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# RESPONSE TO THE DRAFT PROFESSIONAL AWARD CRITERIA AND GUIDELINES FOR INITIAL PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION (LEVEL 7 AND LEVEL 8) DEGREE PROGRAMMES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE ....

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RESPONSE TO THE DRAFT  
PROFESSIONAL AWARD  
CRITERIA AND GUIDELINES  
FOR INITIAL PROFESSIONAL  
EDUCATION (LEVEL 7 AND  
LEVEL 8) DEGREE  
PROGRAMMES IN EARLY  
CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND  
CARE (ECEC) IN IRELAND

Mary Moloney on behalf of  
PLÉ

## Introduction

PLÉ welcomes the development of Draft Professional Award Criteria and Guidelines for Initial Professional Education (Level 7 and Level 8) Degree Programmes in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in Ireland. When reviewed and finalised, PLÉ believes that the Professional Award Criteria and Guidelines will inform the development of new undergraduate ECEC degree programmes, and support the review of existing programmes. We are pleased to note that

1. It is not intended that the award criteria and guidelines will standardise and homogenise the delivery and content of Level 7 and Level 8 courses, rather it will bring some consistency to the experiences and outcomes for students undertaking such courses (p.5);
2. Professional dimension of practice in the ECEC sector must be integral to the professional formation of Level 7 and Level 8 graduates (p.5). PLÉ hopes that this particular requirement, will also underpin blended learning ECEC degree programmes currently being offered by a myriad of institutions in Ireland as preparation for working in Irish ECEC sector. PLÉ has been concerned for some time now, about the absence of a professional practice component in many of these undergraduate programmes.

PLÉ further notes that the proposed model mirrors components of teacher preparation and development, viz a viz, initial, induction and continuous professional development. While we have some concerns about the current environment in which ECEC operates in terms of supports and resources, we welcome this approach to educator preparation and ongoing learning and development.

We also welcome the recommendation that Level 7 and Level 8 undergraduate ECEC programmes, should provide rich and diverse learning experiences for students, including personal and professional development experiences that enable them to become reflective practitioners and prepare them for professional practice in the ECEC sector. This reinforces the foundational principles for all PLÉ members, and the programmes they deliver, which is to provide opportunities for students

to 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 Organisations, TUSLA inspection team, City and County Childcare Committees, as well as abroad (Moloney, 2018, p. 67).

## Issues Requiring Attention

PLÉ wishes to draw attention to some issues within the current document that will require review and or clarification, before the publication of the final award criteria and guidelines. These issues relate to the following:

1. Variability of ECEC degree programmes and consequent variability in childrens' experiences;
2. The aim of undergraduate ECEC degree programmes;
3. Programme content and deliver;

In relation to the variability of ECEC degree programmes, it is explicitly stated that 'given the variability of the experience of degree courses, it follows that the experiences of our youngest citizens in ECEC settings will also be variable' (p.3). This statement takes no account of the present composition of the ECEC workforce in Ireland, where only 18% of those working in the sector, hold a Level 7 or a Level 8 degree (Pobal, 2017). It is disingenuous to assert that the variability of children's experiences is a direct result of the variability in undergraduate degree level training. After all, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) maintains and regularly updates a recognised list of Early Years qualifications to work in the sector in Ireland. In 2017 alone, this list included 500+ qualifications from 37 countries (Moloney & McKenna, 2017). Besides, it is also important to consider that those who work directly with children in the sector, include graduates of QQI Level 5 and Level 6 ECEC awards. The quality and focus of training delivered at these levels also contributes to the variability of experiences offered to children.

### PLÉ recommends that:

- The range of approved qualifications in the sector as indicated earlier, provide contextual information. This must form part of the purpose of, and rationale for, the criteria and guidelines in the next iteration.

With reference to the DES (2016) survey, which sought ECEC practitioners' views on the extent to which their education and training provided them with the appropriate blend of knowledge and skills to support the educational development of children in early years settings; the report highlights gaps in existing initial professional education, including a lack of preparation of educators to use and critically appreciate the national practice frameworks: *Siolta* and *Aistear*. However, it is important to note, that of the 25,000 strong ECEC workforce, only 0.3% actually responded to this survey. Moreover, the findings do not make any distinction between the differing levels of ECEC qualifications (e.g., Level 5, 6, 7 or 8). It is therefore, not possible, to definitively attribute any gaps identified in the DES (2016) survey solely to Level 7 and Level 8 undergraduate ECEC programmes.

In addition, reference is made to PLÉ research. It is imperative to note that the findings from this research indicate, that Level 7 and Level 8 undergraduate ECEC students have deep theoretical knowledge, the ability to implement and evaluate the practice Frameworks: *Siolta* and *Aistear*; capacity for critical reflection, and co-participation with setting staff leading to communities of practice within settings (Moloney, 2018).

**PLE recommends that:**

- A qualifying statement relating to the findings of the DES (2016) survey is included in the final document
- The findings from the PLÉ study (Moloney, 2018) which provide a contextual evidence base must to be incorporated into the context and rationale for the development of award criteria and guidelines.

According to the EYEPU working group, the aim of undergraduate ECEC degree programmes is to 'prepare early years professionals to work across a broad range of role profiles within the sector, including setting-based practitioners, teachers, lecturers, inspectors/evaluators, mentors and many more' (p.3). PLÉ believes that it is not the sole aim or purpose, nor should it be, of any undergraduate ECEC degree programme, to prepare 'teachers, lecturers, inspectors/evaluators, mentors etc.' roles, which in most cases, require Post graduate qualifications and extensive experience in the field.

There is an implicit message within the current document, which suggests that Level 8 graduates should seek work, outside the direct work in the ECEC sector, in what are considered more prestigious roles (i.e., inspectors, mentors). In fact, the suggestion that

programmes aim to prepare graduates to work as inspectors/mentors/evaluators etc. is at odds with a later suggestion by the EYEPU working group (p.3) that ways must be found to attract graduates to work in the sector in order to realise the benefits in terms of quality ECEC provision.

**PLÉ recommends that:**

- All reference to preparing graduates to be anything other than early childhood educators (birth to 6 years) should be removed from the final document, while specifying if necessary, that post-graduate qualifications and extensive field experience is required for other roles.

**Perception of Early Years Professionals**

PLÉ acknowledges that the evolving policy and practice landscape in Ireland has led to an increase in the level of qualifications achieved by early years professionals (p.3). However, notwithstanding reference to other comparable established professions, e.g., primary school teaching, nursing and social studies (p. 18), it is disheartening to note that ‘there is currently no occupation within early years settings that can only be filled by a higher education graduate’ (p.10). This perspective undermines and devalues the complexity of working with young children in ECEC settings, and in this regard, PLÉ concurs with the EYEPU working group in stressing the need to address this anomalous situation

if higher education graduates in ECEC are to be attracted to work in early years services and more importantly retained so that the benefits in terms of the delivery of high quality early childhood education and care provision can be realised (p.10).

Responsibility for addressing this situation rests with the acknowledgement that personnel with Level 7 and 8 qualifications in the sector, will only enhance the quality of service provided to our youngest. The DCYA must determine why there is currently no occupation within ECEC that can only be filled by a graduate. Given the increasingly complex nature of working with young children, and concomitant accountability to multiple stakeholders, it is unfortunate, that at macro level, it is thought that somebody with a minimum Level 5 or a Level 6 qualification is capable of undertaking this multi-faceted and highly responsible role without the support, or guidance of a more knowledgeable other, i.e., Level 7 or 8 graduate.

**PLÉ therefore recommends that:**

- The statement that ‘there is currently no occupation within early years settings that can only be filled by a higher education graduate’ be removed from the document, or expanded upon. Due to the organic development of the sector; the lack of defined occupational profiles and inadequate investment in the systemic development and retention of the workforce, the current situation exists whereby there is currently no occupation

The EYEPU working group report further identifies a range of attributes, that are considered essential for an early years professional graduate:

A combination of attributes which are developed through a range of experiences...[including] academic attributes (e.g., establishing sound academic principles), professional practice attributes (e.g., planning and developing a curriculum for children) and professional personal attributes (e.g., an ethical practice framework to inform their practice, the capacity for reflection and critical thinking) (p.8)

PLÉ is concerned that this narrow view of the early years professional may reduce the role of the educator, to that of competent technician (May, 1997) ‘whose main purpose is the application of human technologies’ (Moss, 2008), and not as professionals. Nowhere in the present document, are educators associated with knowledge sharing and dissemination, engagement with, or within research (praxeology), research publications, advocacy, etc. skills that must surely form part of the formation of a Level 7/8 graduate.

On the basis that

Higher capitation grants are awarded to ECEC settings in the Free Pre-school Year scheme which employ early years professionals with higher qualifications (Level 7 on the NFQ), with three years paid experience) and a minimum level of qualification has been introduced for all staff working with young children (Level 5 NFQ) (p.3) .

The EYEPU working group suggest ‘it is evident that the professionalisation of the sector is well underway (p.3)’. The Report does not offer any clarity or substance on the role of strong/ reflective/ research informed/ professional Level 7/8 graduate in the ECEC sector. PLE strongly supports the notion that a Level 5 qualification is a minimum requirement only, and must be seen as an initial first step on the journey towards the professionalisation of the sector. To suggest otherwise, undermines childrens’ right to equality of access to quality early learning experiences with well qualified professionals. It also devalues graduate level training, and the complexity of working in ECEC. There is currently no attempt to

professionalise the sector with regards to babies from birth to 2 years 8 months, for whom those with the lowest qualification level (QQ1 Level 5) work presently.

It is suggested that the purpose of the draft criteria and guidelines is to support the development of awards (Level 7 and Level 8) that will lead to the formation of early years professional graduates ‘who are fully prepared to take on the complex challenges of practice in this field’ (p.4-5). In relation to the *Workforce Development Plan for the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector in Ireland* (Department of Education and Skills [DES], 2010), it is stated that ‘this plan recognises the impact that the calibre and capacity of early years professionals has on the quality of experiences of young children’ (p.6). Moreover, QQI (2014, p. 2) indicates that the purpose of a Level 8 Professional Award 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 (in EYEPU working group 2017, p. 7)

Yet, recent policy decisions contradict both the workforce development plan and the QQI objective; by requiring graduates to have three years **paid** experience in order to qualify for higher capitation awards. Indeed, this requirement to have 3 years paid experience, having already undertaken a 3 or a four year Level 7 or 8 programme, creates an additional obstacle for graduate employment, which does not exist elsewhere within the education system. Furthermore, it sends the message that graduates are not fully prepared for the complexity of practice, and are incapable of independent practice.

**PLÉ recommends that:**

- Contextual information relating to the paid experience be included as part of the purpose of and, therefore rationalise the criteria and guidelines, in the next iteration.

**Programme Content**

Nowhere in the document is it more apparent than in ‘programme content’, that the educator’s role is analogous to ‘competent technician’ (May, 1997). Overall, PLÉ has reservations about the breadth and depth of knowledge required of a Level 7/8 graduate, and suggest that this is not sufficiently captured in the current award criteria and guidelines. The proposed programme content adopts a ‘technical, competencies and skills’ (Oberhuemer, 2005) approach to educator preparation. There is considerable lack of emphasis upon critical reflection, research and advocacy for example. In the words of Urban (2008, p.150)

[The technical model is] ‘About acquiring skills to deliver technologies. [...]Its connotations contradict the very essence of professional and educational practices as a transformative practice of mutual dependence and respect, co-construction and shared meaning making between human beings’.

In its current iteration, the award criteria and guidelines are constrained by the notion that graduates should have sufficient knowledge, skill and competency to undertake a task. There is no apparent notion of quality differentiation between lower order and higher order tasks and thinking. Consequently, the programme content lacks depth, and there is no indication that it seeks to reach ‘beyond the minimum’ (CoRe, 2011, p. 15). This is disappointing, especially in the context of the professional competence profile (DJELR, 2002) which identified Basic/Intermediate/Advanced and Expert educator.

At both Advanced and Expert level, it is assumed, that in addition to in-depth intellectual knowledge, attributes and processes, that educators would operate with varying levels of autonomy, culminating in ‘engagement in policy development and management, engagement in research publication and dissemination of knowledge and skills’ at expert level (DJELR, 2002). As noted by Moloney & O’Carroll (2017) some of the greatest advocates of quality in ECEC (e.g., Peter Moss, Helen May) argue that ‘educators should be perceived as much more than task oriented technicians’ (p.99). Not only do the award criteria and guidelines not take account of autonomous practice, they do not countenance the concept of policy development, management, or engagement with, or in research (praxeology) within or outside the field, or research publication and dissemination of knowledge and skills. This may be interpreted as a dumbing down of the graduate’s role within the early years sector, viz a viz working directly with children, parents and staff within settings.

Programme content does not extend to knowledge, understanding, application and critical appreciation of national and international policy. In relation to national policy, while knowledge of the Early Years Services Regulations, 2016 for example, is core to all ECEC training programmes, it must be embedded incrementally over the three or four years of a degree programme, together with *Aistear*, *Síolta*, *Diversity and Equality Guidelines*, the *Access and Inclusion Model* etc. to ensure depth of knowledge, understanding, and critical capacity for application within practice at multiple levels within a setting context. Concepts such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL) which are now inherent within inclusive parlance; classroom management, educational continuum and child protection for example, are notably absent.

PLÉ believes that Level 7 and Level 8 undergraduate ECEC programmes must also prepare graduates for supervision and mentoring roles in line with the unique nature of leadership in ECEC (Rodd, 2013), for example, those associated with room leader positions. This aspect of educator professional development has been overlooked. Likewise, in the context of the programme for Government, 2016, and the Interdepartmental Group Report: *'Future Investment in Early Years and School Age Care and Education'* ((DCYA, 2016) both of which emphasise the importance of quality school age childcare provision, there is no focus upon this evolving area of ECEC within the draft award criteria and guidelines.

### **Programme delivery**

Research undertaken by PLÉ in 2016/17 across the Higher Education Institutions in Ireland offering full-time Level 7 and Level 8 degree programmes, indicates that current approaches to programme design, delivery and content are in line with the draft award criteria and guidelines. Again, this is reassuring for existing providers, in terms of the quality of their current undergraduate Level 7/8 ECEC programmes. Moreover, it augurs well for the review and further enhancement of existing programmes, and or new programmes into the future by the HEIs.

It is recommended that there should be structured supervised assessed professional practice placement for a minimum of 25% of the overall duration<sup>7</sup> of undergraduate degree programmes (EYEPU working group, p.18). PLÉ research indicates that currently, students undertaking full-time degree level training, spend between 25% and 31.94% engaging in professional practice placement, over the duration of a 3 year Level 7 degree, between 26.38% and 41.66% over the duration of a 3 year Level 8 degree, and up to 34.71% on practicum during a four year Level 8 degree (Moloney, 2018). Interestingly, 78% of participating students (n=101) indicated that the right amount of time is spent on practice placement currently, with 13% noting that more time is needed (Ibid.). PLÉ therefore suggests that a 25% professional practice requirement may not be sufficient for students. It is also critical, that not only quantity, but quality of the placement component of undergraduate programmes, be assessed and supported for development of an effective early years' education programme.

**PLÉ recommends that:**

- The recommended minimum 25% structured supervised assessed professional practice placement be increased, and that clarification in relation to the number of hours, ECTS credits and modules must also be included in the guidelines;
- Guidance relating to college responsibilities with regards to supervision/mentoring/coaching and assessing students during professional practice placement should be provided. Colleges cannot be permitted to abdicate their responsibilities in this regard. Indeed the PLÉ research (Moloney, 2018) concludes that college staff must see students in practice, and that those college staff supervising professional practice placement have the appropriate qualifications and experience to do so.

The question of how many ECTS credits students must achieve to attain a Level 7/8 award warrants attention. The European Commission (2015) specify that:

ECTS credits express the volume of learning based on the defined learning outcomes and their associated workload. 60 ECTS credits are allocated to the learning outcomes and associated workload of a full-time academic year or its equivalent...one credit corresponds to 25 to 30 hours of work (p. 10).

A graduate from a four year Level 8 degree programme will have attained 240 ECTS credits, equating to a minimum of 6,000 hours of work, while a graduate from a three year Level 7/8 degree programme will have attained 180 credits, equating to 4,500 hours of work. This information has significance for Institutions offering one year Level 7 or Level 8 ECEC degree programmes to students who hold a QQI Level 6 qualification for example. The potential ECTS credit deficit undermines the integrity of three and four year undergraduate degree programmes

**Accordingly, PLÉ recommends that:**

- Information pertaining to ECTS credits, outlined here is included in the final award criteria and guidelines.
- Recommendations relating to the level of ECTS credits in a Level 7/8 programme also be included;
- Consideration must also be given to uniformity with regards to the duration of undergraduate programmes. PLÉ questions the feasibility of having both three year and four year Level 8 ECEC degree programmes. In light of previous commentary

relating to the provision of one year degree programmes to students holding a QQI Level 6 award, there is every risk, that Institutions will have no other option, than to pursue the lowest common denominator, i.e., expediency;

- Guidance in relation to RPL for QQI Level 5 and Level 6 qualifications must also be included in the final award criteria and guidelines. PLÉ emphasises the need for transparency and uniformity in this regard;
- Guidance in relation to part-time courses is also essential.

## **Wider Issues**

This final section of our response examines wider issues relating to:

1. Induction for newly qualified professionals
2. Professionalisation and working conditions
3. Establishing a professional body

### **Induction for Newly Qualified Professionals**

PLÉ agrees in principle, with the value and importance, of a structured induction process for entry to a profession (p. 20), and note references to other levels of the education system (e.g., primary and post-primary), where structured induction programmes have been developed and are being introduced, to support the transition for students in the first year of teaching. It could be argued, that because of the requirement of three years paid experience, that graduates currently engage in a three year induction programme (albeit unstructured).

Broadly speaking, induction involves mentoring by a more experienced and knowledgeable other. For instance, *Droichead* is an integrated professional induction framework designed to support the professional learning of Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs) during induction, thus laying the foundations for subsequent professional growth and learning for the next phase of their career. A Professional Support Team (PST), a team of fully registered teachers, ideally with five years' experience, which can include the principal, work collaboratively to support and mentor the NQT during school-based induction (DES/Association of Education Centres in Ireland (ATECI) 2017, p.9). In addition, the DES operate the National Induction Programme for Teachers (NIPT) in collaboration with ATECI and the Teaching Council. Again, this fully funded programme is facilitated by practising teachers. It is apparent

therefore, that a successful induction programme is dependent upon a competent system. Unfortunately, when it comes to ECEC, Ireland does not have a competent system yet, but one ‘underscored by sectoral fragmentation, considerable variance in quality, and a dispirited and disenfranchised workforce’ (Moloney and O’Carroll, 2017, p. 98-99). Within this context, who will/would support the professional learning of the newly qualified professional (NQP)? In common with Murray (2007), Moloney (2018) points to a shortage of excellent ECEC settings available to students while undertaking undergraduate training. This situation is problematic and, warrants serious consideration, before any induction programme is developed for NQPs.

### **Professionalisation and Working Conditions**

It is not our intention to cover old ground or to appear vapid in relation to professionalisation and working conditions. Suffice it to say, that PLÉ concurs with the sentiments expressed by the EYEPU working group, that until issues of remuneration, appropriate salary scales, terms and conditions of employment, and support for professionals to advance their qualifications are addressed, ‘graduates will enter a sector where their work feels undervalued and under rewarded which will impact on their capacity to practise and develop professionally’ (p. 21). This seems to be a damning indictment of current policy in relation to the ECEC sector.

The fact is, that graduates are hindered at every turn. There is no correlation between educational attainment, professional status, and compensation (Moloney & Pope, 2013; Moloney, 2015). This poses a significant threat to the professionalisation of the sector.

It is widely acknowledged that educators feel undervalued and underappreciated, their work is neither appreciated nor rewarded. When it comes to staffing, the sector is currently in crisis, with Pobal (2017) reporting that in the 12 months prior to May 2017, the annual staff turnover rate in the sector was 28.2%. There is little doubt that such turnover is directly related to poor salaries, seasonal contracts associated with the ECCE scheme, and overall lack of status and professional identity. From a graduate perspective (Level 7/8) and, as mentioned earlier, the requirement to have 3 years paid experience, having already undertaken a 3 or a 4 year programme, creates an additional obstacle for graduate employment, which does not exist elsewhere within the education system.

The system in Ireland is underpinned by a neo-liberal agenda that is strongly focussed upon cost, supply, accessibility and affordability for parents, rather than advancing the status of the

sector. Consequently, PLÉ questions the vision for ECEC. We hope that the National Early Years Strategy being developed by the DCYA will indeed, ‘articulate a shared orientation for the sector’ (EYEPU working group, 2017, p.8). We further hope that any such shared orientation includes an objective to works towards a graduate led workforce over a period of time. However, a shared orientation alone will be insufficient to ameliorate the issues that impede professionalisation and working conditions.

**PLÉ therefore recommends that:**

- The DCYA recognises ‘the impact that the calibre and capacity of early years professionals has on the quality of experiences of young children’ (DES, 2010, p.6) by removing the requirement for **paid** experience from the requirements of the ECCE scheme in the first instance;
- Introduce a target to achieve a graduate led workforce over the lifetime of the National Early Years strategy, such that, each room/area within an early years setting will have at least one Level7/8 ECEC graduate;
- Work relating to the development of salary scales by the professionalisation sub-group of the Early Years Forum be expedited, and
- Financial resources commensurate with these salary scales are invested over a period of five years into the ECEC sector, with the ultimate goal of pay parity with similarly qualified professions.

**Establishing a Professional Body**

85.4% of respondents (n=342) to the DES (2016) ‘*Early Years Practitioner Survey*’ highlighted the need for a professional body. The sector is characterised by inordinate fragmentation at multiple levels, including qualification requirements, governance involving both the DCYA and the DES, inspection by both TUSLA and the DES in respect of settings participating in the ECCE scheme, and resourcing. Moloney and McKenna (2017) who have called for the establishment of an Early Years Specific Council, suggest that ‘one of the hallmarks of a profession is having a professional association which acts to protect the status and position of its members’ (p.95). Any such body should be ‘an autonomous single agency responsibility for accreditation of education and training providers, developing key standards for education and training programmes, workforce registration and fitness to practice’ (p. 96-97). They further suggest that an Early Years Council would yield considerable benefits for

the sector in Ireland by promoting the standing of the early years professional; establishing and maintaining 1) criteria for early years professional registration, 2) a code of professional practice and responsibility and, 3) a national register for early years professionals.

The responsibilities outlined underscore the long over-due development of the ECEC profession, and could overtime, reduce fragmentation, redress the issue relating to 500+ recognised qualifications as an entry point to the field, promote a clearer identification of the workforce, and establish a more focussed pathway towards enabling members of the profession to remain up to date with current and new information, practices and knowledge in order to maintain professionalism (ibid., p. 97).

With regards to the draft award criteria and guidelines, PLÉ notes that the establishment of a professional body with a register of professionals may be considered into the future as part of the journey towards professionalism (p.21). As mentioned earlier, the sector is in crisis, and professionalisation has not been recognised or rewarded (Ibid.). We reiterate the view, that responsibility rests with the DCYA to address this situation.

**PLÉ recommends that:**

- The DCYA follow through on the proposal by the professionalisation sub-group of the Early Years Forum, to undertake an initial scoping exercise to:
  - Review the roles of regulatory agencies in other jurisdictions, including the establishment and maintenance of criteria for early years professions registration, code of professional practice and responsibility for Early Years professionals and, a national register of Early Years professionals

**Conclusion**

The effort to enhance the quality of professional awards and criteria of Level 7 and Level 8 undergraduate ECEC programmes is welcomed by PLÉ. There is much for PLÉ to celebrate, as the current iteration of draft award criteria and guidelines is reassuring in terms of existing approaches to programme design, delivery and content.

The intention to bring a level of consistency to the experiences and outcomes for students undertaking undergraduate ECEC degree programmes; attention to the integral nature of the professional practice dimension of practice is particularly welcome. In this respect, we reiterate the need for professional practice placement to underpin also blended learning

programmes, currently being offered by a multitude of institutions as preparation for working in the Irish ECEC sector.

We welcome the proposed approach to educator training viz a viz initial, induction and continuous professional development, as well as the recommendation that Level 7 and Level 8 undergraduate ECEC programmes, should provide rich and diverse learning experiences for students, including personal and professional development experiences that enable them to become reflective practitioners and prepare them for professional practice in the ECEC sector. As mentioned, this reinforces the foundational principles for all PLÉ members, and the programmes they deliver, which is to provide opportunities for students.

Our constructive critique is directed towards the following areas:

1. Variability of ECEC degree programmes and consequent variability in childrens' experiences;
2. The aim of undergraduate ECEC degree programmes;
3. Programme content and deliver.

We have further explored some of the wider issues including induction for newly qualified professionals, professionalisation and working conditions, and the establishment of a professional body.

We look forward to the next draft of the award criteria and guidelines.

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