



Interchange 65

Uptake and Perceptions of Early-years' Qualifications



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Research cannot make the decisions for policy makers and others concerned with improving the quality of education in our schools and colleges. Nor can it by itself bring about change. However, it can create a better basis for decisions, by providing information and explanation about educational practice and by clarifying and challenging ideas and assumptions.

It is important that every opportunity should be taken to communicate research findings, both inside and outside the Scottish Executive Education Department (SEED). Moreover, if research is to have the greatest possible impact on policy and practice, the findings need to be presented in an accessible, interesting and attractive form to policy makers, teachers, lecturers, parents and employers.

Interchange aims to further improve the Education Department Research Unit's dissemination of the findings of research funded by SEED. We hope you will find that **Interchange** is long enough to give the flavour of the complexities, subtleties and limitations of a research study but concise enough to give a good feeling for the findings and in some cases to encourage you to obtain the full report.

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Uptake and Perceptions of Early-years Qualifications

Introduction

Pre-school education and childcare are major priorities for the Scottish Executive. Its *Childcare Strategy for Scotland* (1999) identified a need for childcare provision in Scotland to be more affordable and accessible and to try to ensure that it is delivered to a consistently high standard. This research, carried out by George Street Research on behalf of the Scottish Executive between March and July 2000, contributes to the process by looking at the uptake of HNCs and SVQs in childcare across Scotland, and noting the perceptions of key participants.

The research also set out to gain a detailed and in-depth understanding of the advantages and disadvantages associated with the various HNC and SVQ qualifications and training packages currently available, and make recommendations as to how these qualifications should evolve.

Background

Currently, early-years education and childcare qualifications can be achieved in several ways, for example:

- on the job (SVQs)
- at a college of further education (HNCs/SVQs)
- a combination of the two (HNCs/SVQs)
- as a Certificate of Higher Education, Diploma of Higher Education or Bachelor of Arts course.

The most popular forms of current provision are the Scottish Vocational Qualification (SVQ) in Early Years Care and Education, and the Higher National Certificate (HNC) in Childcare and Education.

Aims of the study

The study had five key objectives as follows:

- to determine levels of uptake and, if possible, completion of both college-based and work-place qualifications in the years 1996-97, 1997-98 and 1998-99, profiling respondents
- to explore students' and employers' opinions of the qualifications from a career and practical view
- to understand employers' views and opinions on the range of qualifications, for example about the quality of qualifications and the channels through which they are delivered

- to assess the relative merits of the qualifications from the perspective of training providers/awarding bodies
- to identify any changes and/or modifications required to the overall design and delivery of childcare qualifications.

Outline of the project

There were three main elements to the research:

- an initial stage of desk-research, which established the numbers involved with HNCs and SVQs for early-years education
- in-depth research in the form of four discussion groups with employees, 30 depth interviews with employers and 22 depth interviews with stakeholders
- a final quantitative stage of research, using self-completion questionnaires, with key audiences across Scotland –

Type of Respondent	Number of responses
Employees in childcare establishments	709
Students	279
Childminders	173
Employers (involved in childcare provision)	310
Stakeholders (representatives of national childcare professional bodies/childcare training providers)	21

The findings

The main findings from all three stages of the research are summarised below, beginning with the results of the desk research. The first section provides information in relation to the first objective, on the existing levels of uptake of the main childcare and early-years education qualifications. Later sections deal with each of the remaining research objectives.

Uptake of college and work-based qualifications

This part of the research focused upon the HNC in Childcare and Education, the new SVQ Levels 2 and 3 in Early Years Care and Education, and their predecessors, SVQ Levels 2 and 3 in Childcare and Education.

The HNC is an award widely delivered as a one-year full-time course, although it can also be taken in many colleges as a part-time course over two, or sometimes three years, for example through day release, evening or twilight classes. It comprises a programme of Higher National (HN) Units, which incorporate study and assessment in the workplace. Entry requirements normally include satisfactory experience of working with young children and this is often expressed by the completion of a one-year programme at National Certificate Level. To be eligible for registration with the Scottish Childcare

and Education Board, candidates require to hold a National Certificate for specified National Certificate (NC) units delivered as part of the one-year NC programme.

The HNC in Childcare and Education has one of the highest levels of enrolments and awards of all HNC courses in Scotland. In 1997/98 a total of 1,074 awards were made. Almost all (99 per cent) of the awards were made to female students, which reflects the initial enrolment pattern.

From 1996-97 to 1998-99, the number of HNC Childcare and Education awards increased by 38 per cent. The number of colleges delivering the awards has also increased, with an additional seven colleges offering the course since 1996.

The SVQ

SVQ Levels 2 and 3 in Early Years Care and Education are designed for those people who are already working in childcare and early-years education establishments. SVQ awards are made on the basis of candidates demonstrating defined competences. This can be done in a variety of ways, for example assessment through direct observation of performance in the workplace, through records and testimonies, and by responding to questions to demonstrate an understanding of good practice. In many cases, SVQs articulate with HNC courses.

Childcare SVQs aim to provide understanding of providing care for young children and child development. The SVQ in Early Years Care and Education replaced various SVQs in Childcare and Education in January 1998. It is worth noting, however, that there has been an overlap period.

The SVQ in Childcare and Education at Level 2 experienced successive increases in uptake from 1995/96 to 1997/98, but the figures for 1998/99 indicate a dramatic decrease. The SVQ Level 3 Childcare and Education has experienced a similar dramatic fall in the number of entries in 1998/99. The number of awards, however, has dropped only slightly.

These trends and patterns have been affected by the introduction in January 1998 of the new SVQs Levels 2 and 3 in Early Years Care and Education. Since their introduction, 653 students have entered the course at Level 2 and 135 awards have been made, and 369 have entered at Level 3 and 45 awards have been made.

Overall, the current enrolment for SVQs in childcare are below average, which perhaps suggests that a peak in demand occurred prior to the old Childcare and Education SVQs being phased out.

As with HNC childcare qualifications, the vast majority of candidates for SVQs in childcare are female.

Student and employee opinions of the qualifications

The research found the following;

- those at the beginning of their working life and those studying at college were more likely to opt for the National Certificate route to the HNC rather than pursuing the SVQ route, which could eventually lead to an SVQ Level 4
- in contrast, those currently working in childcare and early-years education establishments were more likely to view the SVQ route as having greater potential
- childminders showed little interest in either of the qualification routes – only a minority (13 per cent) stated that they intended to complete this type of qualification in the future.

Generally, interest in pursuing qualifications was driven by a belief that qualifications are necessary to make career progress. Some employees also felt that the more formal input from courses would make them better at their jobs.

HNCs and SVQs –impressions and preferences (students/employees)

In cases where people had chosen HNCs, they did this because they felt that employers preferred HNCs to SVQs, and employees thought the HNC provided better coverage of the subjects involved. This despite the fact that more than a third of students thought HNC is too demanding.

There was considerable kudos attached to the HNC route – it was seen as being the more traditional way to complete the required study. In part, this reflected the greater history attached to the course. Employees and employers were more likely to understand what the course sought to deliver. It is true, also, that the more college-based approach of the course suggested that it would be more challenging and lent it more stature.

Reasons for opting for the SVQs seemed to be more pragmatic – SVQ students were able to gain practical experience at work and be paid. It was felt that this practical experience was recognised and combined well with the theoretical content of the SVQs.

The overall importance assigned by employees and students to qualifications was gauged using a scoring system applied to a range of potential skills and attributes required within the childcare profession. Neither work-based employees nor students placed holding a relevant qualification at the top of their list – they cited it as third most important after having a suitable personality and relevant practical experience. Childminders assigned even less importance to qualifications (it came second bottom out of a list of six) and placed highest emphasis on having a suitable personality.

Strengths and weaknesses of the course

Views on the HNC and SVQ course contents were generally favourable – both were seen to:

- cover all relevant areas of interest. (If anything, students rated the HNC higher on this, while employees preferred the SVQ)
- cover all subjects in sufficient depth. (Both the SVQ and the HNC were equally well regarded here)
- provide sufficient practical experience
- be appropriate to students' needs. (The SVQ was better regarded on this point, both by students and employees.)

It was felt that neither qualification devoted enough time to the care of babies.

Where HNCs did less well than SVQs was in terms of:

- the support and guidance given to students/employees in the workplace
- college not being convenient to students' homes

Interestingly, students were less critical of SVQ courses in terms of the amount of support they got in the workplace, but employees did indicate that more support for students was needed. This may imply that those working with students in the workplace were aware of a support need that students themselves did not recognise.

Childminders showed relatively low levels of interest in HNCs and SVQs. The usual difficulties cited in this connection are issues around the assessment of workers who often work alone, and the problems surrounding distance delivery of vocational qualifications. The childminders in this sample felt that the main problem with these courses is that they do not cater for people who may have to work early mornings, through the day, and early evenings in their own homes/clients' homes. This is reflected in some of their suggested improvements for the provision of early-years education and childcare courses, which were:

- more evening classes
- more correspondence or distance learning courses
- provision of more course places
- developing course options that take account of practical experience.

Reactions to suggested changes

The preliminary research identified a number of suggestions that might be used to change the way in which SVQ and HNC courses were delivered. These were developed into a range of statements for use with each of the

childcare worker audiences. As the table below indicates, there was widespread support for each of the suggested changes and this was fairly consistent across each type of childcare and early-years education worker.

Table 1: Attitudes to suggested changes

	Childminders		Employees		Students	
Number of responses	173		709		278	
Whether specified aspect would improve quality/delivery of childcare	Agree (%)	Mean score	Agree (%)	Mean score	Agree (%)	Mean score
There should only be one course (replacing SVQs and HNCs) covering all the basic modules	57	3.19	58	3.06	49	2.77
There needs to be more work done to ensure that workplace assessments are all to the same standards			75	3.36	62	3.04
There needs to be a clear link between childminder experience and how it counts towards a qualification	78	3.44				
The rates of pay for qualified staff do not act as an incentive for them to pursue qualifications	53	3.25	76	3.44	70	3.26
Other forms of tuition should be offered, e.g. distance (or open) learning or evening classes	73	3.50	72	3.27	74	3.13
Separate modules covering specialist subjects, such as dealing with autistic children or baby care, should be available	74	3.41	87	3.58	85	3.43
Extending the range of placements available to HNC students would improve individual skills and experience			68	3.40	66	3.18
A business module within the SVQ, covering skills such as communication etc, should be available			64	3.17	42	2.93
The criteria to become qualified need to be more standardised for the different courses	54	3.33	69	3.30	59	3.04
There has to be more effective communication provided to employers on what the different qualifications will provide in terms of skills and experience			78	3.42	71	3.31
There has to be more effective communication provided to parents on what the different qualifications will provide in terms of skills and experience	63	3.13				
There should be one compulsory registration board, covering all types of childcare worker	48	3.07	74	3.43	72	3.36
If I were to do a qualification I would need financial assistance	71	3.49				

Notes: The higher the mean score, the greater the level of agreement amongst those expressing an opinion.

The blank areas on the table indicate statements that were not asked of that audience

Childminders placed the highest priorities on:

- accessing different forms of study
- the need for financial support
- being able to use their own experience and accreditation towards gaining a qualification.

Employees and **students** prioritised quite different changes from those that emerged from the analysis for childminders. Employees and students showed the greatest interest in:

- the addition of specialist modules
- more effective communication with employers about what the different qualifications provided
- one registration board.

Employees were also concerned with achieving better rates of pay.

A wide variety of other suggestions were offered by those completing the questionnaires. Amongst those mentioned most often were:

- vetting of potential students, thus ensuring a higher calibre of candidate
- improving salaries generally, or when qualified
- improving the status of childcare as a profession
- standardising qualifications
- training standards to be improved
- better explanation of the relationship of different qualifications
- recognition for the feeling that the relationship with children is more important than qualifications
- creating a bridging qualification from childcare/early-years education to teaching
- providing better information to parents
- a need for a clearer career structure
- improving rural/local provision.

There was some support also for an awareness-building campaign amongst parents about the role of qualifications.

Summary

HNCs were perceived to be of greatest interest to employers and hence employees felt they were at an advantage when seeking employment if they had this qualification. The practical advantage of HNC, from the employers' point of view, was its set time-span. It was, however, seen as a more demanding course, so was therefore less suitable for some. The HNC offered less practical experience but this could be compensated for by the greater variety in placements.

For those in employment, the SVQ had the advantages of maintaining an income for the student, offering a greater element of practical experience, and causing less disruption (both from the employer's and employee's perspectives).

In terms of content, there was little criticism of either the HNC or SVQ, although accessibility was raised as an issue for both qualifications – there was a need for more places on courses, more flexible provision and more support in placements. Neither route seemed to offer adequate provision on the care of babies.

Employers views and opinions on the qualifications

The interviews revealed that a minority of employees had recognised pre-school or early-years qualifications, and that current staff training in this area was also restricted. The research found that:

- almost 20 per cent of survey participants claimed that their organisations did not employ anyone with a recognised qualification (four per cent of nurseries but 19 per cent of playgroups, and 24 per cent in the 'other' category). This situation is slightly more prevalent in rural areas (23 per cent) and suburban areas (27 per cent)
- around two in five workers were classified by their employer as having a recognised pre-school or early-years qualification
- around one in four employers (24 per cent) claimed to have a proportion of staff who currently hold SVQ Level 2
- just over one in ten employers (12 per cent) claimed to have a proportion of staff who currently hold SVQ Level 3
- slightly more than one in five employers (21 per cent) claimed to have staff who held the HNC
- around one in four employers (24 per cent) claimed to have a proportion of staff who held the NC.

There was some evidence amongst employers that they intended to boost levels of qualified staff.

The research found that the majority of people currently working in childcare and early-years education hold, or intend to hold, a formal qualification. This appears to be driven by two factors:

- greater regulation of childcare and early-years education
- the qualifications themselves are valued.

There were, however, underlying factors which could inhibit employers promoting formal training and supporting these qualifications, for example:

- the broad consensus that there is insufficient funding available for training
- the feeling amongst employers that if they provide financial assistance for training they may not necessarily have time to recoup their investment – better trained employees are better placed to move on
- concerns over asking parents to pay more for childcare and early-education places, without first making parents aware of the benefits of having better qualified staff.

Employers were asked a similar question to that used with students and employees, to help to determine the priority they placed on qualifications within the overall skill set required by staff. They were asked to consider, first, employing a senior member of staff (e.g. a nursery manager); and, second, a more junior member of staff (e.g. a nursery assistant). For each position the employer was asked to assign weightings (in terms of points) to a number of criteria, including personality, experience, flexibility, formal qualifications and references. The results are shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Importance of attributes

Weight assigned to specified criterion by employers	Senior role (mean score)	Junior role (mean score)
Number of responses	310	310
Relevant practical experience	29.07	23.03
Suitable personality for post	27.42	32.42
Holding appropriate qualification	21.82	16.70
References, recommendation	15.71	18.47
Flexibility and availability	12.02	14.41
Other criteria	2.71	6.19

At a senior level, relevant and practical experience and having a suitable personality outweighed having suitable qualifications. With junior positions, personality, experience and references take precedence over qualifications. If anything, employees thought that employers held qualifications in higher regard than was actually the case.

HNCs and SVQs — impressions and preferences (employers)

A key objective of the research was to determine employers' attitudes to HNCs and SVQs, their preferences and their opinions on the different qualifications in respect of career development. On this basis, respondents were asked what their recommendation would be if a member of staff asked for advice on which particular route they should take if pursuing a career in early-years education and childcare, and why they would recommend this course. The findings are as follows:

- just over two thirds (44 per cent) of employers claimed that the SVQ would be their recommended choice
- slightly more than one in four employers (28 per cent) would recommend the NC/HNC route.

However, on further examination of their organisations, it appeared that employers in nurseries are more likely to recommend the HNC route (55 per cent) and playgroups are most likely to recommend SVQs (49 per cent). The main reasons for favouring the SVQ were the practical experience it provided coupled with the lack of disruption in the workplace (staff do not have to be released to attend college). The main advantages associated with the HNC were that it had more widespread recognition as a qualification and offered better career opportunities.

Attitudes to courses

It became apparent to the research team that there was a limited knowledge amongst employers about the detail of the courses available, underlining the need for better communication. Amongst those who were able to comment, the data suggests that they had a favourable opinion of the HNC for a number of reasons, for example, coverage of relevant subjects, study of subjects in sufficient depth, and provision of sufficient places to meet demand. Areas of disaffection included the perceived inaccessibility of the HNC to full-time worker, and employers being divided as to whether the HNC was tailored to meet their needs. Playgroup employers in particular expressed doubts.

With SVQs the main weaknesses were seen to be lack of places on courses and the accessibility of the course provision. This is reflected in suggestions for improving future provision, especially the provision of more evening classes and making more use of technology, for example, having 'learning on-line' packages available.

Reactions to suggested changes

The respondents were presented with a list of suggested changes to the qualifications. The results are as follows. Eighty-seven per cent agreed that separate modules covering specialist subjects, such as dealing with autistic children or baby care, should be available, while 86 per cent felt that there had to be more effective communication with employers as to what the different qualifications would provide in terms of skills and experience. Eighty per cent

would like more work to be done to ensure that workplace assessments are all carried out to the same standards. Seventy-nine per cent felt that there should be one registration board, covering all types of childcare worker, and also agreed that other types of tuition should be available, for example distance/open learning or evening classes. Seventy-three per cent felt that the criteria underpinning the different qualifications should be more standardised, and 72 per cent felt that the rates of pay for qualified staff do not provide an incentive to pursuing qualifications, and that extending the range of placements available to HNC students would improve individual skills and experience. Seventy per cent felt that a business module within the SVQ, covering skills such as communication, should be available.

Summary

Course provision was seen to be improving – new courses and variations were being added all the time. However, it was acknowledged that more could be done to facilitate flexible learning, and more use made of technology to facilitate distance learning. There was an awareness that the industry was moving in the direction of being more qualified and that this would result in an increased demand for qualified staff.

Stakeholders regarded the HNC as the better option in terms of career enhancement and academic quality, but most accepted that the SVQ was suitable for those already working in the profession. The SVQ was seen to offer employment opportunities of its own as well as more flexible modes of delivery.

Recommendations

The research team make the following recommendations:

Course content

- that there is provision of more specialist modules, for example baby care, special needs
- that the pre-school curriculum dovetails more closely with children starting primary school (stakeholders, in particular, raised this)
- that there is better linkages between SVQs, HNCs and other courses (stakeholders, in particular, requested this).

General environment

- course content is updated in line with new approaches
- course content links with related syllabi
- employers are educated about the SVQ and its strengths
- there is better liaison between employers, colleges and students
- there are improved remuneration and rewards generally, and when linked to qualifications
- there is a clearer career structure

- there is a more transparent system of assessment for SVQs, for example standardisation of assessments
- there are higher entry requirements for courses.

Support and guidance

- there is increased support from tutors, mentors and assessors/other staff when on placement.

Workloads

- there is greater study time and time set aside for college-based elements.

Practical experience

- there is accreditation of childminder experience.

Accessibility

- a wider range of delivery options be used
- there are more evening classes
- there are summer schools/weekend courses
- there is distance learning
- there is local provision
- flexible study time.

For HNC candidates

- there is more time on placements
- there is a greater variety of placements
- there is financial support rather than loans (off-putting for older candidates).

For SVQ candidates

- there is a greater variety of placements
- there is greater support to those employers with SVQ candidates in terms of varied day of attendance at college and acceptance of the need to meet the employer's agenda for assessments.

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