly with children while engaging in practicum.

Table 13. Observation of Students during Practicum

	n	%
Yes	55	56.1
Sometimes	22	22.4
No	21	21.4
Total	98	100.0

Note: Data were not provided by three respondents

Among the sample (n=98), 56.1% (n=55) indicated that they are observed by college staff while working with young children, 22.4% noted that they are sometimes observed and 21.4% indicated that they are not observed by college staff while working with children during practicum placement.

Respondents expressed a desire to be observed working directly with children by their college supervisor. One student stated 'I would have liked to be observed with the children, as I feel it is one of my strongest skills', while another stated that 'student's interactions with children should be observed and should go towards assessment'.

Benefits of Practicum

Students generally stated that practicum was 'very valuable', 'a great experience', aids us to build our confidence and see ourselves as professionals after graduating from the course at degree level'. In addition, students clearly associated practicum with 'preparing them for the workforce' by giving them 'a real feel for the area' as well as 'the right experience for your future career'. In terms of preparing students for the workforce, this can also mean, helping students 'to identify if you can see yourself in that career'. Indeed as discussed later in this section, students perceive practicum as an opportunity to test whether ECEC is the right sector for them.

Of the 95 student that provided additional information about practicum, 59 (62.10%) noted that practicum enables students to put theory into practice. In fact, across all three survey questionnaires (HEI, host placement providers, final year students) there is irrefutable evidence of how practicum, enables students to bridge the theory practice divide, by providing opportunities for them to work directly with children, parents, and other educators in a variety of Early Childhood Education and Care settings.

51.75% of respondents (n=95) suggested that practicum helps to prepare them for the future, by providing 'insight into how everything runs, and contacts for the future'. Others noted that 'some managers are willing to provide references', that practicum 'gives you the feel for what it is really like in the line of work that you are studying to be qualified in', it 'provides you with the knowledge, skills and strategies required to work in the field' while another stated that practicum enables students 'to gain an idea and knowledge of the working world and how knowledge becomes practice'. Yet another respondent described the multiple benefits of practicum ranging from putting theory into practice to critical reflection. Consequently, practicum helps students to

Put all the knowledge and theory into practice that you have learned, and you can visibly see different theories emerge, build relationships with children, learn about different curriculum styles, partnership with parents and also helps you to develop as an educator yourself and learn how to critically reflect and learn what quality standards are and what is best practice and what not to do

As noted by one student, practicum 'helps you get a feel for how to do things in the real world, rather than just the idea on paper', with another stating that 'you learn different skills and strategies that you wouldn't have learned by sitting in a lecture every day'.

Although, practicum helps to prepare students for their future work in the ECEC field, as mentioned earlier, it also serves a purpose in helping students to 'gain an idea if Childcare is the right career for you or should you choose a different path', decide what route you would like to go in the future', 'an idea of what you do and don't want to do as a future career', 'it helps to identify if you can see yourself in that career'.

Findings indicate that while some students may remain in the ECEC field, they opt to work in a different area. As articulated by one student 'I now know that I want to work in early intervention. Before placement I thought I preferred education over intervention'. Others

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Final Year Early Childhood Education and Care Students

decide that ECEC is not for them. For example, one respondent 'decided I would like to go on and do primary school teaching'.

Students also noted that 'after placement, there is more of an understanding of what we need to learn, gain skills and improve on', 'it promotes skills needed within the profession and allows you to identify certain areas that need to be developed in order to enhance your learning'. Furthermore, practicum enables students to differentiate 'good practice and bad practice'. 'It gives you an idea of what you feel are good practice and bad practice'. As a result, practicum helped one student 'realise the type of practitioner **I D'ONT**⁶ want to be', and another noted that 'in my placement I learned not only the way I want to behave as a practitioner but the way I don't want to behave'.

What Works Well for Students with Regards to Practicum?

In response to the question what works well in terms of professional practice placement in your institution, respondents (n=77) identified three key aspects:

1. **Preparation for practicum** (23.37% of respondents)
2. **Duration of practicum** (37.6% of respondents)
3. **Support from college supervisor** (19.48% of respondents)

As indicated, 18 respondents (n=77) mentioned that 'the preparation before we go out on placement' works well.

We are prepared well and are ready to go on placement when it comes to the time of placement through the many different theory and practical modules offered

Compulsory workshops were organised two weeks previous to going out on placement. In these workshops the lecturers went through different areas, recap of important information to know going out on placement

The manner in which practicum is organised for students was discussed earlier in this report. In this regard, a mix of approaches including co-selection by college and students are utilised. In addition to their satisfaction with preparation for practicum, the findings further indicate that students (6 respondents) liked 'having a say in where we go' or 'choosing the placement'. Conversely, one respondent was happy for the 'college to choose the placement', with another indicating that 'not having to choose the placement' worked well. The variety of placements was also highlighted by three respondents.

In relation to the length of time spent on practicum, 29 respondents (n=77) referred to the benefits of block placement which was associated with:

Allowing 'the staff and children to get to know us, and vice versa'

⁶ Emphasis by respondent

Getting 'a feel for the roles and responsibilities needed for the workplace'

'Gives you a chance to settle in to your setting and become confident in your abilities'

Critically, it was felt that:

Semester long block placement is helpful when conducting observations as we can track children's development over the weeks, and it's easier to gain an idea of the children's interests in order to facilitate good quality and interesting learning experiences

Being appointed a college supervisor, and having the 'support of a college supervisor', was highlighted as beneficial by 15 respondents. 'The support from the college supervisors works well, and pushes us to get the most out of placement'. In the words of one student 'we are assigned a supervisor in the college who I found very supportive and I could contact them during placement if problems arose so these could be addressed with staff immediately in placement'.

Commenting upon the benefits of practicum generally, and clearly pointing to the importance of practicum, one student noted

I feel practice placement should be half the course and the other half in college. At the end of the day, you will be out in practice all the time when you graduate.

Challenges Associated with Practicum for Students

Even though findings relating to block placement were predominantly positive, 'getting back to college after being on placement for so long' can be difficult for some students. One student explained that 'when out on placement, I feel very disconnected from college'. The following student commentary further illustrates the difficulty voiced previously by a host placement provider with regards to back-to-back placement

Placement in second year was after Christmas and placement in third year was at the beginning of semester. Therefore a full year was spent out of college. It is difficult to get back into the routine of assignments etc. after being out of college for the year

However, the most significant challenges identified by students related to the quality of the placement setting (18 students) and interpersonal relationships within the placement setting sixteen students (16 students, n=71). Students spoke of 'staff on my placement not allowing me to do as much, and therefore not allowing me to gain as much experience as I could have', 'negative responses to students in the placement makes things difficult'.

Although, previous findings suggest that students can and do, help to establish communities of practice within host placement settings, there are times when students feel disregarded by setting staff. One respondent described

Phase 2 Findings: Part 2

Final Year Early Childhood Education and Care Students

The frustration at being a student and in the case that the children could have had alternative learning experiences this was often not favoured by certain members of staff. As a student your opinion can often be disregarded on placement

Another spoke of finding it difficult to engage in 'reflection...as some practitioners/teachers out there are not up to date, this also makes it challenging to implement Aistear with staff who don't know what you're trying to do'. In some instances, students voiced concerns about 'fitting in. Feeling like a cleaner...feeling that you don't belong there and in the way', and 'students are sometimes taken advantage of, sometimes acting as relief work without pay'. These challenges are interlinked with lack of student understanding about what is required of them in placement, as well as the quality of placement settings which was identified as a considerable challenge by the HEI respondents in phase 1. One student for example, noted that 'the quality of the placement setting and the support you may or may not receive from the staff/supervisor in the setting' as being especially problematic.

However, as alluded to earlier in this section, students also identified college supervision and support as problematic and, stressed the need for 'ongoing support from staff if you have problems'. Building upon the particular issues related to the challenge of working with setting staff, it was also felt that 'tutors should visit more, once is not enough', there 'needs to be more access to support from supervisors, and [emotional] safety for students'.

It is important to note, that student concerns were not solely directed towards setting staff. Rather students were also concerned about the need for college supervisors to adequately monitor student professionalism while undertaking practicum, as well as underperforming students. 'I feel that spot checks could be organised between the college and staff...spot checks would keep students on their feet and actually working'. Others called for 'supervising teachers from the college should look more into what students are doing on placement and possibly visit a couple of times as well as having students send completed work throughout the placement period'.

In common with host placement providers, students mentioned the challenge of achieving a work-life balance. The issue of not being paid while undertaking practicum was also emphasised

Students should receive some sort of income during placement. We work for 30 hours a week, doing the exact same work as some staff for absolutely nothing.

Another respondent explained that it is 'very difficult to balance working unpaid for approx. 30 hours per week, written work associated with placement, and working part-time in weekends to support it all, as well as having leisure time and family life'

Notwithstanding the challenges identified by students, as with the providers, the findings indicate that the benefits outweigh any difficulties. In the words of one student 'practice placement is the most enjoyable part of the course'.

Introduction

This study, which was funded by the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education © is the first in Ireland, to examine practices and perspectives related to the professional practice component (i.e., practicum) of full-time Level 7 and Level 8 undergraduate ECEC degree programmes. It explores practicum from the perspective of HEIs, final year undergraduate ECEC students and, host placement providers facilitating placement for these students.

The study was undertaken against the backdrop of considerable changes to the ECEC policy and practice landscape in Ireland throughout the past two decades. Greater State involvement, regulation, universal and targeted initiatives in the provision of ECEC, as well as increased investment has resulted in greater professional expectations and accountability of those working with young children (Moloney & Pettersen, 2017). Although ECEC educators have only been required to hold a mandatory training requirement at QQI Level 5, since January, 2017, degree level training has been available in Ireland, since 1995. The number of HEIs offering ECEC degrees has increased exponentially since 1995, and currently, seventeen institutions offer twenty nine full-time undergraduate degree programmes, with an average of 825 students graduating annually, from the thirteen HEIs participating in this study.

It is thought that degree programmes enable students to master particular theory, and knowledge, and to acquire a set of skills that are the basis for quality practice (Ryan & Grieshaber, 2005). More specifically, from the perspective of QQI (2014) the purpose of a Level 8 degree is to ensure that:

The knowledge, skill and competence acquired are proper to independent professional practice, as well as relevant to personal development, participation in society, employment and study including access to additional formal education and training (p.2)

Clearly however, as this study indicates, practicum must be a key aspect of ECEC degree programmes if students are to develop the knowledge[s], skills and competencies required in practice. Simply knowing that an educator has a degree, provides little, if any, information about the course content, or the practicum experiences that help students to apply learning to practice (Whitebook et al., 2009). Therefore while degree programmes strongly influence the way that future educators impact the nature and quality of children's interactions and experiences within settings (Ackerman, 2005); this study suggests that classroom-based learning alone, does not equip students with the knowledge, skills and competencies required to work in the field, nor does it instil, develop or enhance their sense of self-efficacy.

Centrality of Practicum

The EYEPU working group (2017) note that the 'professional dimension of practice in the ECEC sector must be integral to the professional formation' of degree level graduates (p.3). Findings in this study, indicate that practicum is integral to the undergraduate ECEC

Discussion and Conclusion

programmes offered by the thirteen participating institutions, and that careful consideration is given to selecting host placement settings, preparing, supervising and assessing students engaging in practicum. It is heartening to note that host placement settings are primarily selected because they have been identified as high quality by individual HEIs, or by other bodies and, that they are registered with TUSLA. Equally reassuring is the commitment of host placement settings to facilitating and supporting students undertaking practicum.

Duration of Practicum

Across the thirteen participating HEIs, students engage in lengthy supervised practicum experiences ranging from 540 hours to 1,000 hours over the duration of the degree programme. Although the study did not yield information pertaining to the optimal time that students should spend in the field, students and host placement providers alike expressed a preference for 'longer blocks of practicum' (e.g., 6 weeks +, or an entire semester). It was thought that placements were critical to enabling students to build relationships with children, families and setting staff, getting to know and build upon children's interests, and putting theory into practice while also getting a feel for working in an ECEC setting. In addition, providers felt that longer practicum is less complex from an organisational perspective; 'it's easier all round when students come for 10-12 weeks, it's less disruption for the setting, and we don't have to organise different weeks for different students'.

The EYEPU working group (2017) recommend that 'there should be structured supervised assessed professional practice placement for a minimum of 25% of the overall duration' of undergraduate degree programmes. Although the model differs from institution to institution, and there is room for improvement, each of the thirteen HEIs currently provides supervised structured assessed professional practice for their students. With the exception of one HEI where practicum accounts for 22.91% of the four year Level 8 degree programme, students currently spend between 25% and 31.94% while undertaking a 3 year Level 7, between 26.38% and 41.66% while undertaking a 3 year Level 8 degree, and up to 34.71% on practicum during a four year Level 8 degree. It is noteworthy that 78% of students indicated that the right amount of time is spent on practice placement currently, with 13% noting that more time is needed. Signifying the centrality of practicum, one student felt that 'practice placement should be half the course and the other half in college'. These findings suggest that a 25% requirement may not be sufficient for students to hone and perfect the attitudes, values, skills and competencies required to work with young children.

Timing and Structure of Practicum

The timing and structure of practicum requires consideration in some cases. Zeichner & Bier (2013) discuss 'the lack of connection between course work and clinical experiences' (p. 155), leading to disconnect between the theory learned in college/university courses and actual practice in a classroom. Findings in this study indicate a certain disconnect between students and college during extended periods of placement. This is particularly the case when practicum is organised back to back, resulting in students being away from college for

a full academic year. As a result, students find it 'difficult to get back into the routine of assignments etc.' Exemplars of good practice exist in some HEIs, such as, having the mentor/supervisor 'call in one day a week during placement, [this] works well for linking theory to practice, and provides support', or having 'students return to college for dedicated workshops on one day each week'. In keeping with the call generally, for greater supervision and mentoring of students by college staff, and notwithstanding the resource issues for institutions, it is incumbent upon HEIs to explore strategies to engage with students and host placement settings during extended practicum placement.

Breadth and Depth of Practicum Experience

Consistent with the recommendations of the EYEPU working group (2017), students gain experience across a diversity of ECEC settings and social contexts, (e.g., working with children from birth to six years, children with Special Educational Needs, children from areas of socio-economic disadvantage, children in hospital). They also have opportunities to work in family resource centres, Barnardos, National Voluntary Childcare Organisation (NVCO), TUSLA inspection team, City and County Childcare Committees, as well as abroad. Thus, students gain experience across four broad areas or dimensions of practice:

1. Working with children
2. Working with families and communities
3. Working with other professionals and institutions
4. Early childhood in the wider local, national and international context (Urban et al, 2011; EYEPU, 2017).

Given that undergraduate ECEC degree programmes are directed towards training educators to work with children in the birth to six age range, it is worrying to note that, because practicum requirements and opportunities differ across institutions, a student may progress through a Level 7 or Level 8 degree, not having worked with a baby for example. This particular finding is at odds with ensuring that graduates have the knowledge, skills and competencies required for independent professional practice (QQI, 2014) in the ECEC field. It is essential that all students have opportunities to gain experience of working directly with children in each of the overlapping age groups in *Aistear*, while continuing to get experience of working with families, other professionals and institutions, as well as within the wider local, national and international context.

Organising and coordinating practicum across three or four years of a degree programme, liaising with placement settings, allocating and monitoring students etc., is an onerous and vital task. Findings suggest that of the ten institutions that provided information relating to placement coordination, there is a full-time placement coordinator (academic position) in place in only five institutions. HEIs believed that having a full-time placement coordinator 'recognises and values professional practice'. While being mindful of the resource implications for HEIs, greater attention must be given to placement coordination, and to the appointment of a full-time placement coordinator in each HEI.

Preparation for Practicum

Findings relating to preparation for practicum are particularly positive, and it is apparent that this aspect is given considerable attention by the thirteen HEIs. 23% of student respondents (n=77) noted that 'the preparation before we go out on placement' works well. Likewise, host placement providers commented that 'preparing students for placement before they start [is of] enormous benefit'. In fact one placement provider attached such importance to 'preparation for placement', that s/he suggested that 'a student should not be allowed on placement unless they attend orientation in college before they set foot in placement'. This view was supported by one HEI where 'preparation classes are mandatory' and where any placement hours missed for any reason 'have to be made up'. It would benefit HEIs, placement settings and, students if mandatory preparation became the norm across HEIs, in terms of reinforcing the critical importance of practicum and student professional behaviour in preparation for working in the ECEC field following graduation.

Practicum Supervision

Practicum is typified by a supervision triad, consisting of a field supervisor, the pre-service educator (student), and a mentor-teacher (Cohen, Hoz & Kaplan, 2013). In this triad method, the student is placed in a classroom within an ECEC setting and, works with children under the supervision of the mentor-teacher, who also serves as the classroom teacher. The field supervisor is typically the college instructor for that student (Cohen et al., 2013) and facilitates the practicum experience through overall management of the experience, observing the pre-service educator in the setting working with young children, provides feedback on his/her performance, and facilitates managerial work with the mentor-teacher and the student (Ibid. 2013). The mentor-teacher engages in day-to-day supervision, mentoring and performance assessment roles with the field supervisor (Ibid, 2013).

The findings suggest that across the participating HEIs, the triad model is the most common approach to supervising students engaged in practicum. This involves shared supervision/mentoring by the host setting, and a member of college staff. However, notwithstanding that each student is appointed a supervisor/mentor, there are instances where students are not observed working directly with young children by college staff. Of the 98 students that provided information relating to being observed working with children, 56.1% (n=55) indicated that they are observed by college staff while working with young children, 22.4% noted that they are sometimes observed and, 21.4% indicated that they are not observed by college staff. This is a matter of concern for HEIs, students and host placement providers, each of whom expressed the need for more hands-on supervision and observation of students by college staff. Students in particular, expressed a desire to be observed working directly with children, by their college supervisor. There are indications also, of some dissatisfaction, with the nature and number of meetings between student's supervisors and host placement providers. Clearly, host placement providers would welcome more onsite visits by college staff as a means of enhancing communication, clarifying expectations, and supporting students undertaking practicum.

The findings suggest, that in order to optimise practicum experience, lecturers who teach the students in college, should also supervise and observe them in practice, to develop a

'rounded view' and build trusting relationships with students and host placement settings, and to ensure 'the student is getting the most from their work experience' (host placement provider). This approach to supervision could only lead to constructive, reflective dialogue between lecturers and students, which over time would influence student knowledge, understanding and pedagogy, ultimately benefit young children in ECEC settings.

Host placement providers further called for training for setting-based supervisor/mentors. Of the thirteen participating HEIs, six indicated that they provide 'initial training' with one providing 'a 5 ECTs supervisory programme', with another offering 'training to new supervisors in person or by phone'. Of this six, two also provide ongoing training. The seven institution not providing training for host placement settings, utilise a range of methods to support providers including 'a memo of understanding', provision of 'written information and advice in a handbook' or inviting 'placement mentors into the college once a year for a meeting with placement staff'. It is evident however, that providers feel unprepared for a supervisory-mentor role, and that a more systemic approach to preparing and supporting setting-based supervisors across the HEIs is required.

Provider Expectations of Students undertaking Practicum

Providers' commitment to practicum is commendable. Findings point to the considerable time commitment involved for providers with regards to completing paperwork for HEIs, mentoring students, encouraging and supporting them to have optimal placement experiences and so on. Findings also demonstrate that providers have high expectations of students undertaking practicum in their settings and, that they clearly expect them to engage in independent professional practice. Students are expected to use their initiative, take responsibility for curriculum/activity planning, actively engage in all aspects of the setting including 'run a full ECCE session from start to finish', 'assist with mealtimes', 'work with the staff team' and 'share in housekeeping – cleaning and tidy up', to 'do almost everything we do'. Given the stated purpose of a Level 8 degree 'to ensure that the knowledge, skill and competence acquired are proper to independent professional practice' (QQI, 2014, p.2) and that providers facilitating students on practicum both expect and demand students to work independently, it is disconcerting to note that settings participating in the ECCE scheme, and employing Level 7 and Level 8 qualified graduates are not awarded higher capitation until such time as the graduate has three years paid post-qualification experience.

Interpersonal Relationships within Host Placement Settings

Girod & Girod (2008) suggest that what pre-service educators are learning in the university/college classroom and what they are seeing in an authentic setting can vary greatly depending on the practicum setting, the co-operating teacher, and the learning environment. An uncomfortable relationship between a pre-service educator and cooperating mentor-teacher can lead to student frustration, and thus, it presents one of the biggest challenges in practicum (Lim & Kwon, 2009). Accordingly, O'Brian et al., (2007)

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indicate that the relationship between the practicum student and cooperating teacher is fundamental to the student's development. Findings indicate that for some students, interpersonal relationships within the host placement setting can be a challenge. Students can struggle to fit in, feel isolated, experience negativity from existing educators, or they may not be allowed to undertake and engage in alternative educational experience with the children. Another challenge for students relates to being placed in an unfamiliar environment, and asked to undertake work they have never experienced before (Chung, 2003) such as assisting with cleaning routines, which emerged as a source of discontent for a number of students in this study. Consequently, while the primary focus of supervision by a college lecturer should remain upon observing, mentoring and assessing student performance, it is essential that the supervisor also acts as a buffer between the student and the setting in circumstances where students feel isolated, unable to, or not permitted to perform to the best of their ability, do not understand or appreciate the nature of the 'domestic work' associated with the field, or where there are interpersonal difficulties with existing educators.

Student Self-efficacy

According to the NAEYC (2009: 6) 'excellence in early childhood teaching is [dependent upon] a continuous interplay between theory, research and practice'. Practicum provides opportunities for students to practice new skills, as a critical aspect of enhancing their ability to positively influence children's learning and development (Hyson et al., 2009) and, where they can engage in reflection; making sense of their practice (Waddell & Vartuli, 2015; Whitebook et al., 2009). Similarly, in this study, practicum is considered a necessary component in 'developing competencies that can only be gained in practice' (HEI respondent). Bandura for example, suggests that a person needs two resources to successfully perform any task: the requisite skill (or knowledge), and self-efficacy (1982; 1986; 1997). Practicum contributes to a student's sense of self-efficacy. Findings in this study support the notion that self-efficacy is strengthened through:

- 1. Mastery Experience.** It is evident that when students enjoyed placement, and felt that they worked successfully with children, staff and others within the setting, they had greater sense of self-efficacy, belief in their ability to work effectively within the host placement setting; As asserted by Dimopoulou (2012) performing a task successfully, strengthens a person's sense of self-efficacy, while failing to adequately carry out a task can have a negative impact on, and weaken self-efficacy;
- 2. Vicarious Experience** where students observed other educators working with children, and where placement providers, room leaders and educators modelled practice during the placement period. Findings suggest that practicum enables students to see people similar to themselves 'succeed by sustained effort [which] raises observer's beliefs that they too possess the capabilities to master comparative activities to succeed' (Bandura, 1994, p.71-81).
- 3. Verbal Persuasion** where students can be persuaded to believe that they have the skills and capabilities to succeed. Placement providers were acutely aware of the need to provide positive feedback and encouragement to students to help them 'overcome their self-doubts and instead focus on putting their best effort on a task or action'

(Dimopoulou, 2012, p.613). The findings point also to the critical role played by college staff in terms of verbal persuasion during practicum preparation, and through mentoring and supervision during the placement period which further enhances student's self-efficacy.

Although Woolfolk Hoy & Burke-Spero, (2005) suggest that self-efficacy often decreases during practicum, overall, in this study, student self-efficacy increased during their professional practice placement experience.

With regards to the fourth principle underpinning self-efficacy, findings in this study indicate that **Psychological Responses**, i.e., student's responses and emotional reactions to situations while on placement, such as feelings of isolation can weaken their sense of self-efficacy in these situations. For example, students spoke of 'negative responses to students in the placement makes things difficult', and feeling 'they are not being treated appropriately'. As noted by Bandura (1994) however, it is not the sheer intensity of emotional and physical reactions that is important, rather it is how one copes with, and eliminates stress, and improves their emotional state when facing challenges that helps people to improve their self-efficacy. Again, the importance of regular on-going supervision/mentoring by a college/university lecturer could go a long way towards enabling students to develop strategies for dealing with and, overcoming stressful situations.

Bridging the Theory Practice Divide

Bonnett (2015, p.197) highlights the benefits of practicum in offering opportunities for students 'to engage in a theory-to-practice model as they work directly with children, families, agency mentors and community partners'. The empirical findings in this study provide irrefutable evidence of how practicum, enables students to bridge the theory practice divide, by providing opportunities for them to work directly with children across the birth to six age range, in a diversity of settings, and social contexts nationally and internationally. It is apparent that the interplay between theory and practice is critical to student professional development, learning and emerging identity. In this respect 'quality educational experiences for ECE teachers are essential' (Ritblatt, Garrity, Longstreth, Hokoda, and Potter, 2013, p. 48). This involves extending educational experience beyond the walls of the lecture theatre, notes and text books into the "true life experience of dealing with the day to day aspects of a fully functioning early childhood setting" (student).

Practicum therefore, is central to supporting students to practice new skills in the field, as a critical component for promoting and enhancing their ability to positively influence children's learning and development (Hyson, Tomlinson & Morris, 2009). Consistent with Ziechner (2010) and Ritblatt et al., (2013), there is little doubt that students in this study, consider practicum as the most influential aspect of their preparation compared to coursework, helping them to 'get a feel for how to do things in the real world, rather than just the idea on paper', and where they 'learn different skills and strategies that you wouldn't have learned by sitting in a lecture every day'.

Similar to findings by Waddell & Vartuli (2015) this study highlights the role of practicum in supporting reflective practice. Moreover, it is evident that reflection is embedded as a core

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aspect of students' written work as part of practicum assessment. It is imperative that all those involved in pre-service educator training, recognise that it is through practicum experience that students consolidate their learning, practice, and reflective capacity, refine and perfect pedagogical strategies and ways of working with children, and enhance their theoretical knowledge and understanding.

Communities of Practice

There is consensus among HEIs, students and host placement providers that 'supervised, reflective field experiences are critical to high quality professional preparation' (NAEYC, 2009, p.6). In the context of this study, such experiences also yield dividends for host placement settings. Findings suggest that students are more than bearers of information (Dewey, 1938), examining their praxis in collaboration with existing early childhood teachers, thus co-constructing new knowledge and understanding, prompting and supporting critical reflection among existing early childhood teachers. Host placement providers highlighted how students' knowledge of theory, familiarity with the practice frameworks: *Síolta* and *Aistear*, and their new and innovative ideas, prompted reflection among educators, often leading to changes in practice, thus enhancing the quality of children's experiences in settings. Equally students are keen 'to learn from fellow practitioners already in the field'. This co-participation (Roth, 1998) is central to communities of practice enabling students and existing educators to explore, reflect upon praxis and, co-construct new knowledge and understandings.

Quality Host Placement Settings

None-the-less, findings relating to quality placement settings are of concern. In common with Moloney (2011); Whitebook et al., (2005); Whitebook et al., (2009) and, Whitebook, Austin, Ryan, Kipnis et al, (2012), the present study, also points to the lack of quality early childhood education and care settings. Accordingly, 9 HEIs (n=13) and 20 students (n=77) expressed concern about the quality of host placement settings. This is particularly concerning, as the varied experiences of students in the field leads to considerable inconsistency in the quality of practicum experiences (Hickson & So, 2009) and may have a negative effect upon how students perceive the field and their role in working with young children (Moloney, 2011). Furthermore, the impact of practicum on students' career choice, must not be overlooked. Thorpe et al, (2011) for example, found that students who had a positive experience during their practicum placement were more likely to consider entering the ECEC workforce. Consistent with Koc (2012), this study further highlights the need for students to practice their teaching skills in high quality classrooms. While currently, settings are selected because they have been identified as high quality and, that they are registered by TUSLA, it is apparent that additional comprehensive selection criteria are required to ensure, in so far as practicable, consistency of experience for pre-service educators.

Practicum as a Testing Ground for Working in the Field

In the context of this study, it is worrying to note that both students and placement providers refer to the idea that practicum is an opportunity for students to test whether ECEC is the right sector for the student. In some instances, observations of poor practice within host placement settings, helped students to 'realise the type of practitioner I D'ONT want to be', while others decided that ECEC was not for them. In relation to those exiting the sector, systemic issues, such as poor working conditions, and remuneration may be a contributing factor in their decision. However, in terms of the cost-benefit of a degree programme, the consequences of exiting the sector require careful consideration. Cognisance must also be taken of student's suitability for working in the ECEC field. For example, host placement providers stressed the importance of student's suitability and disposition (e.g., work ethic, interest, motivation, commitment, enthusiasm) for working in the sector. This gives rise to questions about how students are selected/screened at entry to the programme in terms of motivation and suitability. Or, should a first placement happen earlier in the degree or be a pre-requisite for entry to the programme?

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Findings from each study cohort; HEIs, placement providers and students indicate that practicum is an integral aspect of undergraduate ECEC degree programmes. Furthermore, this study indicates that classroom-based learning alone does not equip students with the knowledge, skills and competencies required to work in the field, nor does it instil, develop or enhance their sense of self-efficacy. The empirical evidence suggests that students consider practicum as the most influential aspect of their preparation compared to classroom based learning or coursework.

Unsurprisingly, the findings indicate that practicum is central to enabling students to bridge the theory practice divide. However, an unexpected finding relates to how practicum helps to establish communities of practice within host placement settings, enabling students and existing educators to explore, reflect upon praxis and, co-construct new knowledge and understandings.

Findings provide convincing evidence that HEIs give careful consideration to selecting host placement settings, preparing, supervising and assessing students engaging in practicum. They also provide valuable insights into what works well with regards to practicum from the perspective of HEIs, host placement providers and students. Consequently, the following factors have been identified: a systematic approach to student preparation, effective supervision involving direct observation of students working with young children; training of supervisors/mentors; block placements (6 weeks + or an entire semester), a range of practicum placements, commitment from host placement providers, as well as their support and encouragement of students undertaking practicum.

Although students gain experience of working within a range of settings and social contexts with diverse age ranges, a student may progress through a Level 7 or Level 8 degree, not having worked with a baby for example. Students must have opportunities to gain experience of working directly with children in each of the age cohorts identified within *Aistear*, while continuing to get experience of working with families, other professionals and institutions, as well as within the wider local, national and international context. In addition, even though each student is appointed a supervisor/mentor, there are instances where students are not observed working directly with young children by college/university staff. All three study cohorts, HEIs, host placement settings and students stressed the need for more hands-on supervision and observation of students by college staff. Mindful of the resource implications for HEIs, it is imperative that those who lecture students also supervise and observe them in practice, and that greater attention must be given to placement coordination, and to the appointment of a full-time placement coordinator in each HEI.

Among the challenges associated with practicum, HEIs and students expressed concerns about the quality of host placement settings. There is some evidence that this has been influential in students deciding to exit the sector. It would be important therefore, to continue to monitor this situation to determine for instance, whether self-selected settings are more problematic than settings chosen by the HEIs.

There is evidence that students may use practicum as an opportunity to test whether ECEC is the right sector for them. While this finding raises questions relating to student's suitability and motivation, there are also questions relating to how they perceive working in the sector, as well as broader issues in terms of poor working conditions and remuneration. Taking all of the findings into account, the need to develop guidelines for HEIs targeted at standardising the approach to practice placement is paramount. Any such guidelines must address the following:

- Duration of practicum
- Student preparation
- Supervision processes
- Selection criteria in terms of who can supervise students
- Selection criteria for host placement settings
- Placement Coordination
- Supervision/mentoring by college
- Observation of practice by college staff
- Support for host placement settings including continuous professional development opportunities, communication methods (e.g., face to face and online forum), and provider/student handbooks

Finally, this study draws attention to resource issues in the Higher Education sector in terms of funding a full-time placement coordinator position, provision of training for setting-based supervisor/mentors, and systemic supervision and observation of students by college staff. It also underscores anomalies with certain policy decisions. It is incumbent upon the State to consider the cost-benefit associated with graduates who exit the sector, and to redress its failure to award higher capitation in respect of qualified Level 6 and Level 8 graduates who do not have three years paid post-qualification experience.

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