

Status quo?

What does the history of early years policy and qualifications tell us about today's workforce? **Hannah Crown** charts developments from the NNEB to T-Levels

For 50 years, the early years sector had a 'gold standard': the NNEB. Then, the National Nursery Examination Board, which was both a qualification and an examining and validating body, was superseded by a new awarding body, CACHE, at a time when parental demand, Government investment and market forces were combining to create a huge new private childcare sector.

Swathes of new qualifications hit the market from the mid-80s, to the extent that in 2012 there were 445 qualifications at different levels. These were swept aside in 2014 by the Early Years Educator following a sector-wide qualifications review, and this is set to be superseded once again by the (yet to be launched) Education and Childcare T-Level following a national rethink of vocational qualifications.

Meanwhile, parental help first introduced as vouchers in 1996 has continued and evolved into 'free' entitlements. Settings have also faced a huge increase in costs, including the National Living Wage.

According to Dorothy Faulkner and Elizabeth A Coates, this period saw 'the gradual professionalisation of the early years workforce'. In their *Twenty Years of Change* report (2013), they noted, 'It is now widely recognised that the value of investing in well-qualified people to care for and educate children is an important plank of strategies designed to establish the foundations of health and education during the early years.'

Despite this recognition, however, the fall in workforce qualification levels is definitive: in 2013, according to a DfE provider survey, 87 per cent of daycare staff held a Level 3 qualification or above, which dropped to 79 per cent in 2015. Recent research by the NDNA, the EPI and Ceeda backs this (see p.8 for the EPI data).

Michael Freeston, director of

quality improvement at the Pre-school Learning Alliance, describes the current situation as 'a slow-motion train crash'. He says, 'Long-term, we have an issue. We had the high of 87 per cent qualified at Level 3. The workforce had done very well to get to that level, but the tide is starting to turn. Anecdotally, a lot of those leaving the sector are not being replaced by highly qualified people.'

Moves to instigate more degree-level staff have also been mixed. There were targets for a graduate in every setting under Labour, and a Government-funded Early Years Teacher scheme under the Conservatives in a bid to raise prestige. However, the relatively poor pay and conditions, low prestige, and lack of career progression and CPD opportunities identified in the Government's most recent *Workforce Strategy* are felt by staff at all levels of the spectrum.

There are persistently low numbers of candidates for the Government's degree-level EYTS programme, billed as 'equivalent' to Qualified Teacher Status but, crucially, without any guarantees of the same pay and conditions. Meanwhile, the majority of current EYT students want to work in early years classes in schools, where their hourly rate is double on average, according to research from PACEY, Voice and Ceeda.

According to Mr Freeston, 'too much reform' has played a significant part in the current exodus. He says, 'It makes people question why they should take a qualification if they can't be certain the future value of it will be the same. Government tampering with early years qualifications has left the workforce feeling punch-drunk'

On the ground, the widespread recruitment difficulties continue –



despite the Government's recent rescinding of the requirement for a minimum grade C in English and maths associated with the EYE qualification, a move designed to upskill the workforce but leaving it with a huge drop in candidates.

London Early Years Foundation chief executive June O'Sullivan says, 'We're not seeing any great change after the GCSE rule change – we lost a cohort of new entrants from it and it is taking the sector a long time to recover'

She adds that of a typical sample of 150 CVs, she could shortlist to six, interview two, and often would not appoint.

She says, 'Something fundamental is going on with the workforce. I am concerned about the calibre of training. Even some of those with a degree – I find their writing skills and pedagogical knowledge not up to the expected standard. There is also lack of employability skills, such as staff not knowing how to talk to parents.'

Broad view

So how did we get here? A comprehensive review of all early years qualifications is outside the scope of this feature, but *Nursery World* and CACHE have produced a comparison of how the old NNEB compares with more recent qualifications (see table overleaf).

Commentators also point to the historical context. Eunice Lumsden, head of early years at the University of Northampton, says, 'The whole thing has been utterly shaped by ideology. The Labour government were focused on the family. The level of investment that was put into the workforce was having a really positive impact. The Graduate Leader Fund was worth millions and

developed a new cohort of people into the workforce – many of whom were working class.

Other flagship policies of the Labour government of 1997-2010 included Sure Start. But the subsequent recession and installation of a Conservative-led coalition government changed the focus, says Dr Lumsden.

‘We have maintained some financial input but because of the nature of the sector, being mixed economy, they can’t control it. The 30 hours of free childcare was a curve ball thrown in by David Cameron to win the election. Now it is really hard to get hold of the political direction. It’s about getting parents into work.’

Her comments are echoed by Damien Fitzgerald, principal lecturer in early years at Sheffield Hallam University, who has said that while early years education has emerged as one of the cornerstones of Conservative government policy, with £6bn being spent by 2020 on childcare support, including £1bn on the 30 hours scheme, the ‘Government sees childcare as an employment issue rather than about children’s outcomes.’

Indeed, the Sutton Trust’s *Closing Gaps Early* report from 2017 has pointed to a trend of money being directed ‘away from quality early education for child development towards childcare affordability for working families’, adding that ‘neither the tax-free childcare scheme nor the 30 hour entitlement for working families are well-designed to promote social mobility.’

This is despite the Government having stated aims on social mobility, with £50m to boost school nursery provision in some of the most disadvantaged areas announced in December. Meanwhile, the Treasury Select Committee has also called for the 30 hours funding rates to be increased, saying they are based on out-of-date research.

A recent attempt to address the systemic issues facing the sector was made in the *Workforce Strategy*, with progress on areas such as new qualifications. However, three key pledges on graduates have been abandoned. Childcare minister Nadhim Zahawi recently said ‘recruiting graduates into the PVI workforce remains very challenging, despite significant investment by successive governments since 2006.’

timeline: early years qualifications reform

- **1945** Founding of the National Nursery Examination Board (NNEB) – first wave of NNEB exams are held in 1946
- **1972** NNEB given parity with O-Levels (replaced by GCSEs and equivalent to Level 2)
- **1974** Men allowed to sit NNEB
- **1985** First BTEC National Certificate/ Diplomas become available for childcare/ early years
- **1987** National Council for Vocational Qualifications is set up
- **1990s** First early years NVQs start to emerge
- **1992** Diploma in Nursery Nursing is launched
- **1993** First early childhood studies degrees are launched
- **1994** NNEB becomes CACHE
- **2001** Foundation degrees launched
- **2007** Early Years Professional Status is launched by the Government
- **2011** Diploma for the Children and Young People’s Workforce launched
- **2012** *Nutbrown Review* finds 445 different early years qualifications at different levels
- **2013** Early Years Teacher Status launched by the Government
- **2014** Early Years Educator launched as ‘the’ Level 3 qualification following *Nutbrown Review*
-
- **2018** First early years apprenticeship standards expected to be approved at Level 3 following long delay
- **2019** New Level 2 qualifications to be available for delivery
- **2020** Childcare and Education T-Level to be introduced following the Government’s *Skills Plan*.

Carolyn Silberfeld, chair of the Early Childhood Studies Degrees Network, argues that this political context has paved the way for low salaries. ‘The *Nutbrown Review* talks about quality of learning and development for children, but the quality of the experience is the quality of the staff. If you are looking to provide convenient and affordable childcare and you are not providing sufficient funding, where do you think the shortfall is? You don’t employ the highest quality staff because they are expensive.’

‘For girls’

The NNEB’s mission in 1945 was ‘to hold examinations and grant certificates to girl students who had followed a designated course in a nursery approved by the ministers of education and health’. Poor pay and conditions were institutionalised from the start (the Equal Pay Act didn’t come in until 1970). Things were slow to change, says Dr Lumsden. ‘In the 60s we had mums doing playgroups, then the National Childminding Association (which became PACEY) in the 70s, and in the 90s we started talking about getting paid properly. But it was still seen as women’s work.’

The 1990s also gave rise to early childhood studies degrees, a sector-led move. Ms Silberfeld says these degrees were in part ‘a feminist agenda – to get proper qualifications for those who had experience working with children but didn’t have the appropriate training.’

Early childhood is still heavily tied to women, despite recent attempts to rectify the gender imbalance, such as a ‘men in childcare’ campaign.

Dr Lumsden says, ‘The sorts of people who go into early years tend to be, broadly: girls with difficulties at school; people who are told they are good with children; and women who volunteer because it fits around their child’s school hours.’

Are there any signs of hope? Janet King, senior subject specialist, childcare at CACHE, thinks so, despite the ‘challenges’ of 30 hours and recruitment at Level 3.

‘I do think the workforce is in a good place in terms of the future. There’s the new trailblazers and standards, and hope for new early years degree apprenticeships. There are SEND qualifications for CPD – that is all positive. Things are going in the right direction, but it is probably a very exhausted workforce at the moment.’

She adds, ‘I think the Department for Education are recognising the importance of early years in terms of care and education for a child in the moment, as well as for long-term life chances, but that recognition needs to be accompanied with appropriate investment.’ ➤



	NNEB (1988-90)	EYE (2014)	T-Level (2020)
Entry requirements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Aged at least 16. Must be able to communicate effectively 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Aged at least 16. L2 English maths and ICT on completion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Aged at least 16. L2 English maths and ICT on completion
Guided learning hours	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ 1,260, of which 40 per cent are placements and the rest in college 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ From around 490 for work-based to over 1,000 for a college-based qualification ■ Benchmark of 720-750 placement hours for a college-based qualification 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ 1,800 hours over two years ■ Placement time: as yet unclear. T-Levels prescribe at least 420 hours, but this will be too low to give a licence to practice
Assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Written exam (multiple choice and an essay) ■ Course work (including folder of 60 child observations) ■ Practical work experience ■ Pass needed in all three 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ All CACHE students to pass mandatory units and complete longitudinal study/study task. College students to complete one to three external assessments (which can be reattempted once). Work-based students must show competence in a real work environment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Core content (20 to 50 per cent study time) assessed through an external test and an employer-set project ■ Specialist content assessed through performance outcomes to determine whether a student has 'threshold competence'
Age range	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Skills-based criteria to be met with children from birth to seven years 11 months, including family experience (with child under one) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Skills-based criteria to be met with children from birth to five. Knowledge base of birth to seven years 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Core content covers children up to the age of 19 with specialism in early years education and childcare
Course overview	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Child development (birth to seven years, 11 months) to include physical, intellectual, cognitive and language, social and emotional ■ Holistic development ■ Attachment and factors affecting the development of attachment ■ Transition effects and role of the practitioner ■ Theories and philosophies in relation to how children learn and develop ■ Equality of opportunity ■ Supporting children with SEND ■ Plan, implement and review activities and experiences for babies and children (individual, groups, focused for areas of development and personal need) ■ Students encouraged to develop resource files for activities and opportunities ■ Work with others including parents/carers and other professionals ■ Model positive behaviour ■ Use observation to monitor progress, identify need and plan for next steps ■ Complementary curriculum including cookery, needlecraft, drama and environmental studies 	<p>Top-line criteria:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Support and promote children's early education and development ■ Plan and provide effective care, teaching and learning that enables children to progress and prepares them for school ■ Make accurate and productive use of assessment ■ Develop effective and informed practice ■ Safeguard and promote the health, safety and welfare of children ■ Work in partnership with the key person, colleagues, parents and/or carers or other professionals (N.B. this list is headings only – more detail is given in the qualification criteria) 	<p>Core content</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Child development ■ Supporting education ■ Safeguarding, health and safety and well-being ■ Behaviour ■ Observation and assessment ■ Equality and diversity ■ Special educational needs and disability <p>Specialist content</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Performance Outcome 1: support and promote children's play, development and early education ■ Performance Outcome 2: develop relationships with children to facilitate their development ■ Performance Outcome 3: plan, provide and review care, play and educational opportunities to enable children to progress ■ Performance Outcome 4: safeguard and promote the health, safety and well-being of children