A workforce development plan for the early childhood care and education sector in Ireland

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Foreword

by Barry Andrews, TD
Minister for Children and Youth Affairs

The publication of the *Workforce Development Plan for the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector in Ireland* represents an important step forward in our collective journey towards ensuring that young children in Ireland have positive and enriching experiences in all ECCE settings they attend. The development of the ECCE workforce has been identified as a key 'pillar of quality' alongside the publication of the national practice frameworks, *Síolta* and *Aistear* and sustained financial investment in service provision. Since we began the research and development process towards publication of this Plan in 2007, the economic situation in Ireland has changed. However, despite our challenging fiscal climate, we have managed to stay focused on our commitments to young children as is evidenced by the successful introduction of the Free Preschool Year.

This Workforce Development Plan represents a significant body of research and consultation across a diverse range of stakeholders in the delivery of high quality ECCE service provision. Many of the recommendations are already being implemented; others may take more time as they represent challenges to traditional practices in education and training. However, regardless of the timeline for implementation, we now have a clear idea of our destination and one that is shared collectively.

The challenges are undoubted but the rewards are also clear; a better prepared, skilled workforce in our early childhood care and education settings will improve the quality of centre based early childhood experiences of our children and impact positively on the lives of the children and their families.

Barry Andrews, TD
Minister for Children and Youth Affairs

Foreword

by Mary Coughlan, TD
An Tánaiste and Minister for Education and Skills

In the past two decades, the Irish government has invested substantially in the development of the Early Childhood Care and Education sector. This investment has resulted in the availability to parents and children of a wide variety of choice for childcare and early education. It has also enabled the development of a support infrastructure which is designed to promote and develop the quality of children's experiences in ECCE settings. The development of the workforce in the ECCE sector was identified as being an essential element in this objective. To determine the existing educational attainment of the workforce and the needs of the workforce, an extensive programme of research and development began which has now culminated in the publication of the Workforce Development Plan for the ECCE sector.

The Plan identifies the way forward in terms of upskilling the existing workforce and ensuring that those who enter the workforce in the future are appropriately prepared for their role. It also identifies career paths and progression routes for those who choose this area of work and provides clarity regarding the core skills and knowledge essential to practice effectively in an ECCE setting. There are challenges for the education and training sectors in Ireland if the ECCE workforce are to avail of the type of flexible training and education opportunities identified by the sector themselves as being a good fit with busy working lives but these are challenges faced by other sectors as well.

I welcome the publication of the Workforce Development Plan and look forward to the implementation of the objectives set out in this plan.

Mary Coughlan, TD
An Tánaiste and Minister for Education and Skills

Section 1 – Introduction and Vision

1.1   Introduction

This Workforce Development Plan for the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) sector in Ireland is the culmination of a significant process of research and consultation across the diverse range of stakeholders in the sector. That process has resulted in the identification of a number of agreed perspectives on the type of workforce needed to support the development of high quality ECCE service in Ireland and the main challenges associated with achieving these goals (DES, 2009).

The generation of a Workforce Development Plan is a key element of the Government's commitment to early childhood care and education. National and international research has established that the skills and qualifications of adults working with young children is a critical factor in determining the quality of young children's early childhood care and education experiences. The National Childcare Strategy 2006-2010 formally set out the requirement to develop the skills and qualifications profile of the ECCE workforce.

This document sets out the scope and vision for workforce development, presents the main challenges and opportunities and discusses the implementation strategy.

1.2   Definitions and scope of this plan

Early childhood is the period from birth to six years. It is a unique stage in human life, '...*that must be nurtured, respected, valued and supported*... (Síolta[1], Principle 1). Early Childhood Care and Education services within the remit of this plan have been determined by the following definition agreed in the *National Childcare Strategy: Report of the Expert Working Group on Childcare.*

> *"...daycare facilities and services for pre-school children and school-going children out of school hours. It includes services offering care, education and socialisation opportunities for children to the benefit of children, parents, employers and the wider community. Thus, services such as pre-schools, naíonraí [Irish language pre-schools], daycare services, crèches, play groups, childminding and after-school groups are included, but schools (primary, secondary and special) and residential centres for children are excluded" (DJELR, 1999).*

The ECCE workforce, therefore, is all adults involved in the delivery of these services. While acknowledging that teachers and staff in primary school based settings also work with children in the early childhood age range, this plan does not have a brief regarding their professional development.

1.3   Vision for the ECCE Workforce

While the workforce in ECCE in Ireland can be characterised as diverse in terms of philosophies, practice and qualifications, there is a high degree of consensus around the qualifications profile required for the workforce, which is that:

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[1]   *Síolta* is the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education published by the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education in 2006.

The ECCE workforce should be supported to achieve qualifications (appropriate to their occupational role and profile) that equip them with the skills, knowledge, competencies, values and attitudes to:

- Deliver high quality, enriching early childhood care and education experiences for all children aged birth to six years.
- Work effectively with parents and guardians in a mutually supportive partnership towards achieving positive outcomes for children.
- Engage in interdisciplinary professional work practices designed to support the delivery of consistent quality in the early childhood service provision experiences of young children and their families.

While issues such as the status and the terms and conditions of employment of people working in the sector are very much to the fore, they are outside the scope of this policy document.

1.4   Outline of plan

The key areas that emerged from an extensive programme of research and consultation on the workforce in the ECCE sector are:

- The necessity for clearly articulated professional pathways into and across professional domains of practice related to the care and education of children. These include occupational role descriptors with associated qualification levels.
- The establishment of an agreed set of national standards for all awards in early childhood care and education (incorporating core knowledge, skills, competencies and work experience) across all relevant levels of the National Framework of Qualifications in Ireland.
- Access to flexible, affordable and nationally accredited learning opportunities at all levels of qualification for pre-service and in-service professional development.
- The necessity to ensure consistent quality of ECCE courses nationally across a range of variables including content, delivery and work placement.

The Workforce Development Plan addresses these issues in turn and sets out objectives, actions and key agencies involved in implementation, specifically that:

- The Occupational Profiles set out in the 2002 *Model Framework for Education, Training and Professional Development in Early Childhood Care and Education*, together with *Síolta: the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education* and *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*, should inform the development of national awards in ECCE at all levels of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ).
- Occupational Profiles and national award standards (NFQ Levels 1-6) should inform programme development and validation of all education and training programmes in ECCE.
- Occupational Profiles should be reviewed regularly (at least every 5 years) to ensure that they continue to be valid.
- All sectors providing further and higher education training opportunities for the ECCE sector should put in place a five year plan for ECCE course development and implementation, in partnership, where appropriate, with their funding agency, with particular regard to course quality and to flexible delivery to meet the needs of the workforce.

- Recognition of Prior Learning should be an integral element in education and training programmes in ECCE.
- The qualifications of staff involved in the delivery of State funded further education and training programmes in ECCE should be part of the programme validation process.
- The Early Years Education Policy Unit should oversee, monitor and evaluate the implementation of the Workforce Development Plan for the ECCE sector.

As well as setting out the objectives, actions and agencies involved, the following sections also highlight the positive action that has been taken by many agencies as a result, both of their participation in this initiative and the fact that workforce development across all sectors, not just the ECCE sector, is a national issue.

Section 2 – Challenges and Opportunities

2.1   Introduction

The research and consultation phase of the Workforce Development Plan identified the challenges for the ECCE sector if an existing workforce is to achieve further education and training. It also identified the challenges for the Further and Higher Education Sector if life-long learning is to become a reality. These challenges, while set out in national and international policy documents, are restated briefly in section 2.2

2.2   Lifelong Learning

In the context of a lifelong learning agenda, the importance of flexible delivery of education and training programmes at all levels of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) has been clearly stated in a range of national and international policy documents. The European Commission and its Member States have been working on a number of policy initiatives in the field of education and training since 2000. The European Council Conclusions on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training ("ET 2020"), adopted in May 2009, set four strategic objectives:

- making lifelong learning and mobility a reality.
- improving the quality and efficiency of education and training.
- promoting equity, social cohesion and active citizenship.
- enhancing creativity and innovation, including entrepreneurship, at all levels of education and training.

Strategic Objective 1 on Making Lifelong Learning and Mobility a Reality is as follows:

The challenges posed by demographic change and the regular need to update and develop skills in line with changing economic and social circumstances call for a lifelong approach to learning and for education and training systems which are more responsive to change and more open to the wider world......, the establishment of more flexible learning pathways — including better transitions between the various education and training sectors, greater openness towards non-formal and informal learning, and increased transparency and recognition of learning outcomes. Further efforts are also required to promote adult learning, to increase the quality of guidance systems, and to make learning more attractive in general — including through the development of new forms of learning and the use of new teaching and learning technologies.

In Ireland, the 2008 report on 'Building Ireland's Smart Economy' (Department of the Taoiseach) also clearly identifies these issues as essential in ensuring the achievement of a highly skilled workforce across all industry sectors,

Ireland cannot afford to leave anyone behind in the drive to improve the skills and competencies of our work force and to ensure that workers possess the skills required to service a Smart economy. This effort starts with pre-school education, which has been demonstrated as a very effective intervention with proven and social benefits, and extends throughout the formal and informal educational system. In the modern economy, a particular focus needs to be on efforts to increase participation in lifelong learning by providing opportunities for education and training, in order to facilitate required upskilling and reskilling.

> **The challenges facing the ECCE workforce are a microcosm of the wider challenges that must be met for all Ireland's learners across further and higher education and training in the immediate and longer term future.**

2.3 Occupational Profiles and National Qualification System/Award Standards

The National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) came into effect in 2004 and is being used to profile the knowledge, skill and competence requirements of the sector and to identify specific actions that are required from stakeholders in the qualifications system. The interaction between the NFQ and the occupational profiles of the ECCE workforce is such that developments and/or changes to either will require careful monitoring by the Early Years Education Policy Unit.

2.3.1 Occupational Profiles

Specific occupational roles and responsibilities were first set out in 2002 as part of the development of the *Model Framework for Education, Training and Professional Development in Early Childhood Care and Education* (Department of Justice and Law Reform, 2002). These profiles pre-dated the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) but have since been validated against the NFQ and against the practice frameworks of *Síolta: the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education* (CECDE 2006; DES, 2010) and *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2009) (See Appendix C). There is agreement amongst practitioners and education and training providers alike that the 2002 occupational role profiles, once complemented by *Síolta* and *Aistear* should form the basis for the development of award standards at all levels of the NFQ.

Action(s)	Stakeholder(s)
Ensure that the agreed occupational profiles in the ECCE sector and relevant practice frameworks[2] continue to impact on award standards and on the development and review of programmes of further and higher education and training.	Relevant government departments (coordinated by the Early Years Education Policy Unit), Awarding Bodies,[3] education and training providers.
Review the occupational profiles on a regular basis (every five years) to ensure their continuing relevance to the sector and their continuing alignment with the NFQ.	Early Years Education Policy Unit.

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[2] Child Care (Pre-School Services) (No 2) Regulations 2006, *Síolta: the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education* and *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*.

[3] The Awarding Bodies are the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI), the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC), the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC), the Universities and the Dublin Institute of Technology. The NQAI, HETAC and FETAC will be amalgamated into a single qualifications and quality assurance agency.

2.3.2   National Award Standards

The development of ECCE Award Standards at all levels of the NFQ will provide stakeholders with common benchmarks for the development and delivery of education and training programmes and allow practitioners and employers to identify career pathways and progression routes.

Progress to date

In October 2009, on behalf of FETAC, the Further Education and Training Awards Council, the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) established a working group on Award Standards for ECCE courses at Levels 1 to 6 on the NFQ. In June 2010, FETAC reported that, *A revised Level 5 Certificate in Early Childhood Care and Education has been agreed with Council, a draft Level 4 has being proposed for consultation and it is planned that an Advanced Certificate at Level 6 will be published for consultation by September 2010 and agreed by Council by the end of 2010. The planned release of these awards in 2011 will be a significant development within the sector.*

Action(s)	Stakeholder(s)
Completion of Level 6 award standard.	FETAC.
Review existing education and training programmes against these award standards at Levels 4, 5, and 6.	FETAC, education and training providers including private providers, VECs and FÁS.
New programme development against these award standards (including programme validation by FETAC) by education and training providers.	FETAC, education and training providers including private providers, VECs and FÁS.
Ensure that programme validation and review processes at higher education Level 6 – 10 take account of the developments in relation to the occupational profiles for the ECCE sector.	Awarding Bodies, education and training providers including Universities, Institutes of Technology (IoTs), private providers.

2.4   Access to flexible, affordable and nationally accredited learning opportunities

The outcomes of national consultation on the Workforce Development Plan showed overwhelmingly (97% positive responses) that issues related to access and effective participation in education and training programmes would be key to the achievement of workforce development objectives.

There were a number of specific challenges identified as Figure 1 illustrates:

Figure 1: Issues in relation to access and participation
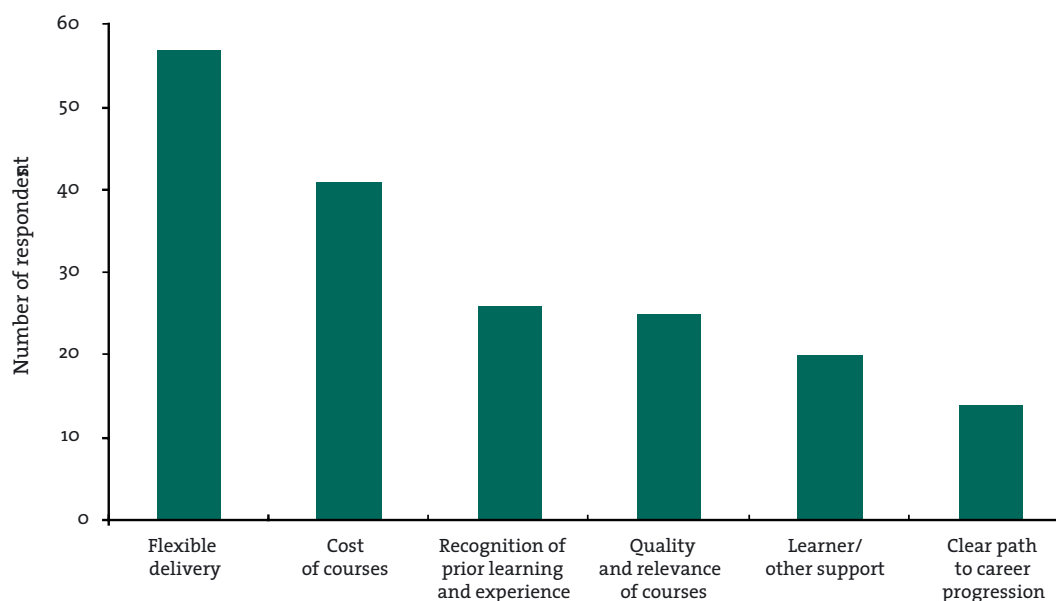
These challenges can also be differentiated according to the perspectives of a number of distinct 'client groups'. These groups are:

1. New entrants to the workforce who wish to become appropriately qualified for specific occupational roles and responsibilities.
2. Unqualified practitioners in the current workforce who want to achieve a Level 5 award.
3. Qualified practitioners (Level 4 or 5) who wish to progress to higher levels.

Each challenge is addressed in the following sections and where necessary, recommended actions are differentiated according to the different client groups.

2.4.1   Flexible Delivery

Constructive suggestions regarding the flexible delivery of education and training programmes that emerged from the consultation process included:

- Part-time opportunities such as afternoon, evening and weekend courses.
- Blended courses that incorporate online and classroom based elements.
- Apprenticeship based systems that combine on-the-job training with classroom based training.
- Modular courses with credit systems.
- Summer/Easter block release courses.

These suggestions reflect the different perspectives of the 3 identified client groups. A sizeable proportion of those wishing to enrol in education and training programmes are already in the workplace and, therefore, unable to attend full-time courses. In the region of 40% of the current ECCE workforce have not achieved basic level qualifications required for participation in the Free Preschool Year Scheme which began in January 2010, (i.e., a major award in Childcare/ECCE at Level 5 on the NFQ or equivalent). For people studying prior to entry into the workforce, the courses available in the Further and Higher Education and Training Sectors are, in the main, offered on a full-time basis only and it is only these full-time course places that are currently subsidised.

2.4.2   Meeting the needs of people in the workplace

The challenges and opportunities for the Further and Higher Education and Training Sector are to deliver training that meets the needs of people in the workplace. Specifically to:

1. Provide a range of delivery options including online delivery and blended learning. Distance learning opportunities are very limited in the field of ECCE. There is significant potential for growth in this area, particularly at higher award levels (e.g., Oscail Bachelor of Arts model).

2. Further modularise Further and Higher Education and training programmes.

3. Outreach from third level institutions – many aspiring learners in the ECCE workforce report a geographical barrier to participation in higher level programmes. Possible solutions could involve collaboration between Sate sponsored education and training providers in local areas to deliver programmes on an outreach basis (e.g., IoTs and VECs).

2.4.3   Progress to date

There has been some progress in the responsiveness of the Further and Higher Education and Training Sectors to the need for increased flexible provision. For example,

- **The VEC sector –** This sector is the largest provider of full-time training courses in ECCE at NFQ Levels 5 and 6. In their submission to the consultation phase of the Workforce Development Plan, the Irish Vocational Education Association (IVEA) outlined a very welcome commitment to exploring innovative practices which would meet the challenge of flexible delivery of education and training programmes for all client groups in the ECCE sector (See www.omcya.ie). There is already a wide range of part-time course provision offered through the VEC sector which is generally self-financing. Information on the availability and cost of these part-time courses is being compiled.

- **FÁS –** FÁS have a long tradition of combining workplace and classroom based learning through its Traineeship model and One Step Up programmes. FÁS is also in a position to respond swiftly to local demands for the delivery of education and training programmes. The transfer, with effect from 1st May 2010, of responsibility for skills and training policy and for FÁS from the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Innovation to the Department of Education and Skills is likely to realise greater synergies in course provision in the Further Education Sector.

- **Skillnets** is funded by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Innovation from the resources of the National Training Fund and enables grant aided training. Each network delivers training, upskilling and professional development programmes for its members that are enterprise-led and designed to specific industry needs. Up until 2009 there were two Skillnets within the ECCE sector that only private pre-school services could avail of; the Childcare Business Development Network and the NCNA Childcare Skillnet. There were, however, no applications received from the ECCE sector for Skillnets in the 2010 round of applications.

- **Higher Education** – Higher Education and Training Programmes tend traditionally to have less flexibility in terms of delivery. However, this is beginning to change, particularly in the IoTs with Blanchardstown, Carlow, Tralee, Sligo and Letterkenny Institutes offering a variety of Level 6, 7 and 8 programmes in ECCE relevant areas on a part-time basis. NUI Galway has also introduced a part-time BA in Early Childhood Studies and Practice (Level 8) with exit awards after year 1 and year 2. It should be

noted, however, that these part-time programmes are subject to fees and generally do not attract any State subsidy.

- **Private and Community and Voluntary Provision –** historically, in the ECCE sector in Ireland, a number of community and voluntary and private providers of education and training programmes have met the education needs of those working in ECCE services. This tradition continues and in some instances (e.g., through National Voluntary Childcare Organisations) is subsidised by State funding.

Action(s)	Stakeholders
Further and higher education and training providers to develop and implement 5 year plans to respond to issues such as flexible learning, modular delivery and quality assurance of courses.	Education and training providers in further and higher education including Universities, IoTs, FÁS, VEC sector, Awarding Bodies, HEA, funding agencies in relevant government departments.
Monitoring of implementation of 5 year plans.	Early Years Education Policy Unit.

2.4.4   Funding of Courses

Having found a suitable course, the next major hurdle identified by learners is that of funding the cost of the programme as part-time further or higher education and training provision in Ireland does not typically attract the same financial supports as full-time courses. Work in ECCE services in Ireland is generally low waged and the cost of participation in both full-time and part-time education is prohibitive for many people.

The work based training opportunities such as the FÁS Traineeship Programme, Services to Business (e.g., One Step Up) and Skillnets are funded, in the main, by the State. The Traineeship Programme alone expended €4.45m in 2008.

There isn't a fund available to assist the ECCE workforce to engage in education and training and in the current economic climate, resources would have to be diverted from other priorities for such a fund to be put in place.

Action(s)	Stakeholder(s)
Agencies responsible for the funding of education and training programmes in ECCE will be asked to identify and prioritise programmes which incorporate flexible methods of delivery designed to meet the needs of learners in the workplace.	Relevant government departments, Early Years Education Policy Unit.
Each funding agency should report to the Early Years Education Policy Unit in this regard.	Relevant government departments, Early Years Education Policy Unit.
Produce annual report on patterns of provision and scope for targeting resources in support of flexible delivery.	Relevant government departments, Early Years Education Policy Unit.

2.4.5   Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)

In 2005, the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland published *National Principles and Operational Guidelines for the Recognition of Prior Learning*. This document addresses quality, assessment, documentation, communication and guidance issues related to the implementation of RPL across all education and training providers and Awarding Bodies.

Recognition of Prior Learning has been defined as,

... a generic term that describes the system for recognising and awarding or transferring credit to learners on the basis of learning that has occurred prior to admission to a particular programme. In order to have learning recognised the applicant will be required to provide evidence of that learning.

RPL, in general, presents major challenges for education and training providers that are well described in the recent publication by the Education in Employment working group '*Recognition of Prior Learning – a focus on practice*' (Cork Institute of Technology [CIT], 2009)

The findings from this research illustrate that the recognition of prior learning is already challenging the current structures of third level academic institutions, requiring them to be flexible in terms of mode of delivery and accrediting prior experiential learning. The findings also emphasise the importance of inter institutional cooperation and highlight the need for sharing information and expertise to further progress the recognition of prior learning nationally...An attitudinal and cultural shift must be engaged with to overcome the barriers and negative myths associated with recognising prior learning in order to successfully address learner requirements in the twenty-first century. (CIT, 2009: Executive Summary)

Of the ECCE workforce, the client groups who are already in employment present particular challenges for RPL systems. The absence of regulation on qualifications to practice in this area resulted in a wide variety of education and training programmes and providers. Some of these programmes were accredited either nationally or internationally but many were awarded by education and training providers without external validation and accreditation.

RPL is not an 'easier' option to the achievement of an award and often requires substantial effort on the part of both the learner and the educational institution. In general, RPL is used to:

- access a particular education and training programme (i.e., establish that entry requirements have been met).
- achieve exemption from aspects of a particular education and training programme (e.g., specific modules or advanced entry into second year).
- establish if the learner has met the requirements for the achievement of a complete award.

Despite the difficulties, RPL processes will have to feature in the implementation of a Workforce Development Plan if the diversity of learning acquired through a range of formal and non-formal opportunities is to be recognised and retained in the ECCE workforce.

Impact of RPL

It is important to consider how the different dimensions of RPL impact on the three client groups identified in this plan.

For new entrants to the workforce, RPL does not play a major role as, typically, they will undertake a full-time learning course before seeking to enter employment in the sector.

However, RPL may be important in meeting the entry requirements for their initial course.

RPL has a key role for the second group - unqualified practitioners in the current workforce who want to achieve a Level 5 award. It is likely that RPL will be most helpful to achieve exemption from aspects of a particular education and training programme rather than for access to a full award, although there may be some cases where access to a full award is possible.

RPL also has a key role for the third group - qualified practitioners (Level 4 or 5) who wish to progress to higher levels. As with the second group, it is likely that RPL will be most helpful to achieve exemption from aspects of a particular education and training programme rather than for access to a full award.

Further and higher education and training providers should have regard to the RPL needs of the three client groups, particularly in relation to the second and third groups. Programmes for unqualified practitioners in the current workforce who want to achieve a Level 5 award or for qualified practitioners who wish to progress to higher levels should look to RPL to provide exemption from aspects of a particular education and training programme.

Action(s)	Stakeholder(s)
Build RPL into programme design and use RPL for entry and exemptions. Develop RPL Programmes to meet the needs of learners in ECCE sector.	Education and training providers (further and higher education), Awarding Bodies.
Fund agencies to facilitate embedding of RPL in all course provision.	Relevant government departments and funding agencies.
Make information and guidance on RPL available to learners.	Education and training providers (further and higher education), Awarding Bodies.

2.4.6 Quality and Relevance of Courses

The main challenges identified are the lack of consistency by training providers, especially in relation to the hours required to achieve certification and the variability in the skills and qualifications of those delivering courses. These issues apply irrespective of the 3 identified client groups.

Skills and qualifications of staff delivering programmes in ECCE

This issue is associated more with the Further Education and Training Sector as the relevant qualifications and expertise of staff delivering programmes leading to awards in Higher Education institutions is a required element of programme validation. However, within the Further Education and Training Sector, there are no policies or procedures in place which would ensure that those delivering programmes in ECCE have the necessary qualifications or expertise to do so. Given the specialised nature of the knowledge and skills required to practice effectively in ECCE services, it is reasonable to expect that further education and training providers would ensure that staff delivering relevant parts of ECCE programmes are qualified in ECCE, have appropriate sectoral experience and that their knowledge and skills are up to date with latest developments in research, policy and practice in ECCE.

Quality Assurance of courses

As an Awarding Body, FETAC's role is to ensure that courses at Levels 1-6 on the NFQ, that lead to the same qualification, have the same learning outcomes for students. Once the learning outcomes can be assured, it allows for flexible delivery of courses by course providers.

FETAC have established comprehensive quality assurance policy and procedures to ensure that all training providers delivering accredited awards meet a range of criteria.

This quality assurance process includes external authentication whereby an independent external authenticator is appointed by the provider for each major, special purpose and supplemental award. The external authenticator must be independent of the centre to which they are assigned. The external authenticator will moderate assessment results for an award or across a number of awards within a related field or sub-field of the major, special purpose or supplemental award. The outcome of the external authentication process is a report which comments on the effectiveness of the application of the assessment process and procedures and on the extent to which the marks/grades conform to national standards.

There is, however, a dual Quality Assurance system still in operation with FETAC appointing external examiners to the VEC[4] sector.

Within the Higher Education and Training Sector, all programmes in ECCE leading to awards have been subjected to rigorous validation and review processes (either by HETAC or by the Higher Education institution involved) involving the preparation of a detailed submission document which is then interrogated by an expert validation panel.

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[4]   FETAC's quality assurance procedures have not been fully implemented in the VEC sector owing to an industrial dispute with the Teachers Union of Ireland.

Action(s)	Stakeholder(s)
Education and training programmes in ECCE should be delivered, where appropriate, by persons appropriately qualified in early childhood care and education.	Education and training providers (further and higher education), Awarding Bodies.
Programme validation to require specific details of the qualifications of staff delivering the course.	Education and training providers (further and higher education), Awarding Bodies.
Information relating to the qualification profile of staff delivering ECCE education and training programmes should be monitored and published.	Education and training providers (further and higher education), Awarding Bodies, Early Years Education Policy Unit.
Aggregate data on the Quality Assurance process for all programmes in the ECCE sector to be published.	Awarding Bodies.

2.4.7   Learner and other supports

Issues identified as challenges for the Workforce Development Plan under this heading related, in the main, to the identification that many of those engaging in courses in ECCE, particularly at lower levels on the NQF, have poor records of previous academic achievement. Literacy and language supports were identified as being important as well as mentoring and guidance. The fact that those working in ECCE services may have low levels of educational attainment and may have specific challenges to face in taking on academic courses was previously identified in the Model Framework publication in 2002. However, the substantial upskilling that has taken place within the ECCE workforce in recent years would indicate that education and training providers have taken account of these issues. The quality assurance processes required by FETAC and within higher education also mean that education and training providers have to put policies and procedures in place to provide a range of learner supports. It is important that such commitments are realised in everyday practice across all education and training providers particularly for those who may have had negative experiences in the education system previously.

Action(s)	Stakeholder(s)
Implementation of established policies and procedures relating to learner supports across all education and training providers.	Education and training providers.
Provision of information to learners on all available learner supports.	Education and training providers (further and higher education), Awarding Bodies.
Monitoring of implementation of above.	Awarding Bodies, Relevant Government Departments.

2.4.8   Clear progression paths

As part of a lifelong learning continuum, opportunities for learners to progress from one level of qualification to another, particularly from further education and training programmes to higher education and training programmes must be available.

Such opportunities have been developed by FETAC, the Institutes of Technology and the University sector. However, the background research to this document showed that the number of learners availing of these routes is very limited, particularly for mature entrants. This may be because education and training programmes at higher levels are primarily offered on a full-time basis and these do not meet the needs of learners who wish to combine work with study. It may also be because of the number of learners who do not have nationally accredited qualifications which will afford them access to such opportunities. These learners would, therefore, require access to RPL programmes to progress to higher education.

Action(s)	Stakeholder(s)
Higher Education and Training Providers must make a range of programmes available at Level 7 and above on the NFQ, that are delivered to meet the needs of those learners who wish to combine work and study. As has been identified previously, these programmes should incorporate RPL processes to achieve exemption from aspects of such a programme.	Universities, IoTs, Private colleges, HEA, Awarding Bodies.

2.5   Conclusion

In this section, the key challenges to be addressed by the Workforce Development Plan for the ECCE sector have been detailed. It is positive to note that since the commencement of the research and development process towards publication of the Plan, some progress has been made in achieving many of these objectives. However, to sustain this progress will require continued attention and oversight. Section three of this report outlines how this might be achieved.

Section 3 – Implementation

3.1 Introduction

In section two, the key challenges for the Workforce Development Plan have been identified together with the actions required to address these issues. Ensuring the effective delivery of such a complex range of objectives requires that State investment in further and higher education and training in the ECCE sector, including work based training, should be directed and monitored.

3.2 Directing State investment in Further and Higher Education and Training in the ECCE sector

There are multiple stakeholders in the Further and Higher Education and Training Sectors, including the VECs, the IoTs, Universities, FÁS and the Awarding Bodies. The research to date has shown what the education and training requirements are for the ECCE sector and has identified how the Further and Higher Education and Training Sectors could respond to those requirements. To measure this response, the Early Years Education Policy Unit will carry out the following functions:

- Development, publication and dissemination of public information associated with the implementation plan.
- Collection of relevant data from all agencies involved in the implementation plan.
- Monitoring progress against benchmarks that will be agreed with the further and higher education providers. These benchmarks could include targets for the availability of RPL within the Further and Higher Education and Training Sectors or the availability of part-time course provision or flexible delivery of courses.
- Monitoring the implementation of the Workforce Development Plan for the ECCE sector and publishing progress reports on a biennial basis.

International evidence would suggest that a period of not less that five years should be allowed for the full implementation of these initiatives.

3.3 Upskilling requirement

During this time frame, it is also recommended that the appropriate bodies should develop and implement initiatives to address challenges related to the upskilling of the current workforce in the ECCE sector. These challenges include:

- Recognition of Prior Learning.
- Evaluation and recognition of legacy awards.

This work will facilitate policy initiatives such as the recently introduced ECCE Scheme (Free Preschool Year) where capitation funding is differentiated based on the qualification profile of staff in ECCE services.

3.4   Conclusion

The key objective of this Workforce Development Plan is to ensure that all staff engaged in the provision of early childhood care and education services for young children and their families are appropriately qualified for their role and responsibilities. Given the diverse nature of the current qualification profile of the ECCE workforce in Ireland, this presents a complex set of challenges that requires investment of the energy and resources of a wide range of stakeholders. In this document, we have set out the first steps towards achieving this objective. However, it should be stressed that all dimensions of this plan need to be implemented in a coordinated effort if overall goals are to be achieved. Regular monitoring and review of actions and achievements will be essential. Protection of resources and investment must be guaranteed for a minimum time frame. If these conditions are met, it will result in the availability of a skilled qualified workforce capable of delivering high quality ECCE services which in turn will ensure that all children in Ireland have access to the best start on their lifelong learning journey.

Acronyms

ECCE	Early Childhood Care and Education
FÁS	Foras Áiseanna Saothair
FETAC	Further Education and Training Awards Council
HETAC	Higher Education and Training Awards Council
IoT	Institute of Technology
IVEA	Irish Vocational Education Association
NFQ	National Framework of Qualifications
NQAI	National Qualifications Authority of Ireland
RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning
VEC	Vocational Education Committee

Appendix A – Membership of the Interdepartmental Working Group[5]

Chair (Department of Education and Skills)	Seán Ó Foghlú
FÁS – Skills and Labour Market Research Unit	Jasmina Behan Ivica Milicevic Joan Mc Naboe
FÁS	Martin Dodd
Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education [6]	Maresa Duignan
Early Years Education Policy Unit,[7] Dept. of Education and Skills	Catherine Hynes
Dept. of Enterprise, Trade and Innovation	Deirdre O'Higgins Niall Egan Ciara Phelan
Further Education Section, Department of Education and Skills	Breda Naughton Marian Carr Yvonne Fawcett
Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs	Moira O'Mara
Higher Education Authority	Muiris O'Connor Tim Conlon Oliver Mooney
Secretariat (Early Years Education Policy Unit)	Noreen Moloney Maria Sheehan Tim O'Keeffe Kieran Ormond

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[5] The list of people includes different representatives at different meetings

[6] The Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education closed in November 2008 and Maresa Duignan joined the Early Years Education Policy Unit

[7] The Early Years Education Policy Unit also provided the secretariat

Appendix B – Membership of the Sectoral Standards Sub Committee

Chair (Department of Education and Skills)	Seán Ó Foghlú
National Qualifications Authority Ireland	Stuart Garvie Anna Murphy
FÁS	Linda Conway
Irish Universities Association	Francis Douglas
Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education[8]	Maresa Duignan
Dublin Institute of Technology	Noírín Hayes
National Voluntary Childcare Collaborative	Teresa Heeney
Early Years Education Policy Unit[9] Dept. Education and Skills	Catherine Hynes
FETAC	Angela Lambkin
Institutes of Technology	Vanessa Murphy
St. Nicholas Montessori	Aileen O'Brien
County Dublin VEC	Shaun Purcell
HETAC	Mary Sheridan
National Council for Curriculum and Assessment	Arlene Forster
Sallynoggin College of Further Education	Frances Gaynor
Secretariat (Early Years Education Policy Unit)	Noreen Moloney Maria Sheehan Tim O'Keeffe Kieran Ormond

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[8] The Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education closed in November 2008 and Maresa Duignan joined the Early Years Education Policy Unit

[9] The Early Years Education Policy Unit also provided the secretariat

Appendix C – Occupational Profiles and Award Levels

The occupational profiles presented in the *Model Framework* were reviewed by the NQAI and the Awarding Bodies to determine if these profiles were still relevant and to match them with appropriate awards levels in the NFQ.

The following matches were decided:

Occupational Profile from the Model Framework	NFQ Level	Comment
Basic Practitioner	Level 4	This may need to equate to a major award or the best fit may be to a minor or special purpose award at that level.
Intermediate Practitioner	Level 5	This would generally equate to a major award (FETAC Level 5 Certificate) while it may also equate to a minor or a special purpose award.
Experienced Practitioner	Level 6	This would generally equate to a FETAC Advanced Certificate at Level 6.
Advanced Practitioner	Level 7/8	This would equate to at least an Ordinary Bachelor Degree.
Expert Practitioner	Level 8/9	This would equate to at least an Honours Bachelor Degree[10].

It was noted that each of the occupational profiles in the *Model Framework* contained a mix of knowledge, skill and competencies from more than one level of the NFQ. For example, there are Level 7 and 8 sub-strands in the advanced practitioner profile. The best fit approach was taken in mapping the profiles to an NFQ level.

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[10] The Bachelor honours degree is placed at Level 8 on the National Qualifications Framework. This is the minimum qualification associated with this Occupational Profile. Master Degree (Level 9) and Doctoral Degree (Level 10) are also associated.