**Early Childhood Studies Degrees Network (ECSDN)**

**Response to the Foundation years and the UK Government's life chances strategy inquiry**

The Early Childhood Studies Degrees Network (ECSDN) represents professionals in higher education institutions who provide degrees in early childhood studies (ECS), an interdisciplinary academic field which encompasses research, development and critical enquiry in early childhood and early childhood services. ECS degrees provide a base for improving the knowledge and practice, including professional practice, of people working or wanting to work in the area of early childhood and children’s services both with and for children and their families.

Early Childhood Studies degrees were developed from the recognition that there was a need for an academic discipline and subject area focused on early childhood to serve as a basis for research, development and critical enquiry in early childhood and early childhood services. The degrees, offered by more than 60 institutions across the U.K., provide a broad base of holistic knowledge and understanding appropriate to working with the youngest children and their families.

The academic study of early childhood focuses on children from conception to the age of eight years. (QAA benchmarks, 2014) An holistic approach is essential to bring together different aspects of learning and development to ensure that children have the strongest foundations for their future learning. There is considerable evidence that the earliest years provide the foundations for the future and for life long outcomes. Young children require secure attachments, love, nurture, and play opportunities to support all aspects of their development; and the first 1001 days have a crucial role to play (Leadsom *et al.,* 2013). Programmes which encourage parents, particularly mothers, to spend time getting to know their babies as individuals, rather than suggesting a 'parenting formula', have been shown to be more successful. We urge the Committee to use the commonly agreed language of ‘Early Childhood Education and Care’ to represent the uniqueness of this period of development, rather than the term ‘Early Education’. This recognises the importance of nurturing young children so that they are able to learn, develop, and flourish.

Young children require warm and sensitive environments within and outside the home to support their development. If they attend early childhood settings they are likely to do best with graduate leaders leading practice (Sylva *et al.,* 2014). It is well documented that the higher level of practitioner qualifications, the better the quality of the setting and improved outcomes for children (DfE, 2012). The importance of having a quality, highly skilled workforce cannot be over-emphasised, particularly in light of the Government’s funded provision for 2-year-olds and its intention to increase the provision to 30-hours for 3-4 year olds in England. At present, the majority of staff higher qualifications are in the maintained sector, yet the overwhelming majority of young children aged 2- 4 years old are in private, voluntary and independent provider provision. Those staff who have undertaken Early Childhood Studies degrees (and their equivalent) are in a unique position of having the critical knowledge and understanding of how to support children’s learning and development in an holistic way, in order to improve children’s life chances.

There is substantial empirical evidence and numerous Parliamentary reports that recognise the importance of what happens in early childhood and the impact on life chances (APPG, Fit and Healthy Childhoods, 2015). We strongly urge the Committee to use this inquiry, not just to add to this wealth of evidence, but to ensure that action is taken to actually support systemic transformation that will enhance the life chances of our youngest generation now and in the future.

**References**

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