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"It's ok not to know what I want to do": An exploration into the aspirations of Early Childhood Studies students

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Abstract

The importance of embedding employability skills in English Higher Education has received increased attention since the introduction of tuition fees and employers claiming that graduates lack the necessary skills for the workforce. This paper considers how these employability skills align with students' aspirations, when there is uncertainty around their career trajectory, an area that appears unexplored in current literature.

Using an interpretative approach this small-scale study (n=25) sought views of first year students within an HE institution in the East Midlands of England. This paper reports on students' career aspirations and motivations for studying, and working in, the field of Early Childhood, at the commencement of their studies. Through questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, students reflected on their aspirations and motivations to follow this degree trajectory. This paper purports that students embark on this degree with a generic interest in working with children but are uncertain about career directions. They welcome the breadth of opportunities the degree could lead to. It is therefore argued that "it's ok not to know what I want to do". It is the role of academic and professional staff to embed a breath of opportunities for exposure to the range of career pathways available.

Keywords

Early Childhood Studies, graduate employability, aspirations, careers, higher education institution

Introduction

Early Childhood Studies (ECS) degrees have been established within the United Kingdom (UK) since 1992. Their aim was to provide a 'research base, firstly, for the study of early childhood as an academic discipline and, secondly, for the education of those working with babies, young children and families in the early childhood period' (Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), 2022, p.3). ECS is focused on the holistic nature of early childhood and the range of careers available within the field. Students' progress on to careers within, for example, education, health, social work and legal fields (QAA, 2022). It is this range of career trajectories and the breadth of placement opportunities afforded by many ECS degree programmes, that is attractive to students who want to work with young children and their families (Holman and Richardson, 2020). However, students are not always aware of the career routes the degree can lead to and for some, this choice can lead to confusion as they are not always certain of the professional direction that they wish to take (Early Childhood Studies Degrees Network (ECSDN),

2019). Arguably this situation reinforces the importance of embedding, into ECS degrees, a holistic approach to employability support and transferable skills (Gunn et al., 2011; QAA, 2017; 2019) that can accommodate the diversity of the student trajectory.

Throughout this paper the terms employability skills and employability support are used and the definition for employability that has been adopted is: 'A set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that make individuals more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy' (Yorke and Knight, 2006, p. 8).

This definition is as relevant today as when they wrote it and it is important to note that embedding these skills within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) is core business (Irwin et al., 2019). This was reinforced by the literature review on behalf of the Higher Education Academy (HEA) in England (Artess, et al. 2017), who concluded that the value of embedding employability skills in Higher Education (HE) was widely recognised. More recently, it has been argued that HEIs also have a responsibility for ensuring graduates are prepared for the employment needs of a fast-changing global society and are equipped with the skills that will enable them to adapt to future roles, hybrid working and technological changes (Chartered Management Institute (CMI), 2021; Cheng et al., 2021; Römgens et al., 2020). In fact, 'attitude and aptitudes for work ranks consistently higher than any other factor – far above factors such as degree classification or university attended' (Confederation of British Industry, 2019, p. 12).

Research that has been undertaken suggests that employability skills are not something that can be taught in the classroom and are more likely to be developed within a workplace environment (Andrews and Higson, 2008; Ng and Feldman, 2009). Irwin et al's. (2019) research into perceptions of different types of work experience offered on social science degrees highlighted the importance of extracurricular activities as well as work experience for employability. This has been reinforced by Scott and Willison (2021) who purport that employers require students to have more than a degree. It is also important, as Artess et al. (2017) found, that employability skills should be relevant to the discipline being studied.

In summary, the nature of employability skills has been contested, the need for graduates to have a range of skills and opportunities to develop has been highlighted in the literature. This paper therefore argues that students who purposely choose an ECS degree, because of the breadth of career opportunities, can provide us with new insights into the role of HE in developing employability skills for a diverse market. Their 'chosen occupation' is not always clear to the student but it is through this insight that they can be reassured that a focus on transferable employability skills is appropriate and that "it's ok not to know what I want to do."

Literature review

Employability of Early Childhood Studies students

In recent years there has been a rise in the number of students accessing HEIs, resulting in a saturation in some parts of the employment market (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), 2017). That said, this over-saturation is not currently a prominent feature of the early years workforce with Campbell-Barr et al. (2020) reporting that after three and half years, only 56% of Early Childhood graduates remained employed in the Early Years sector. Difficulties exist in filling positions within the field (Bury et al., 2020). With this shortfall in existence, it is therefore argued that it is imperative that

students are provided with support and guidance as to what direction they wish to explore on graduation.

It should also be noted that the earning potential for those working in Early Years within the UK is significantly lower than many other professions, with the average salary for graduates working in day-care settings being a mere £10.21 per hour (Vardy, 2021). This is not significantly different to those vocationally qualified educators, who are earning on average £9 per hour (Vardy, 2021). The employment market is such in England that the support for graduate employment and enhancing career opportunities is crucial. Students recognise that working in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) is not generally a graduate role and therefore do not always progress into an Early Years setting; instead opting to work in higher paid roles.

No recent national data exists regarding the employability in graduate roles for Early Childhood Studies students specifically, however students within the realms of Childhood, Youth and Families subject areas are reported on. Throughout the year 2019/20, a national median graduate employment rate was recorded of 59.8% (Prospects, 2020). In addition to this, some students go onto further studies to aid their graduate employability. Given the points raised above regarding staff turnover, low salary and low status this fairly low graduate employment rate is unsurprising.

Wats and Wats (2009) state that 15% of employment success is based on hard skills, such as discipline specific knowledge, and 85% on soft skills, such as communication skills, ethical and reflexive attitude and attitude to work, aligning with the definition from Yorke and Knight's (2006) of employability as discussed earlier in this paper. This indicates the importance of the HE institution looking beyond the requirement of being to solely impart knowledge. It could be argued that those studying ECS are more likely to gain employment after their studies due to the soft skills that are akin to the attributes of the students. It is acknowledged that to work with young children there is a need to be resourceful, nurturing, etc (Bury et al., 2020) and it is these soft skills that convert to employability traits. The recent addition of the Early Childhood Studies Graduate Practitioner Competencies to the careers map (Northern Council for Further Education (NCFE), 2019) has recognised the need to acknowledge and certify these soft skills and it is argued that this will enhance the employability of the ECS students further.

Career choices of Early Childhood Studies students

It is noted that for students the transition from HE into employment has become particularly uncertain (Brooks, 2009). The HEA have developed an employability framework to assist with this uncertainty (Norton, 2016; Tibby and Norton, 2020). It is noted however that where, previously, there used to be the need for skills that were pertinent to the industry concerned, there now exists the need for graduates to develop transferable skills (Scott et al., 2019). This, Donald et al. (2019) would argue, moves the 'responsibility for career management from the organisation to the individual, reflecting increased choice compared to previous generations' (p. 602). While this shift has occurred, giving responsibility to the individual, conversely, HEIs have increased the levels of support available for careers guidance (Confederation of British Industry, 2009; Jackson and Wilton, 2016).

This paper recognises the role of HEIs in supporting employability and argues that this is easier when students are aware of what career path they would like to follow (Peteranetz et al., 2018). It is recognised that generic support can be provided to enhance employability, however students also need to receive guidance on what roles exist and how they can pursue these career routes should they desire. It is suggested that once they have received the necessary guidance, and only then, can they

begin to self-direct their futures. This aligns with the transitional bridging model as developed by Lumsden et al., (2010).

The studies discussed above refer to employability of a general nature and not specific to those working in the field of Early Childhood. When considering those who are following Early Years professions in England the picture does not appear too dissimilar. A small-scale study, undertaken by Silberfeld and Mitchell (2018), found that, with regards to Early Childhood Studies particularly, students felt ill informed about career choices and considered that this may be due to the low perceived status of the profession. It was found through a comparable study (Woods et al., 1999), that this had not really changed in the last 20 years, even with the reported national HE drive to enhance employability support. The international picture is similar with Suryani and George (2021) reporting that internationally students were uncertain of career direction when studying courses in education, citing the reasons for ambivalence to be lack of career prospects and lack of self-confidence.

These findings highlight the importance of clear guidance about employability opportunities at the start of their HE journey. They also raise questions around the motivations for their choice of study.

Motivations for working with young children

There appears to be a gap in the literature regarding the motivations around those studying at HE level to work in Early Childhood with, at the time of writing, no literature found within this area. However, some research has been undertaken concerning the motivation of those working in teaching and studying Early Years at Level 3, and historically this has indicated that people chose these career pathways based on either intrinsic motivations, or altruistic motivations, with very few reporting extrinsic reasons for joining a teaching profession (Vincent and Braun, 2010; Manning-Morton, 2006). The OECD (2005) report that students embark on a teaching career within the UK because they want to work with children, they want to be intellectually fulfilled to deepen their knowledge to benefit those they work with, and they want to make a difference in society, all altruistic reasons. Similar responses were given when researching why individuals chose the social worker career path, with altruistic responses being the most common, and the need to make a difference being most pertinent (Solas, 1994). Perhaps unsurprisingly, those in the UK do not tend to cite extrinsic rewards as the reason for choosing to work with young children and their families (Yong, 1995). These findings around motivation should come with a warning however, Christie and Kruk (1998) argue. They believe that groups of students should not be viewed as one homogenous group, instead being recognised as the individuals that they are with their individual stories creating their individual career choices. This is considered throughout this paper however the purpose of the research was to understand student perceptions and consider how this could influence practice. It is therefore important to retain both the individual alongside the generalisations.

Conclusion to literature review

Graduate employability and developing skills are seen as core work of HEIs, yet research in this area is sparse in the field of Early Childhood. The importance of students who do not have a chosen career pathway receiving guidance, support and opportunities in order to develop soft and transferable skills for the workforce has been acknowledged. This is pertinent for ECS students who need guidance early on in their studies about potential career trajectories to maintain momentum and motivation throughout their studies. The theoretical foundation for this study is therefore the Vygotskian approach, that which recognises the need for the 'more knowledgeable other' (MKO) (Vygotsky, 1978). This social-constructivist view assumes that knowledge is not simply imparted but co-constructed, and the need for the 'more knowledgeable other' (Vygotsky, 1978) changes as individuals

develop and co-construct new knowledge and skills as a result of interactions (Lave and Wenger, 1991). This view influenced this study; using interactions to co-construct knowledge about aspirations and motivations of participants and then employing-knowledge to make recommendations using the same framework.

Methodology

This small-scale study was undertaken within an interpretivist vein, with the prime focus being to interpret the views and opinions of students (Gray, 2018). The qualitative approach assisted with this as this sought and analysed these opinions. Although there was some statistical data within the overall findings, the main purpose of this was to assist in the interpretation of the views and opinions so it was still deemed appropriate to adopt a qualitative study. Hood (2006) states that most research will not fit neatly into one typology however as this study was focussed on perceptions, the qualitative lens was utilised.

A case study was carried out with the participating higher education institution being the case in hand. Although it is recognised that it is not normally possible to generalise to the wider population when undertaking a case study (Yin, 2014), this was viewed as acceptable. The purpose of this study was not to generalise widely, but to use the findings to assist the HE institution concerned with improving their provision. A case study was therefore deemed appropriate. It is recognised that this was a small-scale study however the interpretivist approach remains appropriate in this context as, regardless of sample size, the overall aim was to interpret the views and opinions of the participants.

Methods

A questionnaire was administered to all first-year students studying ECS (n=37), in their first semester, adopting a purposive sampling approach (Robson, 2011). Questionnaires, according to Gillham (2007), are a simple and time efficient way of gathering a large amount of data, which was necessary for this study. An online system was utilised to ensure confidentiality and for ease of administration (Gray, 2018). The questionnaire was introduced to the students by the programme leader. It could therefore have been construed that there was an issue with power in this arrangement (Foucault, 1989), which is discussed below further in the ethics section of this paper. Because of the concerns over perceived power however, a questionnaire was selected rather than an interview or focus group at this stage. It was therefore hoped that responses would be more viable and valid to enable greater depth of analysis.

The questionnaire posed questions around transitions from previous educational experiences, aspirations and motivations for working in Early Childhood. The questions explored the participants views around expectations of academic study and sought views on their backgrounds which led them to choose to study ECS and drive their decisions to work within the field of Early Childhood. This paper reports on the findings around aspirations and motivations and the findings around transitions are to be reported in a subsequent paper. The final question on the questionnaire asked the participants if they would be willing to engage in further research and be involved in a semi-structured interview at a later stage. Silverman (2017) asserts that semi-structured interviews are useful for providing more detail than is possible from questionnaires and can provide the flexibility to explore an area in depth. In this research two participants volunteered to be interviewed and this enabled certain aspects to be explored in much more detail than the questionnaire allowed (Cohen et al., 2002). This triangulation, it is argued, enhances the data within this study and provides credibility to the findings presented within this paper.

Ethics

Prior to this research taking place, the necessary institution protocols (British Educational Research Association (BERA), 2018; European Early Childhood Education Research Association (EECERA), 2015) were undertaken and permission granted. As previously mentioned, questionnaires were administered in a way that maintained confidentiality and, although requested by the programme leader it was important that students did not feel pressurised into the completion of such documents (Foucault, 1989). It was made clear that this research was not compulsory and should be completed of their own free will. Those who were involved in the interview were invited to a mutually convenient meeting and this was chaired and noted by an independent researcher who was unknown to the student. This aimed to ensure that the responses provided to the questions were not found to be controversial or influenced by the position of the researcher in relation to the course being studied. A voice recorder was used to capture the interviews and they were transcribed by another independent body. The issue of power was considered throughout, and all was done to mitigate this, including ensuing the interviews were not undertaken by one of their tutors. All identifying features were removed from the interview transcripts before being passed back to the programme team for analysis.

Findings

There were a total of 25 respondents to the questionnaire, giving a 68% response rate and two students were interviewed in addition to this. Within the questionnaire, participants were asked why they had decided to study ECS, and their responses can be seen in table 1 below:

Table 1: Reasons Participants Gave for Choosing to Study Early Childhood

Theme 1: Inspired by parents in profession	*n*	%	Total *n* (%)
Parents work in education	8	32%	14 (56%)
Parents work in social care	2	8%	
Parents work in Early Years	2	8%	
Parents work with special educational needs	2	8%	
Theme 2: Previous educational experiences			
Positive experiences at school	7	28%	14 (56%)
Challenging school experiences	6	24%	
Placement experience	1	4%	
Theme 3: Adverse childhood experiences			
Challenging family experiences	6	24%	15 (60%)
Parent's divorce	3	12%	
Drug/alcohol abuse in family	3	12%	
Experienced domestic violence	1	4%	
Been involved with child protection issues	2	8%	
Theme 4: Positively inspired by family circumstances			
Sibling with special educational needs or disabilities	7	28%	9 (36%)
Was a young carer	2	8%	

Table 1 indicates that there were a range of reasons that students give for choosing to pursue a career in Early Childhood, most of which derive from familial and childhood experiences of their own. Twenty-five respondents, being invited to indicate more than one reason should it be applicable, produced a total of 51 responses, indicating that it is not necessarily one particular aspect that drives them to study within this area. The responses fell into four themes; inspired by parents in the profession (56% of respondents reporting this as a motivation), previous educational experiences (56%), adverse childhood experiences (60%) and being positively inspired by family circumstances

(36%). These findings indicate the complexity of the rationale behind this career trajectory and highlights that many of these students are driven by both positive and negative emotive reasons when considering working with young children and their families.

At interview stage when this area was explored further and when considering their motivations for studying ECS, both respondents discussed their attributes and reported:

> *It was more what I did outside of my studies that influenced my choice of Degree because everyone in my family and my friends have said to me I've got natural gift with children, I just can connect on their level and make them feel comfortable. So that's why I've decided I'm going to go and work with children* (Participant B).

And Participant A stated: 'And I've just always found everyone's always said to me, 'You've got a real natural gift with children, you should progress it further'.

When asked what career aspirations were, the responses from the questionnaire were received as shown in Figure 1 below.

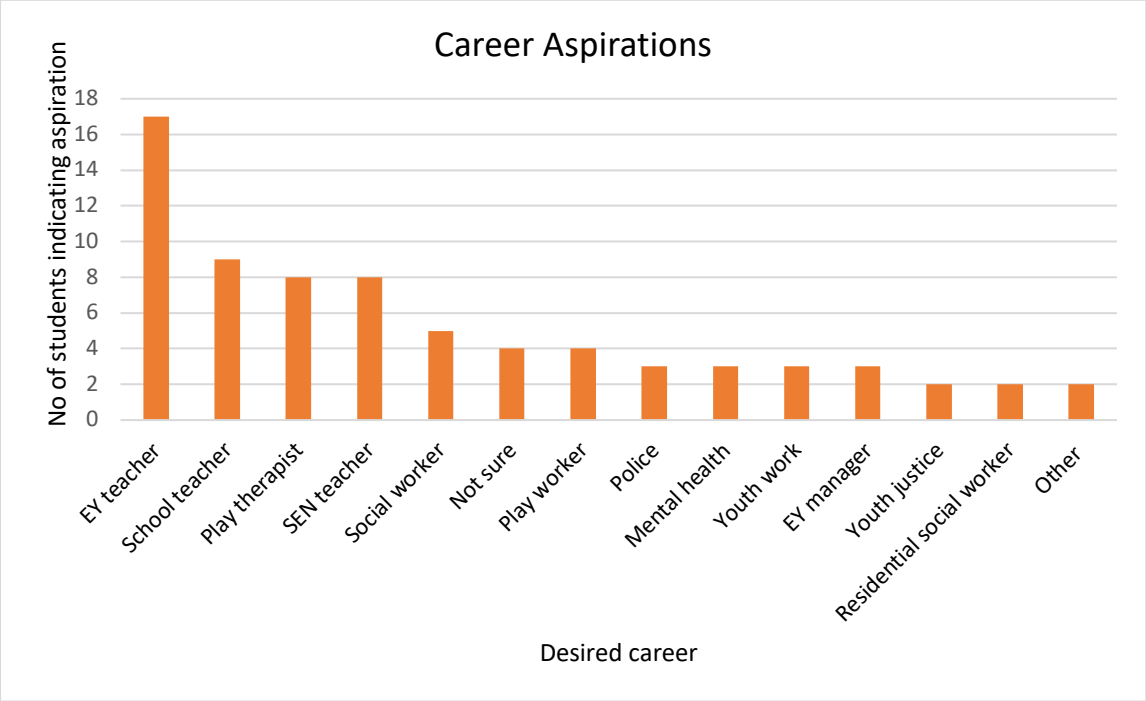

Fig.1: Career Aspirations of First Year Students Studying Early Childhood

Figure 1 shows a range of careers that students are aspiring to at the beginning of their studies. The table above indicates that there is a wide range of potential careers, with 13 different options having been listed. There are also four participants who have not indicated any choice, instead electing to say that they are 'not sure' what they want to do once graduated.

The results above show that some respondents had indicated that they would consider more than one potential career, and on further analysis it was discovered that only five respondents gave one answer to the question regarding what they are aspiring to. The analysis of these responses is shown in Figure 2 below:

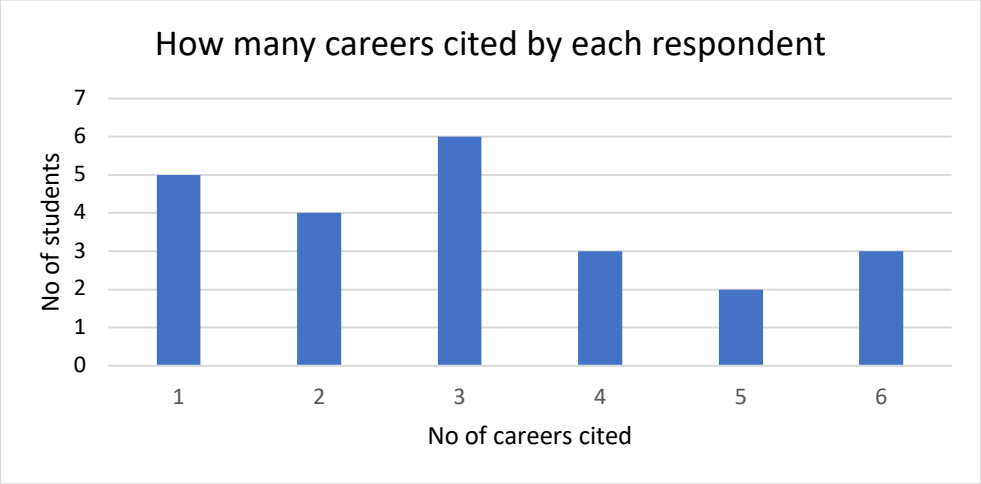

Fig.2: The Number of Potential Careers that Respondents Indicated an Aspiration for

Figure 2 shows how many careers students listed when considering future job roles that may interest them. It can be seen from this graph that 3 respondents listed as many as six possible careers, with a total of 14 respondents (48%) giving three or more possibilities. What this indicates is that on commencement of this undergraduate degree course in Early Childhood, almost half of students do not know precisely what they are aspiring to. They have an idea that they want to work with young children and their families, however they do not know exactly what form that employment will take. This was evidenced further by some of the comments that were made within the interviews, with Participant B stating:

> *I'm hoping the course will lead me to lots of different routes and then will open my mind to different things that you can do because I think there's so much you can do with children. But I think it's very like the convention with teaching, social work, I want to find out what more there is.*

Participant A talked of uncertainty about her future aspirations, stating: 'It keeps changing but the two, but what I've come down to in the end is either a Child Protection Officer or going into Play Therapy.'

The interviews highlighted that the respondents were relying on the course to provide information to enable them to make decisions about career possibilities. When asked how they could be helped with employment choices, Participant A stated:

> *I think maybe in the second and third year more information on what that job would entail, maybe work experience within those two settings so that I can decide, obviously for third year, which one I would definitely want to do and chose as a career*.

Placement opportunities were obviously viewed as a useful tool for assisting with careers decisions, with Participant B saying:

> *My absolute goal is to work in Family Support work in prisons, is my absolute dream. That's what I'd love to do. But teaching's always been something that's really intrigued me and I think from working in the school last year and having the opportunity to work so close with the teacher and they've got to do home visits, parents evenings. And I really gained an insight - I looked at their planning, I was allowed to go and sit with them while they were planning and meetings. And I thought this could be something that I might be interested in*.

Discussion and recommendations

Findings from this small-scale study indicated that motivations to work in the Early Childhood sector were found to be mainly driven by experiences during their childhoods. The complexity of the reasons given, highlighted that ECS was chosen purely through intrinsic and altruistic motivations and some of these were deep rooted in adverse childhood experiences. This finding is supported by the literature (Vincent and Braun, 2010; OECD, 2005), however it is important to highlight that although none of the previous literature identified WHY students wanted to make a difference in society, just that these altruistic and personal motivations existed. It is argued therefore that these motivations appear to be deeply rooted from previous childhood experiences and this should be an aspect of the students' lives that are considered accordingly.

The recognition from the students that their past experiences play a large part in the decision-making process when choosing their area of study and career trajectory, is prominent throughout this research. While it has been argued (Silverman, 2017) that retrospective questions, especially in interviews, may not yield accurate responses, as memories fade and adjust over time, in relation to this paper students current understanding of the influence of their previous experiences on their choices is important. Consequently, retrospective questioning, rather than a limitation is a strength of this research. Through triangulation this troubles the reasons behind motivation and illuminates the fact that ECS as a choice of study, is an extremely personal matter. Furthermore, having the opportunity to explore a range of career options is a strength and motivates students rather than reduces it (Peteranetz et al., 2018).

These experiences obviously shape the career decisions of these individuals and could be seen as the main motivational factor when working with young children and their families. The implications of this are wide and beyond the realms of this paper, however, programme teams need to be mindful of the previous experiences of students and how the course content and activities undertaken may be difficult for some of them. Consequently, activities that encourage students to share their motivations need to be undertaken sensitively and learning co-constructed with the students.

Furthermore, all students need to be informed that the contents of their studies may raise personal issues and be made aware of the wider support services available to them. This is important because some students believe that universities should help them to cope with transitions and the anxiety that university prompts (Cage et al., 2021). However, lecturers and personal tutors are not always equipped to counsel students in this way. Arguably, for programmes like ECS that attract students who have had adverse experiences in their childhood, lecturers should have training and support to address any issues raised.

It was noted that the reasons the interview participants gave for choosing a career in Early Childhood were quite different from those cited within the questionnaire. Within the interview it appeared that motivations came from others; it was what had been said to them over the years as to what they were good at, where their skills were, and was more attribute driven. It was noted that the reasons given in the questionnaire however were extremely personal and sensitive; students perhaps using the comfort that the confidentiality of such a method provided (Gray, 2018). There is therefore a recognition that this level of information may not have been divulged within an interview environment (Silverman, 2017). Although this could be seen as a limitation to this study, it is argued that this could also be a strength. Through triangulation this troubles the reasons behind motivation and illuminates the issue that this is an extremely personal matter. Although Peteranetz et al. (2018) argue that without refined career direction students will lack motivation, it is argued that this may be an exception for those choosing to study ECS and work with young children. The altruistic nature of

motivation can be extremely personal and the nature of this could therefore be seen as quite different from other career paths.

One of the limitations of this paper is the small number of interviews undertaken. However, they did provide additional insights into the role of others in influencing a study and career trajectory in ECEC. Both shared how others have highlighted their attributes with children. Perhaps unsurprisingly, not one participant mooted the reasons for choosing ECS as their area of study as being driven by career enhancement or opportunity to enhance earnings. This aligns with the findings of Yong (1995) who found that in the UK this tended to be the case, and with Vardy (2021) reporting such low average earnings this is as expected. Although no respondents reported extrinsic motivations for working within the early years and even though this aligns with previous research findings (OECD, 2005; Vincent and Braun, 2010), this is something that should be challenged. These students can go into careers that impact on the most critical time in a child's life (Leadsom et al., 2013) and yet they do not see that the status or the economic rewards are areas to motivate them. This is something that surely needs addressing by the wider agenda.

In this small-scale study it was found that the career aspirations of these ECS students varied immensely. Thirteen different careers were listed as potential career trajectories within the questionnaire responses and participants stated up to six different career paths as potential jobs for the future. At interview stage this uncertainty was still prominent with Participant B stating 'My absolute goal is to work in Family Support work in prisons, is my absolute dream. That's what I'd love to do. But teaching's always been something that's really intrigued me...'. These two very different roles indicate that there is real uncertainty with the direction of career path for this student and this was highlighted in the questionnaire responses also. The questionnaires produced results that indicated that 48% (n=14) of respondents gave three or more different responses when asked what their aspirations were and, although two thirds of respondents stated they wanted to become Early Years Teachers, this was not their sole career choice and was always coupled with alternative career plans. This indicates the need for academic courses to provide much more than a base of knowledge and it is argued that, as a result of this study, that HE institutions have a responsibility to provide specific career guidance rather than generic advice on transferable skills. If, as Silberfeld and Mitchell (2018) assert, students feel ill-informed of career choices, then this becomes the HE institutions responsibility to rectify this. At the same time however there needs to be recognition that students need to take responsibility for their own actions and outcomes (Donald et al., 2019), and that the Vygotskian MKO (Vygotsky, 1978) should provide support with a view to fostering independent decision making and proactive members of the Early Years community. This leads us to consider the importance of placement within these courses.

The placement element was seen by the participants to be a crucial aspect that students were relying on to assist them with their career choices, and it is asserted that this is an essential element of employability support. This finding aligns with Andrews and Higson (2008) and Ng and Feldman (2009) who stated that employability skills are best developed within the workplace environments rather than the classroom. If, as this study indicates, students are so unsure of their future career paths then it is suggested that work-based practice is even more crucial than originally perceived, and although Harvey (2005) reports that those who had work-based elements in studies are 14% more likely to gain graduate employment, it could be asserted that this is likely to be much higher in instances such as this. It should be hoped that the work-based experience will assist with career choices and hence increase motivation.

It is also argued that by engaging in work-based experience, this will assist with the development of the much-needed soft skills (Holman and Richardson, 2020). Although Cumming (2010) reported that students were not in possession of these soft skills, it is asserted that this is something that the Graduate Practitioner Competencies (ECSDN, 2019) are striving to address, and future research findings will hopefully align with more soft skills being prominent in ECS graduates as a result. It is also hoped that this addresses the staff turnover issues (Campbell-Barr et al., 2020; Bonetti, 2018) and raises the profile and the earning potential (O'Sullivan, 2020) of ECS graduates. The soft skills identified by Bury et al. (2020) are those highlighted by participants as being their motivation to study in this area and therefore any way that these skills be nurtured and certified should, it is argued, raise the professionalism and employability of the Early Childhood workforce. Potential employability of those studying for an ECS degree, it could be argued, should be a benefit of the course due to the wide range of careers that students can progress into (QAA, 2022). This small-scale study has found that students are not certain of their direction of travel and therefore need a course that has the flexibility to adapt alongside their needs. What remains crucial throughout this work the need for each and every student to receive the support and guidance that is tailored to their individual needs.

As a result of the findings from this small-scale study, it is recommended that further research be undertaken with regards to students' previous life experiences, their skills and attributes and how these can shape employability support moving forward. It is recognised that the soft skills that an individual possesses are far more important than the knowledge base (Wats and Wats, 2009; Confederation of British Industry, 2019) and these soft skills are likely to be formed through life experience. Future research should therefore explore this in further depth and consider how to develop this in a positive manner.

Conclusion

The definition of employability adopted for this study was that of Yorke and Knight (2006), which promotes the importance of understanding, skills and attributes in supporting employability.

This paper argues that this study highlights the importance of HEIs assisting students in understanding the occupations they could pursue, and the knowledge and skills required. Through deciding what job it is that they desire, their motivation for their studies can increase. Although it is recognised that HEIs need to assist students with employability, at the same time it is recognised that students need to take some responsibility for their own futures (Donald et al., 2019) but, it is asserted, until the soft skills and confidence levels are raised then this will not happen. It is therefore argued that HEIs should concentrate on the soft skill enhancement, the raising of confidence and self-esteem (Artess et al., 2017; Holman and Richardson, 2020). Christie and Kruk's warning (1998) remains crucial when dealing with situations such as this; this group of students should not be viewed as a homogenous group and should be treated as individuals. Bespoke support needs to be provided to each student to maximise their potential and to enhance their employability. It should also be recognised by students that 'it's ok not to know what I want to do'.

As argued earlier on in this paper it is the responsibility of the MKO (Vygotsky, 1978) to expose each and every student to a breadth of events, to co-construct this learning and to ensure that they have the skills required to achieve the breadth of career opportunities that exist within the field of Early Childhood.

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