

Research into the deployment of graduate leaders in the playwork workforce

Research undertaken and reported by SkillsActive

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1 Introduction

In late 2007, the Government published the Children's Plan, outlining their vision for a world class children's workforce. The plan stated that:

The single most important factor in delivering our aspirations for children is a world class workforce able to provide highly personalised support, so we will continue to drive up quality and capacity of those working in the children's workforce. We know from our consultation how important the quality of early years childcare and education is to improving children's achievement¹.

A key pledge of the Children's Plan for the playwork sector was to enable the deployment of a core of graduate leaders within the playwork workforce. For this reason, the Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC) has commissioned this research to explore how graduates could be most effectively deployed within the workforce and where they can add most value to the sector.

Purpose of the research

The research is taking place in two stages:

The first stage was a desk research exercise, which has preceded this research. The desk research set out to identify:

- i) current workforce reform activities across organisations in the Children's Workforce Network;
- ii) the current provision of playwork qualifications and training in higher education;
- iii) the potential barriers that inhibit graduates from entering the play workforce;
- iv) how graduates have been deployed and trained in other occupational areas such as early years, teaching and social work;
- v) a range of models that could be tested with employers and employees.

Having assessed and described how other sectors had deployed graduates within their workforce, three possible models for graduate deployment were developed for testing with employers and employees in the playwork sector. These models were designed to be 'conceptual' models, that is, simplified representations of ways in which the graduate-led core could be deployed.

¹ The Children's Plan, The Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2007.

These models were then put through an initial SWOT analysis in preparation for testing within the primary research. Each model is summarised before it is analysed in section 3 of this report.

The second stage of the research is to test the models for deployment identified in (v) above with employers and employees in the playwork sector. This report is the summary of the findings of the research.

2 Methodology

This section outlines our methodological approach with regard to

- data collection
- data analysis
- final reporting.

Data collection

The methodological approach to this primary research is as follows.

Focus Groups

Nine focus groups took place across England over the autumn of 2008. There was one focus group conducted in each of the nine regions of England. As there is no central database of playwork employers and employees, SkillsActive recruited participants from its central database which consists of both these groups of people. This database consisted of employers and employees who had previously responded to SkillsActive's survey of the workforce, undertaken in 2007. Using this database ensured that there was some objectivity in the recruitment process.

Eight of the focus groups were facilitated by an experienced external facilitator and expert in Children's Workforce issues who was independent of both SkillsActive and CWDC, with the first group moderated by an internal facilitator from SkillsActive. The focus groups lasted for approximately two hours.

The focus group participants were representative of the sector. About half of the group attendees were employers, with good representation from both local authorities and private providers. There were approximately a third more local authority employers to private providers. The rest of the group participants were employees of mainly private providers, or umbrella organisations that represent playwork businesses.

Depth interviews

There were 36 depth interviews conducted by two members of SkillsActive staff, an average of four in each region of England. These included interviews with employers and employees as well as academics of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) delivering playwork courses at HE level. Interviews were conducted by telephone at a previously arranged time.

All HEIs were invited to undertake a depth interview, conducted by SkillsActive. There were seven institutions who responded to this invitation. The employers and employees interviewed were mainly made up of playworkers who were invited to a focus group but were unable to attend the event in their particular region. Of the remaining depth interviews, approximately half were conducted with employers and half with employees. Many of these employees were also students undertaking a degree or postgraduate degree in playwork. Of the employers, approximately half were from the private sector, whilst the rest were employed by local authorities. Employees were mainly employed by private providers.

Tools

A discussion guide was designed for use with the focus groups to cover a range of issues. The focus group discussion guide started with broad questions and concluded with questions about the conceptual models. This was designed deliberately in order to ensure that participants in the focus groups had a chance to discuss their first impressions about graduate deployment without being influenced by having seen the models before this discussion. One disadvantage of this is that peer pressure can mean respondents do not fully articulate exactly how they feel.

Conducting depth interviews allows participants the chance to speak in depth and freely in isolation, even if there is no opportunity to consider other people's viewpoints. Participants in the depth interviews were sent the interview schedule in advance of the interview. Using 'pre-placement' gave participants the opportunity to think about the questions and conceptual models in advance of the interview. It was felt that it would be too difficult to explain the conceptual models for deployment to respondents over the telephone and then investigate their feelings about them instantly. The depth interview schedule covered many of the same issues as the discussion guide.

Data Analysis

Detailed notes were taken at the nine focus groups that took place across England. The groups were also recorded in order to ensure that:

- as much data as possible was captured
- the notes that were taken could be checked for accuracy
- accurate quotes could be taken from the groups and used to support a particular point.

After the groups had been completed, the notes made at each one were typed. After this, the groups were listened to again, enabling the notes to be expanded and transcribed where necessary and checked for accuracy. The depth interview data were also written up from the detailed notes that had been taken in the fieldwork.

The data for the groups were read and re-read. From this point, the textual data of the focus groups were explored and analytical clusters developed. These clusters were then coded into broader categories, or indexed into key phenomena. It is important to note that these analytical categories were derived inductively, that is, gradually as they emerged from the data, and not determined *a priori*.

The same process was undertaken with all the data from the depth interviews. Every piece of data that was indexed to a category was subjected to constant comparison in order to ensure that each item of data was checked against the rest of the data to ensure that the analytical categories were a true reflection of relevant nuances in the data. If a new category emerged from one particular group, all other data was checked to ensure all that was relevant to that category had been incorporated.

Indexing the data in this way created many clusters which needed to be further refined and reduced in number by grouping some of them together. Some themes naturally clustered together, whilst others differed, or had a hierarchical relationship with another category. Once the data had been grouped, they were analysed and grouped again under the Model to which they were most relevant. Data that did not fit a Model neatly were not forced.

During this process, a table was created for each Model with the clusters grouped into categories in the left-hand column. The table had the nine regions in columns across the top of the table. Each piece of data was labelled with a number, and the number was entered into the table into the column of the region in which it was said.

By referencing where the data had come from in this table, it was possible both to highlight any regional perspectives that may emerge, but also to ensure that distinctions could be made between the findings of the focus groups and the findings

of the depth interviews. Also, it is essential when looking at the data in categories that one can still identify which respondent said what – it is important that a respondent's background is taken into consideration when interpreting their views.

The key analytical categories in this table were then subjected to further investigation, and links between the initial codes were explored, with patterns and relationships identified. Key themes were re-read to pick out common themes within the category, as well as ideas and thoughts that were shared by a majority. In many cases, each category had nuances that needed to be highlighted in the analysis. Minority views, or 'deviant cases', were also identified through this process. Having all the data on a key theme in one table made these nuances easier to identify. It was easier, for example, to identify whether a view was a majority view or something only mentioned by one interviewee.

Consistency of findings

Often in qualitative research, different responses are received from groups or individual depths. This may result from the different time allowed to reflect on an issue, or the quality of exchange or debate in a group, or because an individual can express 'less acceptable' views in private. In this research the feedback on the models was surprisingly consistent across the focus groups and depth interviews.

Final reporting

The issues were then written up into a report, with quotes substantiating points made throughout. Care was taken to refer back to the original data whenever necessary to ensure that the key themes were indeed key themes and not reflecting any bias on the part of the researcher. Throughout this analysis, a detailed understanding was gained of all the issues affecting those working in the playwork sector and the feelings that they had about them as individuals and as businesses/employees.

3 Analysis of the models

Although quantification can be helpful with regard to the relative importance between the following opinions and views expressed in the data, we recognise here that it cannot be interpreted as the actual frequency in any other population. The issues will be described below not in their order of relative ‘importance’, but rather in a ‘narrative logic’, allowing the analysis to flow from one issue to another. It must be acknowledged that this is qualitative research, which sets out to identify issues and opinions. It does not have a large-scale quantifiable sample to measure the responses.

Before we look at the analysis of Model 1, the following table summarises the key features of the Model as it was developed in the desk research:

Model 1

Model 1: Existing playworkers gain HE qualifications	
Description	Existing playwork workforce acquire higher education qualifications, where they currently have none
Intended target	Existing playworkers
Characteristics	Usually female, working part time to fit in with family life
Likely qualification route	FdA Playwork while working FdA Playwork and Early Years or FdA Playwork and Youth Work Progression to Playwork Honours Degree
Pros	Maximise benefit of experience in the workforce Keep existing workforce Better quality (more mature) students

	Create more progression routes (if this is the case)
Cons	<p>Would take three years to qualify</p> <p>Lack of mobility of students due to family commitments</p> <p>Need for local HE provision or flexible, distance learning</p>
Opportunities	<p>Up-skill existing workforce</p> <p>Provide higher proportion of Level 4 qualified playworkers</p> <p>Increase quality of service</p>
Barriers	<p>Commitment to train at HE level</p> <p>Capacity issues – Provision of sufficient places</p> <p>Restricted mobility created by qualification requirements for each sector</p> <p>Need to develop transitional modules or a cross-child sector qualification</p> <p>Funding for replacement workers</p>

Model 1 – A Summary

The following table summarises the key points of Model 1 according to both the focus group and depth interview data. The table shows what the possible advantages might be as well as the disadvantages. We also summarise the opportunities it could create and the barriers that might stop it from working.

Model 1: Existing playworkers gain HE qualifications	
Description	Existing playwork workforce acquire higher education qualifications, where they currently have none
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Likely qualification route	FdA Playwork while working FdA Playwork and Early Years or FdA Playwork and Youth Work Progression to Playwork Honours Degree
Pros	<p>According to the data, this Model has several potential advantages:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It will up-skill the existing workforce, allowing them some personal development • The existing workforce are more likely to train • It will improve the quality of play • It will improve the credibility of the sector • It could create ‘playwork champions’ • ‘Development’ roles in local authorities could be

	<p>more 'play focused'</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It can give playworkers confidence to articulate what is unique about play
Cons	<p>The difficulties with it, according to participants are that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Current playworker may move away from face-to-face practice • It can be difficult to implement what you have learnt because of workplace constraints • Some of the workforce is already engaged in higher education • Experience could be as good as learning the theory • New people might not be attracted to the sector
Barriers	<p>The kinds of things that might stop this Model working were thought to be:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to higher education, which is patchy across the UK • Playworkers find it hard to access quality courses at lower levels, meaning progression is difficult • The hours and salary are sometimes not in line with graduate's expectations • Playworkers often have more than one job, which makes fitting in training difficult. • Many playworkers haven't been in education or training for many years and so may find it difficult to engage at this level

Focus Group data

Model 1

We will begin by looking at the advantages that focus group participants across the country identified with regard to enabling current playworkers to obtain playwork qualifications where they currently have none. A careful analysis of the focus group data shows that all groups think that there will be advantages to up-skilling the current playwork workforce. Some groups identified several advantages to this model while some only identified one or two.

Advantages

Some focus group members felt that this model was a good place to start with regard to qualifying a core of graduate leaders, simply because, as one participant in the south west put it, the playwork sector already has ‘a cumulative body of knowledge’, with many already professional playworkers. This was supported by a London employer:

“I would agree that up-skilling the existing workforce makes more sense than starting from scratch.”

In the South East, employers have candidates ready to do courses. They are ‘chomping at the bit’ – but there is nowhere locally for them to go. One employer thinks that this is where the best response will be initially, as there is this build up of people wanting to do HE qualifications – ‘they have been stuck for so long, and there are so many people waiting to do it’. Funding is not the issue here either – there are councils willing to pay for them too.

Up-skilling the workforce

Starting with the most basic idea, the most obvious benefit of this Model identified by all groups is that it will up-skill the current playwork workforce. All groups accepted either explicitly or implicitly (through the identification of other factors) that increasing the number of playwork graduates would improve the quality of the current workforce. One employer in the London group was quite specific about the distinction between Level 3 supervisory skills and more senior roles that require strategic thinking:

“What we want is creative thinking people who can respond to very different circumstances.”

This view is supported by another participant in the East Midlands region who described getting a higher education qualification as a benefit in as much as it 'opens your horizons'. Their view was that the degree might help you to see outside of your own situation, and might help you to identify career development opportunities ('planning' and 'town planning' were given as examples) that you would need to make for yourself, given that 'management is the ceiling' (with regard to the career structure of settings). One development worker in London argued that 'the whole point' of increasing understanding 'is that you push the boundaries and think of (your) profession outside of the box'. The consequence of not doing so is a 'factory service of Level 2 and Level 3s'.

One private employer in the Midlands suggested that combined degrees could also be useful in opening horizons – if she was to have several members of staff, 'one doing early years, one doing therapy, one doing youth work' they could 'all bring something back'. The employer then felt that their provision would be improved as they were more skilled at dealing with different types of children, such as those with disabilities. An example was given about how this could be particularly helpful with children who have to make regular visits to a hospital, for example.

One participant in the West Midlands group suggested that while skills gaps would be closed where these were identified, the degree could be tailored to address such gaps in areas such as 'theory, or policy or funding for play'. The participant felt that the degree should be fluid in order to meet constantly changing circumstances. A participant in the London group, a playwork graduate, independently supporting this, highlighted the difficulty of job descriptions which are 'always changing'.

Another participant in the South East focus group also suggested that being qualified to degree level would give the playworker the necessary skills to be able to undertake leadership and management responsibilities at work.

Improving the quality of play

Leading on from this, playworkers in several groups asserted that graduate level qualifications would increase the quality of play provision for children. One Play Development Officer (a strategic role, as opposed to face-to-face with children) told how she thought it was 'fascinating, putting theory into practice', acknowledging that there is 'so much we don't know'.

A playworker in the West Midlands supported this;

“When you really look at child development and emotional literacy – being able to study in depth...gives you the hooks to be really effective as a playworker”.

One owner of a playwork setting, also in the West Midlands group, cited her own experience of doing her first degree, which was a sandwich course. It was felt by this employer that degrees where you can actually be working in the setting and be paid by your employer are good because ‘you immediately have your setting so everything you’re learning goes back into practice’.

Although the general feeling across the groups was that existing playworkers gaining higher level qualifications would have a positive impact upon provision, there were some who qualified this slightly. One senior practitioner in the one of the groups in the Midlands felt that the graduate could only really have an impact on quality if they were bringing extra funding into the setting:

“You can’t quantify the quality of play experience just because of the level of education of the playworker.”

The playworker elaborated on this slightly by saying that it wasn’t much good being a good playworker if the roof of your building is coming off.

Evidence from an employee in the South West sums up this point – play opportunities would be enhanced because ‘you have to understand why you do what you are doing’. It was argued that the NVQ is simply a tick box scenario in situations where the candidate doesn’t understand the theory and understanding behind what they were doing.

It was also argued that employers could also improve the quality of play provision even though they do not necessarily work face-to-face with children. One employer from the private sector in the south of England said that a manager who owns a number of clubs who qualified to graduate level in playwork could have ‘the perfect quality role’. For example, an employer with five settings could visit one setting each day and filter down best practice to practitioners. On the same issue, a playworker in the East region argued that although ‘knowledge is not everything’, nevertheless, employers with knowledge can do more than filter down but also ‘create such a better environment and think of different ways of doing things...’.

Increasing credibility

Many groups considered the issue of parity and respect of playworkers with other workers in the Children’s Workforce. One employer in the South West would like to see ‘the leaders of school facilities and out-of-school facilities treated equally’, which

for them meant to 'have comparable terms and conditions'. Playworkers in most groups would see it as an advantage of this Model if it helped parents to see that 'the people working with their children are not just "mum" baby-sitting after work'.

Others in the East region felt that qualifying the current workforce would help others to see the sector 'as a profession'. This quote represents this feeling:

"We're not invited to safeguarding meetings, CAF stuff etc – professional status might support our inclusion."

Some also argue that this directly affects the quality of Children's Services. One employer, also in the East region, suggests that even now 'social services are now beginning to recognise the value of feedback from partnership with playwork'. A Play Development Officer in the North West said it felt strange that equal status isn't there with other professions even though '[playworkers] deal with the same child throughout the same day'. A graduate-led profession will enhance quality of provision by improving multi-agency working – 'we're urged to do lots of it!'. As a different employer in the North West put it – 'people listen to you because you've got the qualification to back up what you're saying'.

Champions and role models

Some participants felt that this Model was good because current playworkers are often the ones that are passionate about playwork and can really be ambassadors for the sector. One private employer in the North West was discussing how one keeps people in the sector once they are qualified:

"The intention should be to champion playwork. Surely that's what we're looking to do. We're not looking to say 'Look, you can do this through playwork, and then you can go here and here, as then we devalue playwork by showing where you can go in other sectors.'"

Others in the South West agreed that playworkers should be champions for play in whatever role they find themselves in, and 'graduateness' would help existing practitioners to do this. In the London group, one development worker talked about barriers to entering the sector, such as racist barriers. In this context, it was suggested that playwork needs 'role models', or 'inspirational figures', so that people think of the sector as 'something that is worthwhile to pursue'. People in the East region said that playworkers were already role models there.

It was certainly felt by some that this Model would be advantageous because it would give existing playworkers somewhere to go – 'it adds another point on the ladder and makes the industry more elongated to work in'. One employer in the

East region simply felt that graduateness gives young people looking to enter the sector 'something to aspire to'.

Non face-to-face roles

There is evidence from one focus group in particular that an understanding of play within a local authority can add a lot of value to the playwork sector. The following quote highlights the situation in Nottingham with regard to playwork posts in the local authority:

“In Nottingham, there are three locality managers working for the local authority, who in turn manage the Play Development Officers, who then manage the Play Co-ordinators. We've got a whole structure.”

The employer from Northampton had never heard of these roles if they exist within the local authority in her county. Similarly in Swindon, if these roles exist then the post-holder 'has never been to see us'.

The employer in the Midlands cited the fact that one of her staff was a lunchtime supervisor but had been told not to do playwork 'or else they'll want it all the time'. In Nottingham, this is being actively encouraged. If those in development roles were to become graduates, then inequalities across regions like this may become a little less pronounced.

This is not however to minimise the importance of face-to-face playwork. The general feeling across the groups was that any deployment of graduates should include some face-to-face work. In London, one strategic worker described it as a worst-case scenario to have 'Level 3 practitioners and degree level managers'. She felt that there needed to be a 'dynamic' between the child and worker, which will be enhanced by better skilled playworkers. An employer in the East region said something similar to this:

“You should be able to access graduates in the smallest setting – I would hate to see it starting to be limited to big management roles.”

Another Senior Practitioner in the South West commented that she would find it difficult to train others if she didn't do any face-to-face work herself. The following quote is fairly representative of those who believe an element of face-to-face playwork is important if this Model is to offer real benefits to the sector:

“How do you support and develop other people if you don’t have the hands-on experience yourself? We need Continuous Professional Development as the world of children changes so rapidly.”

Related to this point, some participants in the West Midlands felt that this would be the best Model for deployment as it would be a good opportunity to refresh playworkers who perhaps qualified some years ago. The example cited was with regard to refreshing a CACHE course with a top-up course after six years. Nevertheless, the principle remains the same:

“You get eroded by schools and education and other people and so it’ll be nice to go back and get some reinforcement.”

This same point was made by an employer in the East region.

Confidence

One of the key motivations for undertaking higher education is the confidence it gives playworkers in many different situations. A number of groups talked about higher education giving playworkers confidence to articulate their views and values. We will now consider some examples.

With school leaders

Many groups talked about the difficulties that playwork settings often have with schools, whether it is about the building or respect between the professions generally. Two groups in particular gave evidence of how qualifications at higher level had been useful in this regard. One large employer in the Midlands says she has discovered that, because she has had graduates working with her, people’s attitude towards playwork had changed, particularly among teachers. In the past they had been treated like ‘a disease that you can’t shift – the antibiotics aren’t strong enough’, but now the attitude has changed. An employer in London argued that what would really make a difference to her is if ‘more senior managers were playwork graduates – then they could argue with school leaders’.

Related to this is a point made at the North East group with regard to extended schools. Extended schools were discussed at many groups, although this point was made in this context only here. One employer felt that extended schools seem to be ‘a big heavy cloak’ that threatens to strangle the value base of playwork. It is argued that playworkers ‘need a stronger voice’ with regard to this agenda and ‘a lot is down to the individual heads of schools’. In this respect, graduate level playworkers could exploit an ‘opportunity’ that is set before them.

With parents

The South West group spoke at length about the confidence that studying to a higher level gives you with parents. The following quote is reflective of this discussion:

“I constantly write in my newsletters so that parents know I’m doing a degree and that other staff are doing qualifications – they’re always asking how my study is going. It builds confidence in what we do. Why should we expect less? It seems like a contradiction”.

The group went on to say HE helps to get the message across that you’re not just ‘mum’ baby-sitting after school, but rather ‘actually having to put all this effort in to doing a really good job’. The evidence is that some existing playworkers have been motivated to study at higher education level to increase their own credibility.

With Ofsted

An example was given in the North East region of an Ofsted inspector asking an after school club to fence off the nettles and bushes for health and safety reasons. It was argued that in Newcastle, the practitioner had been able to reason why this might not be appropriate for a playwork setting – ‘and they’ve accepted what we’re saying’. According to one employer in the North East, ‘Graduateness certainly brings credibility and credibility brings confidence.’ Graduate playworkers may also help Ofsted to recognise the different practices and approaches in different parts of the Children’s Workforce.

To lead

Some practitioners in the South West said that higher education had given them the ability to lead certain ‘initiatives’. They did not expand on what kinds of initiatives these might be, but it does illustrate that higher education has in at least one instance given a practitioner the confidence to ‘lead’, which is an important concept as far as this research question is concerned.

Personal development

There is evidence also from the focus groups that some playworkers have chosen to do degrees in playwork simply for their own professional development. The following quotes are from six different groups and highlight the point that a passion for play is a significant reason why people might engage with higher education:

“I’m not driven by salary but by the enjoyment of my job. I’ve got a Level 3 now and have begun my Level 4 in Child Development as a stepping stone – I’m not a typical graduate but can’t wait to do a degree.” Employer, East region

“It’s like a drug. I’m already qualified in Early Years, but then you do a Level 3 and think ‘Oh, I don’t know enough’, then you find out about something else.” Employer, South East

“My motivator for doing a degree was myself – to prove I could do a degree – I know there are no financial rewards.” Senior Practitioner, South West

“If I didn’t do this [my degree] for myself, I wouldn’t be able to sustain and would shut.” Private sector employer, North West

“The people working for me already would probably do the graduate course and be really happy as part of professional development as they are all passionate about it and be relatively happy to carry on doing the job they’re doing.” Private sector employer, East Midlands

This last quote is interesting because it shows the perception of a manager about her staff – that they would be relatively happy to continue in their roles doing the same job.

Increasing demand

A final point to make here is about an increasing demand for playworkers. One participant at the group in the East region suggested that the demand for playworkers could increase with the drive to get single parents of seven year olds into employment/training. It was argued that ‘more and more provisions are going to be required’. The argument was that the Government will need to recognise this and thus opportunities might open up for the sector.

A point was also made in the South East group about Pathfinder/Playbuilder status of local authorities and how these will increase the number of face-to-face workers needed as well as those in development roles. It was argued that managers of face-to-face positions will have an ‘integral role’. The question is whether these jobs will be for playwork graduates or not.

Disadvantages

The preceding paragraphs highlighted some of the benefits that focus group participants could see in up-skilling the existing playwork workforce. The following paragraphs aim to look at some of the disadvantages group members felt that this Model has. The purpose here is to discuss the disadvantages of the model *in principle*, and not necessarily the barriers to making it work.

Moving away from playwork practice

The disadvantage most frequently discussed in relation to this Model is that progressing into higher level roles can often take you away from face-to-face work. This comes back to the point above about the significance of face-to-face work. One employee in the West Midlands suggested that obtaining higher level qualifications often increases the expectation one has of salary level, the problem being that ‘the higher you go up the scales to find this salary, the less playwork you do’. This is because pay in face-to-face roles is ‘low’– and ‘it always has been’. The respondent likened the situation to a matron at a hospital, where the higher you go, the less time you spend with your patients.

Another employer in the East region agreed with this position, intimating that purely ‘developmental’ roles for graduates might put existing playworkers off doing higher level qualifications. ‘People like face-to-face and do [the job] *because* it’s face-to-face.’ Indeed, one senior practitioner in the East midlands went as far as to say that because there is little opportunity for progression once you hit managerial level, people move away from face-to-face playwork into strategic roles. It was his view however that these roles ‘aren’t playwork’.

One strategic worker in the North West felt that this situation could be quite detrimental to the sector – some practitioners are fantastic at face-to-face work and it would be a shame to lose them. This view was countered within the group with the argument that playwork is losing some of its best practitioners anyway as they move to other parts of the children’s workforce. At least this way they are staying in the sector.

Some groups highlighted another disadvantage with this Model – that graduate playworkers might leave the sector as they go in search of full-time employment. One development worker in the London group suggested that many people on his playwork degree course had used their degree to get jobs in other sectors. This was at a time when the degree was called ‘Professional studies – Playwork’. We will see later in this report that those seeking full-time time work could well be tempted to move out of the sector to satisfy their need for a good salary.

Implementing theory

Another perceived disadvantage of this Model, discussed by at least two of the groups, is that much of the time it is difficult to implement what you learn when obtaining a degree within a setting. The following quote is particularly striking in this regard:

“Sometimes I think when you send people on courses, they come back excited with all these wonderful ideas...If you’ve got a manager that’s got the playwork ethos and has done playwork training – they’re going to be ‘off you go’ if you have a good idea ‘let’s see what happens’. But if you’ve not got somebody with that ethos, ‘They’re going to get their fingers bitten’, it becomes a whole different issue.”

The same sentiment was shared in the London group, with one development worker suggesting that getting a degree would ‘not necessarily’ lead to a better outcome for children. This point was backed up by another participant who said that it was very easy to ‘lose momentum’ as a playworker when they’re told they can’t do things – ‘You can have the hall but it must be kept clean.’ Some current playworkers who experience this might think ‘What’s the point?’, which is clearly a disadvantage to this Model. This point was consolidated further as sometimes the restrictions aren’t just the manager – it was argued that sometimes the playworker can be restrained by the school, the owner or by Ofsted – ‘what is left is not much’. It was noted above however that some felt this Model was a good one precisely because it can give playworkers the credibility they need to challenge these difficulties.

Holiday workers and the voluntary sector

One group highlighted a difficulty with this Model in that some of the current workforce is already engaged with higher education. The group in the South West highlighted an issue around holiday playworkers specifically. Holiday playworkers are quite often already doing a degree and playwork is something they do in the summer holidays, for example. This Model is therefore not something that will work for this type of worker.

Related to this is a concern discussed at some groups about the voluntary sector. A Play Development Officer in the North West said that the voluntary sector worried her in as much as she could see what happened to playgroups happening to playwork settings. In her experience, when staff in the pre-school playgroups voluntary sector were told that they had to go down a certain qualification route, many settings were lost because they couldn’t sustain what they were being asked

to sustain. A large employer in the South West has also had experienced playworkers resign because they were 'scared by the Early Years Foundation Stage'. People work in clubs because they want to provide a 'home environment' to children, but don't want to study for qualifications. The issue here isn't that employers think their whole staff must be graduates, but simply that the introduction of new things can sometimes push people out of the sector.

Experience versus qualifications

Although not a common theme, there were however instances in the groups of senior playworkers who didn't see the value in getting a degree in playwork. The following quote sums up this view:

“All the knowledge you would gain on a playwork course could be learnt in the same amount of time in a setting doing the actual work, experiencing it – your knowledge from experiencing would be much more higher quality of learning than just being told what you should do.”

This playworker did concede that one would learn things on a course that one would not learn in a setting, such as 'play types', but that fundamentally one could still be a good playworker without it. The point here is that not all playworkers will see the benefits of doing a degree and may value experience more than qualifications.

No new people

One other disadvantage to this model mentioned by one group is that it wouldn't, by definition, attract people from other sectors into the playwork sector. If this was the only Model, it would be 'a bit funnelled' and wouldn't raise the profile of the sector as much as other potential Models.

Barriers

There was a general consensus across the groups that there are some real barriers with regard to current playworkers gaining higher level qualifications. It is important that these are highlighted here as any deployment using this 'model' would need to consider how these might be reduced.

Provision of courses

The focus group data shows that a lack of progression routes is a very significant barrier with regard to current playworkers obtaining higher level qualifications. There are two main sub-issues within this issue. One surrounds the availability and quality of qualifications *below* HE level, whilst the other concerns the quality and provision of higher education courses themselves. We will take each one in turn.

Pre-HE Courses

Every focus group discussed the problems that exist with regard to qualifications that precede the degree. This is significant because if the prerequisites to the degree are not in place, it makes it much more difficult for people to progress to higher levels. One issue here is simply a lack of provision – sometimes there aren't enough courses (i.e. assessment centres are full), and other times there simply aren't the courses available in the area. One large private employer in the South West said that she had five people waiting to do an NVQ Level 3 but that there was no assessor to assess the candidates. In the South East, the assessment centre for NVQs is at capacity. In London, an assessment centre had just been closed. A play development officer in the North West tells of her experience:

“Warrington has moved over to CCLD (Children's Care, Learning and Development) – colleges have stopped delivering. A short-term effect of the Children's Plan is that all the playwork training has stopped! Nobody could argue that the playwork strand of CCLD is sufficient for playworkers. But Warrington aren't even delivering this or assessing this unit.”

It is interesting to note that since the extra funding for 4,000 playworkers was announced in the Children's Plan, all existing funding for playwork training in the North West has been discontinued.

The situation concerning provision generally seems to be similar in some parts of the North East as well:

“Is there enough training out there for people? Working in the workforce department now, I'm not hearing much about playwork qualifications at the moment. I got an email from one worker doing Children's Care Learning and Development getting part of the way through it and thought 'I want more on the playwork side', and she was just recommended to do the play unit added on top. So I looked and thought 'What else is there out there?' If colleges don't get the numbers they don't provide the training.”

In London, one employer said that she cannot find people with playwork qualifications – ‘so we get others with the Early Years NVQ and then use the transitional module’. In Devon, the situation is the same, even though there is a strong NVQ background in that county:

“I run an after school club and I cannot find competent playworkers at Level 3 even though in Devon we have a strong NVQ background. There are twenty each year with CCLD from the local college – but they go and work in Marks and Sparks as we can only employ people for twenty-two hours, twenty-nine if working in a breakfast club as well.”

One employer sums up the perceived significance of this issue – ‘If you haven’t got enough people qualified to playwork in Level 3 full stop, what chance have you got getting universities and colleges offering the Foundation Degree?’.

There is also an issue of how good the provision is where it does exist. In the East region, one employer stated that she has been on too many courses where the tutors are not experienced in the field in which they’re delivering training. It was argued that ‘we need more people with playwork experience who have been there and done that’. The person went on to say that it can be quite uncomfortable when you have sit there and say ‘sorry, that’s not quite right – if you look it up you’ll find it says blah-de-blah-de blah’. In the North East group the perception was that at the moment the push towards an NVQ model of education (as opposed to an academic one) meant that ‘there aren’t the experienced assessors on a wider level’.

HE Provision

Most groups discussed the issue of degree course provision and the practical implications this has for up-skilling playworkers. For example, in some regions there is access to degree level courses such as the Foundation Degree, but no access to a full Honours degree. Examples of this are the East and West Midlands. Another example given was in Hertfordshire, where the playwork Foundation Degree is offered but the top-up year to the Honours degree is in Education Studies, not playwork. The Honours degree without distance learning is only available in one region of England.

The other issue is that there is also a lack of Foundation Degree provision. Many groups discussed the lack of institutions delivering the Foundation Degree. In the North West, participants felt that the only way that deployment could really grow would be to have more institutions offering the degree ‘nearer to where people are’. In Birmingham, participants said that Birmingham University used to offer a B.Phil. in Community Play and Youth Work, but have recently changed it so now it is just Youth Work. In the East Midlands, there is no provision at all. The following quote from a playworker illustrates this point well:

“Many playworkers can’t or can’t afford to drive. I have two jobs and to travel even within the county is almost too much. I have to get two buses. Going out the county in terms of time and money would be ridiculous.”

Even where a Foundation Degree is offered in a region, sometimes it is still a long way for people to travel. In the South East it was reported that even though the Foundation Degree is offered in Brighton, that is still a big distance for some in the region. In the East region, it was felt that the distances can be so far that some may feel the need to stay overnight, adding significantly to the cost of training. An employer in the West Midlands wanted to put her manager through the Foundation Degree, but was unable to given that half of the course was delivered in a place that was inaccessible.

Quality of courses

In at least a third of the groups, the quality of the courses run was also questioned. In London, this was quite a major point. One employer really felt that the existing qualifications were ‘failing the sector’ in that it has become ‘very prescribed’ what you have to put in. The concern is that this will lead to an ‘inflexible and inadaptable way of running HE’ It is probable that what is being referred to here is the Sector Endorsed Foundation Degree. There was however an anxiety that dictating a course actually hadn’t worked that well – ‘[people telling us that] this is what the content should be’. This employer argued that there needs to be some ‘synergy between courses and the people that attend’. This position was supported by an employer in the Midlands who indicated she would like a degree in playwork, not ‘a degree in everything with a bit of playwork’.

Another member of the London group questioned the quality of the actual course, suggesting that in some instances it’s not ‘particularly good’ although it may be getting better. There is a problem with recruitment – ‘you have to get ten or 12 or else it’s cut’. The consequence of this is that because there are sometimes such varying levels of ability on the course, ‘the bar was set to the lowest common denominator’. It was suggested that certainly in the early years of the course there was ‘one hour of real play to two and a half hours of not play stuff’.

Funding

Following on from this, there is also an issue with funding which stops many playworkers undertaking qualifications at HE level. One problem is that some

private and voluntary sector employers cannot afford to pay for their staff to go through HE courses, whether this is the cost upfront or the back-filling that is necessary in order to cover whilst that person is studying. Many groups commented on this. The following quote from the North East region sums this up well:

“Funding is also needed for backfilling if you release somebody from the private and voluntary sector – they can’t afford to get supply cover in, to enable staff to be released to do training or attend HE courses. Employers can’t afford to pay fees for cover and pay student wages while being released”.

An employer from the East Midlands shares this sentiment, suggesting that the degree would *have* to be ‘hour friendly’ and would need to run in the middle of the day as back fill staff couldn’t be afforded. One participant in the North East indicated that her degree course was planned especially with playworkers attending a setting in mind – all the lectures finished in time for students to get to the after school club.

There is also the issue of funding for the course itself. The following quote from the South East region highlights the difficulty that some face:

“For a start, you’ve got to have the funding for somebody to do the Foundation Degree – like a grant scheme, because at the end of the day, for the majority of the people it’s a part-time job, so they could not afford to pay to go and do that. There has got to be financial support.”

One employer in the East region told of her battle to get her local council to fund her playwork course – ‘a lot of funding is going to Early Years, which is good, but there needs to be equal weight’. Indeed, an employer from this region stated that the success of this Model would depend upon the geographical area in which it was introduced. Funding access ‘may be inconsistent’. One participant in the West Midlands group highlighted the fact that students can get £6,000 to train to be a teacher. In the same group it was argued that a lot could also depend on the local authority and whether or not they had a good play section.

Two groups also highlighted a problem that exists with fees for doing a third year. In the East region, one participant had done a Foundation Degree in Playwork but then wanted to top this up to an Honours Degree. However, the publicised top-up degree in the region is Education Studies, with no playwork at Honours level; because he already had a degree in Leisure Management, he was told he would have to pay double the fees for the third year.

A similar situation is apparent with distance learning – one participant in the South West is undertaking her degree via distance learning. As well as having to pay for it herself, she also only gets £1,600 from the Student Loans Company – ‘there’s no-

where to do it full time, but as a playworker you're discriminated against by UCAS just because you need the flexibility'.

Hours and salary

One of the key concerns across all of the groups was about the part-time nature of playwork. Private employers in all groups were concerned that they cannot, in the words of one from the Midlands, 'create a full-time wage':

"Most people at my clubs work 25 hours a week."

This is fairly representative of the way employers feel about employing a graduate. In the West Midlands, playwork was described as 'very rarely a full-time job'. One private provider from the North West expanded on this to say that he thought people left his business 'on a weekly basis' not because they could necessarily get better pay in other parts of the children's workforce, but because other sectors can offer more hours, which comes back to pay. One employer was very concerned about how she would be able to afford a graduate salary – 'people at Level 3 only work 15 hours a week'. Indeed, a senior practitioner in the South West doesn't think any club could afford to pay what she called 'a graduate salary'. An employer illustrates the problem:

"How [this] will be sustainable, I don't know how it's going to work. I'm studying a university playwork degree but as the provider I still get paid on what's left over the same as I do now. I will still be in the same position financially, just with more education and training. I won't get a better salary. I pay my own salary so I know what I can earn!"

He went on to say later that, for the private sector, everything is an 'economic decision', and 'we can't generate extra funding'. This point was confirmed by an employer in the Midlands who argued that this was even more important given that many businesses rely on fees from carers and parents for their income. The following quote from an owner of six after school clubs highlights the dependence that clubs in the private and voluntary sector have on income from parents, and the fear they have of passing on extra costs to them:

"We're not expensive (£2 per hour) but parents even moan about this! They're moaning even more at the moment. More are now defaulting on payments – but all increasing costs are as of necessity passed on the parents. I'll cut my own throat if I'm not careful."

These comments show that the cost of employing a graduate is a fearful concept for employers in the private and voluntary sector.

Some employers also fear that subsidies given by the public sector to sustain salaries will only be for the short term. One large employer explained that somebody she knew in the Early Years sector had had their hours extended because the subsidy was used to pay her wages. However, once the subsidy was cut, the hours were also cut. An employer in the North West said that he couldn't see a situation where this would ever be sustainable without subsidy, and yet worried 'that there's then a point where you become unsustainable'.

The result of this situation is that some clubs are now finding it difficult to recruit even at Level 3 for the jobs they have available at the moment. Indeed, one employer said that she was unsure whether or not some of her clubs would run because she cannot fill the vacancies. Another practitioner furthered this argument by suggesting that if the model is to be successful it might need some legislation to back it up, as people struggle to recruit at Level 3 'and this is an Ofsted requirement!'.

More than one job

Most of the focus groups also raised the issue of many playworkers having 'a portfolio of jobs' in order to make up this lack of hours and salary that comes from only working part-time. According to the groups, it is not uncommon for playworkers to have more than one job. A large employer in the South West puts it this way:

"How you play a role of education in this busy-ness is hard to see – if they are the lunchtime supervisor, where will they fit it in?"

One respondent argued that it was already difficult to fit things in because of available time. A senior practitioner commented that a relative of hers had been put off doing the foundation degree because he saw how much time it took her to do hers.

In the London group, a play development officer argued that some people 'need two or three jobs to satisfy their playwork drug'. Given that this is the case, other difficulties present themselves:

"One member of staff works for three different people, but we can't figure out how three different organisations can manage the training needs of one individual. There needs to be work [done] with multi-jobbers."

Another point raised was that sometimes the situation is made even more difficult when one of the employers is a school. It was argued that people can rarely get time off from schools to train – one respondent in the Midlands described them as ‘insular’. One thing that has helped this situation is distance learning, as ‘full-time courses cut a lot of people out’ for the reasons discussed above. Thus the option to study when it best suits the learner was deemed good. There was definitely evidence that busy lifestyles could make this Model a difficult one to implement without some commitment to lifestyle adjustments.

Profile of current playworkers

Another barrier that potentially exists in enabling current playworkers to become graduates is that many in the existing workforce aren’t used to the arena of education. About half of the groups brought this up as an issue. Perhaps one problem for Model 1 is that many people in the existing workforce do not have playwork qualifications. This was only mentioned by one group, but nevertheless this could be quite a significant issue:

“Somehow, we perhaps need to go back a step, because some of the existing playworkers don’t have a playwork qualification at all and so don’t have the entry requirements for Higher Education. Right from the foundation stage as well it’s a step too far. Progressing with this Model somewhere down the line, because you’ll have a play workforce at Level 3, but we need to give team Level 3 first! This would be ideal if existing playworkers were qualified to Level 2 and Level 3 first.”

Perhaps this quote illustrates that the model will only really work with playworkers that are already at Level 3.

Discussed much more widely was another potential problem. The following quote from a practitioner in the North East is pertinent:

“If people aren’t used to qualification and training and formal/informal education, you need to coax people along slowly but gently – having a need for a clear and concise career pathway - ‘this is where you enter at, and this is where you can go from there’. It has much more clarity – some of the existing workforce may not have been in education for thirty years or so and so we shouldn’t set the stepping-stone too far from the shore”.

This was echoed in many of the groups, albeit with slightly different takes. A strategic worker in London argued that it is the job of existing playworkers to ‘raise

the aspirations' of this group of people. It was acknowledged in the same group however, that often it was this type of person who might have a family and thus find it more difficult to engage in training.

An employer in the South West was concerned that many of her staff would be scared away by the thought of studying at a higher level for this very reason. They are people that you might perceive to be 'your mums and grannies', and yet 'they are so good at what they do'. This was supported by another who suggested that this type of person was often very good at reflective practice and 'wouldn't need to be a graduate'. However, the following experience of one owner highlights the difficulties some can have with training:

"When you are in a classroom, you've got all these teenagers who are so fast with computers, and especially in playwork we don't tend to use computers. So IT is not as powerful. Their IT knowledge is powerful, whereas I worry about which key I need to press. This is the module that we're doing at the moment. Everybody managed to do all their work and I'm still on the first exercise."

Finally, there was discussion in two of the groups about those who were very experienced at playwork but who didn't want to do a degree. It was suggested in the East region that whoever doesn't want to do a degree should be able to choose not to do one. In the North West it was argued that much of the voluntary provision has 'fantastic' playworkers from the local community who are not very 'academically based'. It was argued that settings should be able to 'home grow' what they need.

Enablers

This brief, final section considers what kinds of things might need to be done in order to make this Model successful. These are not exhaustive, nor are they recommendations, but rather present themselves in the data. It could be the case that even with these factors in place, this Model still may not work.

Information, Advice and Guidance

One thing that could be improved is the Information, Advice and Guidance that current playworkers get. This seems to be especially the case where the local authority is not 'play based'. One employer in the Midlands gave evidence about how she had been mis-sold information about what training she and her staff should be undertaking – they did lots of unnecessary training and 'even had to do placements in nurseries'.

Pay scales

Some people thought that pay scales should be introduced for existing playworkers in order to make the degree a more attractive prospect. The group in the West Midlands discussed this issue in this context and one participant in particular thought that pay scales should be introduced. It is unclear from the data however, whether all participants in this group were in favour of the idea. In the North West, a Play Development Officer argued that pay scales were an 'important part' of up-skilling the workforce. This was countered within the group, however, by a private employer who argued that you had to be careful, because it mattered that certain types of employer, such as those in the voluntary sector, would not be able to adhere to the pay scales. This latter sentiment was shared with at least one other group. We heard earlier about affordability and sustainability in relation to pay.

Depth Interview analysis

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)

Much of what was said in the focus groups about Model 1 was confirmed by the participants in the depth interviews with Higher Education Institutions delivering Playwork courses. Just as the employers and employees did, the HEIs identified advantages to this Model, as well as disadvantages and barriers that could make it difficult and prohibitive. We will not seek to repeat the data that is presented above, but rather give an indication for how well it is supported by interviewees as well as highlight any points of difference with the preceding data.

Advantages

Improving the quality of play

There was a consensus among HEIs that being qualified to degree level in playwork increases the quality of services that playworkers deliver. It is perhaps not surprising that this should be the case. HEI respondents gave two main reasons why being qualified to degree level would have this effect. One reason is that a degree gives you generic, transferable skills that are valuable to playwork practice. The other is

that it increases the practitioner's knowledge of playwork which is beneficial to the quality of service that is offered.

Generic skills

The importance of generic skills was discussed in the focus groups – as we have shown, some private providers went as far as to say that graduates *per se* have the level of generic skills needed in order to perform to expectation. However, this issue was emphasised more in the depth interviews with Higher Education Institutions. The following quote outlines the benefits according to one:

“The core graduate skills are developed, and the key skills gained are very important. For example, both oral and written communications support report-writing which is necessary in Playwork to get the message across to other professionals. Confident communications are important, and the ability to communicate well brings further confidence. Being organised, multi-tasking, working under pressure and managing a big workload, help them learn transferable skills for the workplace. Graduates also provide innovation and enterprise, which can contribute to the play setting's sustainability and ability to manage change. Reflective practice, which is a crucial part of programmes at higher levels, will contribute to best practice in play settings too.”

Other HEIs supported these observations. One described it as being able to make 'something from nothing'. Another argued that these generic skills help with leadership in the sector:

“Leadership is lacking currently...there are lots of voluntary organisations with a big responsibility to lead, so it's crucial to get people leading. The hidden skills such as critical thinking, writing, problem solving, transferable skills such as thinking, reflecting. Higher education can help develop a research mind.”

Knowledge of playwork

HEIs also consider that the quality of provision will be increased further if the degree is a playwork degree. It was argued that it is not only the level of education that is important, but also the subject. The following is from a lecturer in Playwork from the North of England:

“Knowledge of play and Playwork that graduates gain is also valuable: all graduates in Playwork should have a knowledge and understanding of child and adolescent development right across the

age spectrum, and cover psychological and sociological perspectives. Also, at higher levels the values of Playwork can be explored in more depth and opportunities provided to apply them, and reflect on them, so that they become embedded in practice.”

This notion was supported widely across the HEI interviews. One argued that graduate progression ‘offers participants perspectives which are useful to prepare them to take a step back to explore [their] own opinions which inform their own practice’. This suggests that HEIs believe Playwork degrees are preferable over other degrees because their content has greater relevance to the delivery of playwork services. One of the ‘graduate’ skills identified by HEIs is the ability to be able to ‘reflect’:

“In [our region] there is a strong history of adventure playgrounds and they can be complicated organisations, working in deprived areas, working with challenging children and young people (and sometimes staff). Highly developed, reflective staff are very important in large organisations like that.”

One interviewee said there is anecdotal evidence that higher qualifications can lead to an increase in the quality of services provided, but that we cannot rely on the EPPE² research for the evidence. This is because the EPPE research talks about ‘outcomes’, when playworkers do not look for ‘outcomes’ in children’s freely chosen play.

Champions and role models

In line with the focus group findings, many HEIs felt that current playworkers needed higher level qualifications in order that they might ‘champion the playwork cause’ and be used as role models within the sector.

One HEI argued that with more people studying play, it would mean that there were more who could promote it and its ethos – ‘they would have a clear rationale for the benefits of play and playwork and therefore [the benefits] for the children’. Another argued that studying to a higher level was necessary in order for playworkers to be able ‘to articulate the differences between playwork and other disciplines within the Children’s Workforce’.

² The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project is the first major study in the United Kingdom to focus specifically on the effectiveness of early years education. See <http://eppe.ioe.ac.uk/> for further information.

Status

HEIs also confirmed what the employer groups said about status and parity across sectors. Rather than repeat the points made above, it illustrates that HEIs also felt that increasing the number of graduates in the playwork workforce would help to recognise playwork as a profession:

“The benefits from my perspective are improved recognition of Playwork as a graduate profession alongside teaching, social work etc. If you have that core of graduates, you immediately have a network of people who can influence policy and speak the same language, hold policy-makers’ attention.”

Another said that graduate level status was important or else playworkers would be ‘left behind’. This comment was given in the context of the Early Years sector and the requirement for each setting to employ a graduate by 2015. One interviewee felt strongly that it should be playworkers and not other professionals who staffed extended services and has recently changed the name of the foundation degree offered by the institution to make the course more attractive to those who might manage these settings.

Current workforce more likely to train

Most HEIs interviewed felt that Model 1 would be the model that was most likely to be successful in enabling a graduate-led core of playworkers to emerge. This was because they felt that those with the ‘values and ethos of playwork’ were more likely to want to learn about it at a higher level. One interviewee felt that this group of people were the ones with the ‘most to gain’, said in the context of the benefits which graduate level skills can bring discussed above.

One HEI said that the make up of those on their course was predominantly existing playworkers ‘who are passionate about playwork and want to improve their existing practice’. This quote sums up the feeling of this respondent:

“It is an obvious Model and one that has the best equipped students coming in...”

Another institution claimed that the research conducted when developing their degree showed that there was lots of commitment within the sector to train to a higher level, and it was only the barriers that exist that stopped them doing so:

“What is clear is that many have done playwork over the years for next to nothing – we should be supporting the existing sector – many want to do Higher Education and therefore we would be widening participation in HE.”

Disadvantages

Although HEIs were broadly in favour of this Model, they nevertheless identified some disadvantages to it.

Hard to engage some of the workforce

Although the evidence given from some HEIs suggests that the existing playwork workforce are perhaps quite likely to engage in playwork training, there was a feeling from some that there was still a number who could find qualifying to degree level quite difficult. One problem is the perception that playworkers have of themselves:

“The real problem is getting enough bodies together to make it worthwhile to provide a course at this level in the area. Playworkers are not academic, or at least they don’t see themselves as academic – there’s a lot of work to be done because until they do, we won’t be able to recruit for courses and so the courses won’t be provided at this level.”

A different institution highlighted the problem from their point of view:

Returners to education are nervous about entering Higher Education Institutions. But we don’t really support non-traditional students who work alongside the more traditional HE entrants. Inclusion should be extended to enable the non-traditional students to access HE.”

Another Institution supported this claim and outlined the problems that face their region. Within the region, there were several colleges who are providing or who had provided the Foundation Degree in recent years – the interviewee suggested that all are, or were, struggling with course recruitment. A different interviewee suggested that employers could possibly do more to make studying attractive:

“Employers really need to support people, for example by paying fees and helping staff to manage their workload while studying, either by giving them time off for study leave or redistributing work to others.”

Another highlighted another possible disadvantage to this model in that because it is not a 'profession' like some sectors, there are issues when it comes to encouraging the existing workforce to undertake qualifications and training:

“There’s a tension between a profession versus volunteers. Volunteers could not engage with a three-year programme. Professions are not run on volunteers. You don’t get volunteers in medicine or teaching.”

Thus, a qualification to the positives of this Model highlighted above is that the uniform is not 'uniform' and thus different help might be needed to make education attractive to the whole of the sector, It’s for this reason that many of the HEIs argued that access routes must be 'wide and varied' to 'suit people’s needs’.

It is fair to say that there was some polarisation of opinion here. One HEI gave the strongest opinion as to why they thought education was attractive enough for those within the sector:

“People will always argue that there must be a cheap and easy way to do it (i.e. gain a degree), but it needs hard work. APEL and APL allow easier access, credit and recognition. But you shouldn’t get a degree for doing nothing. Sustaining the quality is the key – people have to work hard.”

The reasoning here is that it doesn’t really matter too much whether people find it attractive enough or not – higher education is attractive to those who want to do it for the right reasons.

One HEI pointed to the fact that the BA (Hons) in their region had only had 'limited success', although it may have been a different story if it had been delivered in a bigger city than the city it was delivered in. Indeed, a different HEI argued that the Foundation Degree could be a 'good place to start' because the existing sector 'like vocational courses'. They went on to say that it wasn't too difficult to 'twist their arm in order to get them to do another year’.

Related to this is the desire not to discourage or 'upset' those already working in the sector. This was highlighted within the focus group discussions, but it was also mentioned by two interviewees from HEIs. The following quote is representative of the view:

“We know from the Early Years Professional Status that there are workers who feel that they are passed over if they don’t have a Level 3 qualification [as entry to HE] or don’t want to undertake an HE qualification. The backbone of playwork is people who are passionate

about play and have been in the sector for a long time. They would be upset at being made to do a degree.”

Again, the issue of passion is raised here, and the importance of working with the diversity of the existing sector.

A move away from face-to-face

Another potential disadvantage to this Model identified through the face-to-face interviews was about the temptation there might be for the current workforce to move out of face-to-face roles, should the ‘graduate-led core’ be deployed in a strategic role, with full-time hours and full-time salaries.

One HEI argued that this should not have to be the case:

“Graduates need not necessarily be senior practitioners and policy-makers. Graduates should not have to move away from face-to face-work.”

One other HEI was sceptical that however desirable it might be for graduates to stay in face-to-face roles, there would possibly be nevertheless too much of a temptation for existing practitioners not to accept these opportunities.

Barriers

The Higher Education Institutions identified three main barriers to current playworkers obtaining higher level qualifications. These were:

- access to courses
- the issue of part-time working, and
- terms and conditions of employment.

Much of what was said in this instance reflected the discussions of the focus groups reported above. The following is a summary of the HEI perspective.

Access

The issue of access covered not only access to training, but also access to funding to make training possible. The following quotes are from two different institutions:

“Funding is absolutely critical. People don’t have enough to pay HE fees.”

“Students get a grant when they are on low income but it’s not always possible. Even if fees are paid it’s still expensive to study – buying books and paying for travel is a big investment.”

With regard to physical access, the following quotes are representative of what many of the HEIs were saying about the issue:

“The delivery of Playwork qualifications is patchy. Some training providers send consistent numbers of playworkers through and others send very few.”

“Courses need to be more accessible and providers need to think about support for students.”

One HEI argued that accessibility was an issue, but that if the will was there, ‘this could be got around’. However, one problem that was of concern to this respondent was the lack of access to good placements:

“There are limited opportunities for quality placements – identifying centres of excellence demonstrating high quality practice would make sense, and offering internships there would be good. There is a growth in children’s centres but not those with an emphasis on play.”

One Institution played down the problem of funding, as well as the possible lack of lecturers to teach any increase in undergraduate numbers:

“Presumably, the drive for a qualified core of graduate leaders assumes a structure within the workforce? That is to say, if the government want a graduate led core then one would assume that resources would be in place to allow greater access to provision.”

Part-time work

This issue of part-time work was also raised by many of the HE respondents, just as it was by the focus groups. It must be recorded that a few interviewees insisted that there were enough full-time opportunities available if that is what was desired – ‘enough for a core’:

“There are some full-time jobs— like adventure playground workers – I was a full-time playworker for a long time. There are many full-time positions.”

Another institution also thought that there were full-time jobs available:

“Strategic jobs, for example play officers in local authorities, should be graduates or Playwork postgraduates to help make decisions for children. Big projects, for example adventure playgrounds or play centres,)should employ graduates, without a shadow of a doubt.”

Others though were more sceptical. One institution argued that some of the sector, like those mentioned in the quote above, might be okay, whereas after school clubs and settings such as that would struggle because of the part-time issue. For one institution, this was a real concern:

“I think it’s immoral to train people to do jobs that don’t exist. This keeps me awake at night. Will a degree enable graduates to get a job in Playwork or anywhere else? I don’t want to be responsible for people getting into huge debt while studying in order to go into a twenty-hour per week job.”

This was echoed by another – ‘we need jobs to be available that are full time and include working with children. There aren’t many of those in [our region].’

Pay

Related to this is the issue of terms and conditions, and this was raised by a majority of the HEI Depth Interview respondents. This following quote summarises the general feeling:

“We need to pay graduates an appropriate wage and recognise their investment. Lots of Playwork Foundation Degree students have gone into different roles in leadership and management for Playwork where pay levels are higher. It’s worrying that they’re not staying in Playwork practice.”

In the focus groups, the issue of pay scales was discussed, especially in the North East where ‘professional’ playworkers are on the same pay scale as Youth Workers. One HEI stated that this had a made difference:

“The pay bar in Newcastle has been the biggest incentive to staff undertaking Playwork HE qualifications. Opportunities for promotion have also come about as a result of Newcastle Play Service’s

engagement with Northumbria University to [a] provide Playwork HE course for staff.”

Employers and employees

Employers

Fourteen Depth Interviews were conducted with private providers as well as local authority employers. The following analysis will seek to highlight differences where they exist.

Personal development

There was clear evidence from employers in the sector that a passion for playwork is an important factor for some when choosing whether or not to do a Playwork degree. Evidence from both private providers as well as those who work for local authorities shows that commitment can be a key motivator:

“I did the Foundation Degree for my own personal development. It certainly wasn't for the money – whilst I've been doing my degree I've had to close one of my two clubs, so it certainly wasn't for the money or the effect it has on my bottom line!”

Another private provider said she would love to do her Foundation Degree if it were possible, especially if it would get the Playwork sector recognised within the Children's Workforce and 'parity with other sectors was ensured'.

One local authority employer argued strongly that this Model was the best model. The following quote is long, but it does nevertheless convey the depth of feeling with which it was made:

“Many people who are doing playwork qualifications are, in my experience, doing it for their own passion. It's not really any good somebody else telling you what you should be doing in this context. It may be okay when the requirements are clear, such as for a doctor, but for a part-time job it won't work. It has to be what you want to do, driven by your own passion. What we need to do with playwork is 'big it up' as an offer – rather than making it mandatory – if you make it mandatory, you end up getting the wrong people doing it. If you make it desirable, the passionate people will do it.”

The employer also made links between a passion for the job and the fact that many playworkers will not be used to a higher education 'setting':

“I would encourage the Government to start by looking at those in the field who are passionate about playwork. They should spend money on getting those people somehow into the Higher Education system – let’s not forget that there is a culture shift in getting from an NVQ to university. Focus the money on moving appropriate people up the notches. You could then ask the locally authority to work on support.”

Accredited Prior Learning (APL)

One thing that some employers felt quite strongly about was Accredited Prior Learning. Although this is not something that all employers spoke about, one private provider argued particularly strongly that APL should be given prominence in any model that is developed. However, it has direct relevance to this Model because existing playworkers are more likely to have lots of experience of the sector than those being deployed using Model 2 or Model 3. She talked about her experience of the Early Years Professional Status:

“I got very frustrated when I got told I wasn’t qualified to run my Early Years setting when I had been working with children for forty years. The problem for Playwork is that it doesn’t have anything equivalent to EYPS. I did EYPS and it was really nice and easy to do the fast-track route.”

“I’m now fifty-six and my favourite fantasy of retirement is to leave managing this centre to just run an after school club. As I run a centre offering a lot of different services, this would be a substantial reduction in the level of my responsibility, and yet I could be in a position soon where somebody is telling me that I’m not qualified to do this. Without a fast-track element I would be *very* unmotivated to do another two- or four-year degree.”

Another argued that employers currently like people who have experience, and not particularly those with a degree. To then ‘move the goalposts’ and not allow for an APL route could be quite traumatic for some. As one interviewee said, ‘people that work in out-of-school clubs do not seem to see themselves as academic in the bigger picture’.

The provision of one private provider extended only to a holiday play scheme. She outlined how satisfied she needed to be that this was safe for the 90 children that register. She argued that it is as much effort to get the children registered for this in the summer than it is to get the 50 children the centre gets everyday at the nursery. In her view, ‘only the love of the job keeps us going’. Her point was that the staff who

work for her will not be motivated to undertake a qualification at degree level, but rather the opposite.

Parity

Just as with the focus groups, a majority of employers here also felt that qualifying existing playworkers to degree level would help with regard to parity across sectors within the Children's Workforce. One private provider did feel that recognition of the sector should come 'before lots of taxpayer's money is spent on the qualifications'. Another private provider supported this view to some extent, arguing that it can be a real barrier for existing playworkers:

"The problem is that playwork still has a stigma attached – people still attach 'lower level status' to the profession and this is a real barrier to development."

However, most saw this as an opportunity for the existing sector to improve the perception that people have of the sector and thus the influence it has in practice. As one local authority employer commented:

"I like the expectation that playwork being 'graduate-led' will increase the sphere of influence that playwork has both within the Children's Workforce and more widely, impacting on the lives of children."

Another employer said that it would help playworkers to make play opportunities 'something special', as opposed to education.

Pay

Both private providers and local authorities felt similarly about terms and conditions, and local authority employers were actually more likely to raise this in a private provider context than in their own context. The following quotes summarise the views given by most employers around this point. The following quotes are from private providers:

"Money is a real barrier – playwork is a low paid job and there is not enough money in it – many people have to work in more than one job to make ends meet. Playwork never has been a well paid job and I can't see that really changing – not for the private and voluntary sector anyway."

“I operate in a fairly affluent area and I can honestly say that putting up prices that parents pay is not an option. Often they are resentful in paying what they pay. We must find ways of making the sector sustainable but how this is done is the million dollar question.”

These sentiments were echoed by most employers that were interviewed and it triangulates previous data. Local authority employers argued the same thing:

“The real problem we have is the incentive – at the moment there is a philosophy that employers have of ‘Let’s keep Ofsted happy’ and thus stay at Level 3. To train staff above Level 3 the employer would need provide a real incentive for them to do so – otherwise why would they?”

“Who would employ these people, I don’t know. The funds aren’t there. And I certainly can’t see a private and voluntary sector business funding a graduate!”

Others talked about subsidy, and how this can help this situation. It was noted by one however, that in their region this only contributed about £2,000 to salary, which sometimes isn’t really enough.

The other problem highlighted by one Local Authority employer also confirms the focus group finding about other costs that businesses have to cover, and the disincentive that exists to want their staff to be qualified to degree level:

“For all private and voluntary sector businesses, releasing staff will be a big problem, as will paying for cover and the such like. I used to work for another London borough who provided its own out-of-school clubs which meant that there was always somebody there pushing you on. But in the voluntary sector sometimes you’re not pushed on because it’s putting the employer out of pocket.”

Hours

We saw in the focus groups that pay is related to the issue of the number of hours that are available to those working in the sector. This was discussed in the focus groups and without being repetitious here, most employers also raised it in the one-to-one interviews. The following quote is representative of what many were saying in this regard:

“If it was playwork all day you wouldn’t have a problem. The problem is that these people are usually free during the day and so some do Teaching Assistant roles. The trouble is that they often find full-time employment and so move into other sectors.”

Another Local Authority employer felt that because of this, whichever Model was used, it 'certainly couldn't be mandatory'.

Access to courses

As with the focus groups, there was concern across most employer Depths about access to provision of education, both at HE level and below. One private provider couldn't really see the benefit of having a graduate core of playworkers as she had become disengaged with the education system 'ever since Children's Care, Learning and Development came into force'. This is because it has 'really made it difficult to access playwork qualifications at all'.

Others *could* get training at Level 3, but access to Higher Education was a problem:

"The other real barrier is access. How do you propose to do this? I have only just been able to get some Level 3 training in this area. There is nowhere particularly close that does the Foundation Degree – there is one not so far away, but if you had to travel there every week then it's probably not close enough. That's the reality with which we're working."

Another Depth Interviewee made the link between the busy life of those that work in the sector and the access to provision. Many playworkers have more than one job as well as families to look after, and so travelling outside of an area is not realistic on a regular basis – 'many are already too tired by 18:30!'.

Access to funding

Related to this is the access to funding. Employers didn't talk extensively about this, although one Local Authority provider argued that 'the Government will also have to take into account the funding that is needed for support structures and such things as travel expenses, materials, books and cover etc – it's more than just paying for the degree fees'.

Employees

Although employees raised similar issues to those raised by the employers, HEIs and focus groups, the following data are interesting in as much as they give the employee perspective.

Personal Development

We highlighted above that many existing playworkers seem to undertake playwork qualifications for their own benefit. There were four examples within the employee Depths that support the focus group finding that many already fit this model:

“I did my Foundation Degree purely for my own benefit. Playwork is so valuable – we all work for peanuts and do it for the love of it.”

Profile of playworkers

Again, the employee Depth responses also confirm the focus group idea that it may be difficult to engage some existing playworkers in higher education because they have not been used to education and training. One argued that this could be one of the biggest problems with this Model, because playworkers see themselves as playworkers, and not ‘academic’ in that sense. The following quote shows that the same person can have different experiences of studying at a higher level:

“I absolutely loved doing my Foundation Degree, but I’m not really enjoying the third-year top-up. Sometimes the institutions don’t really appreciate that you’ve been out of study for so long. For example, the course I’m on this year is very IT based, and I’m most certainly not IT based!”

For this reason, one argued, just like the employers and the focus groups, that some form of Accredited Prior Learning should be available. This is because there are some playworkers who don’t have any qualifications who ‘don’t want to do them’. She cited difficulties with the Early Years Foundation Stage with regard to the fact that you have to be a graduate to do it.

Parity

Most of the employees interviewed spoke about parity and the ‘professionalisation’ of the sector that having a graduate-led core could bring. The employee data helps us to understand in more depth how this can be in reality. Most of the Depth Interviewees worked in settings such as out-of-school clubs. One, however, was a hospital play specialist. The qualification needed to become a hospital play specialist is not graduate level, and the interviewee described the implications of this in a hospital setting:

“In my sector, I feel as though I need to be on a par with nurses. It’s so important with regard to parity and credibility, even if the pay is not the same. People view your role and responsibility differently if you have a higher level of qualification. It’s important to me that I feel valued by other members of the medical team, that I’m making a worthwhile contribution.”

To this end, this employee has begun the process of obtaining a postgraduate level degree in Playwork, something which she is funding herself ‘because the trust won’t fund add-ons’, that is, qualifications additional to the basic requirements of the job:

“Within the hospital setting, some workers do need encouragement to go and do the Playwork course, it’s true. But most of them ask if they can do it. And no, there really isn’t an incentive to do it, but most of them seem to do it anyway. I think it comes back to what we were saying about recognition – some people are willing to undertake higher levels of qualification for the credibility it brings – that’s reward enough!”

Other interviewees shared this sentiment and indeed the sentiments expressed in the focus groups that playwork is often seen as the ‘poor cousin to education’.

Pay

Employees also talked about the issue of pay in the Depth Interviews, but it did not quite have the emphasis in the context of Model 1 like it did in the employer Depths. Some of the specific points raised were quite general, and echo what the groups were saying:

“Pay is a big issue – playwork has always been seen in the childcare sector as ‘what you can do if there is nothing else you can do’.”

A small number of Depth Interviewees picked up on the point raised in the focus groups about short-term funding for full-time jobs. The following quote illustrates this point:

“Roles for graduates don’t really exist – and the ones that do exist are short term. Maybe you get two or three years at £25,000 through the Big Lottery, but when this dries up there is nothing to replace it.

But what we struggle with is sustainability issues. Couldn’t have this for two years and then the plug gets pulled.”

Another talked about her experience of the Early Years sector and the scepticism that existed before the Transformation Fund that an increase in labour costs would be passed onto parents and carers.

One respondent also talked about the temptation to move away from face-to-face delivery to enter full-time jobs that are not face-to-face with children upon completion of a degree:

“If I was in this position, I would go for a Playwork Development Officer role as the pay is better. But if the pay was the same I would stay in a face-to-face role, but I guess it depends on the person as to what is most desirable for them.”

This latter point suggests that, all things being equal, face-to-face work would be more desirable than development roles that do not include working with children. One respondent argued that there were already ‘too many’ people in development roles telling practitioners how to practice and that more needs to be done to allow ‘empowerment’ of practitioners.

Jobs

Employees generally confirmed what employers in the groups and Depths were saying about the lack of full-time jobs and the predominance of full-time employment. One employee gave her perspective:

“I feel as though something is missing somewhere. Most people work three hours a day or seven hours a day in the holidays – this suits me as I’m retired, but for younger people it’s not really practical.”

So for some people, part-time working is practical and desirable. It is important not to lose sight of this in the debate. There is evidence that many of the people engaged in this research have either obtained or are undertaking playwork qualifications at a higher level whilst working in part-time roles. However, the perception of many of these respondents is that most people wouldn’t want to undertake a degree only to work part time.

“The trouble is, playworkers only work a few hours a day. Usually when you have a degree, you want a little more than this.”

Access to funding

Employees also gave their perspective on the issue of funding as it relates to higher education. These perspectives are interesting as they cite real examples. One Depth interviewee talked about not just funding but also the incentives to encourage people to train at this level:

“I actually feel really let down by [the] education system. When we started our course, we were told that we would get supply cover, books, laptops etc, but they never arrived. I now have to pay about fifteen per cent of my fees of £3,300. I didn't get the incentives and the one that really hurt the most was the lack of supply cover which really made things difficult for the club.”

As we noted above, the hospital play specialist also spoke about funding:

“I'm having to fund my own Dip.H.E. Sometimes the Primary Care Trust will fund things like this, but at other times they won't. Usually, if it's an add-on, they won't.”

Another interviewee highlighted just how difficult it might be for playworkers to fund their own education at this level. This is especially true if a playworker wanted to either return to education or go into education full time in order to do a degree, as opposed to doing something over a six-year period. One respondent suggested that there could be a grants process.

Another respondent suggested that this lack of funding meant that many current Playwork HE students were not face-to-face playworkers as they could not afford to get into debt, especially if they had families. One playworker said that there is a real issue with funding and that she has had to pay entirely for her own Foundation Degree.

Access to quality courses

About half of the respondents also talked about access to funding, but actually employees spoke more about the qualifications levels lower than HE than about access to HE itself. This was similar to the focus groups, which also talked a lot about the importance of these qualifications. Two respondents did raise distance learning, and how this really enables playworkers to study when it is a suitable time for them to do so. One suggested that it is a Model that works because of the issues there are with access to higher education institutions.

Others argued that if the government wants more people to qualify to graduate level, then training at the lower levels needs to be of a better quality. There are several examples of employees with this view. This quote from a playworker illustrates the point:

“The training structure has to be better – at the moment, Level 2 and Level 3 are being organised by somebody who isn’t a playworker. The NVQ Level 3 in particular was very bad quality. This is really important and it’s essential that we get it right.”

In one region, a respondent talked about the numbers of assessors and trainers available at these levels and described them as ‘horrendously understaffed’. He had a whole cohort of staff ready to undertake a Level 3 in Playwork but couldn’t find anywhere for them to do it. This makes it difficult for them to progress on to degree level.

Level 3 ‘insufficient’

Two employees suggested that existing playworkers should be qualified to degree level because it is not realistic for existing practitioners (who are often the employees of a voluntary management committee) to run a setting:

“Running a setting with just Level 3 is not realistic. With a Level 3, a majority of what is being assessed is your ability to be a playworker – it’s very difficult to be assessed on what you don’t do most of the time.”

There would also be an advantage to the leader of a setting being qualified to degree level as ‘raising the bar’ to this level may raise the expectations of other staff.

Model 2

Having discussed the relative merits of Model 1, the analysis now turns to Model 2 – encouraging school leavers to obtain playwork qualifications. The following table summarises the key points of Model 2 as it was developed in the desk research.

Model 2: More school leavers choose Playwork HE courses	
Description	Encourage school leavers to choose HE Playwork courses
Intended target	School leavers choosing a future career Careers advisors, teachers and parents advising on career choice
Characteristics	Young people, with few family (or life-stage) commitments
Likely qualification route	FdA Playwork (with progression to degree via EYPS-type process) FdA Playwork and Early Years or Playwork and Youth Work (with progression to degree via EYPS-type process) Playwork Honours Degree
Pros	Bring new, young people into Playwork Better qualified entrants to Playwork Less need for local HE provision, since young people are more mobile
Cons	New graduates will not have extensive work experience other than through degree course Young people often have not decided on final career when choosing HE course

	Need for careers campaign to sell Playwork
Opportunities	<p>Attract a new high calibre workforce</p> <p>Provide higher proportion of Level 4 qualified playworkers</p> <p>Increase quality of service</p>
Barriers	<p>Playwork may seem a restrictive choice of degree, given that specific qualifications are required for each sector</p> <p>Competition to recruit graduates of any HE discipline</p> <p>Better pay and prospects in other careers / sectors</p> <p>Lack of life-stage trade-off factors or 'satisfiers'</p> <p>These factors might result in Playwork not benefiting from additional graduates</p> <p>Restricted mobility created by qualification requirements for each sector</p> <p>No / little playwork experience</p>

Summary of Model 2

The table shows the summary issues for Model 2 as they are presented in the analysis.

Model 2: More school leavers choose Playwork HE courses	
Description	Encourage school leavers to choose HE Playwork courses
Intended target	<p>School leavers choosing a future career</p> <p>Careers advisors, teachers and parents advising on career choice</p>

Characteristics	Young people, with few family (or life-stage) commitments
Likely qualification route	<p>FdA Playwork (with progression to degree via EYPS-type process)</p> <p>FdA Playwork and Early Years or Playwork and Youth Work (with progression to degree via EYPS-type process)</p> <p>Playwork Honours Degree</p>
Pros	<p>According to the focus group and Depth Interview data, the main advantages to this Model are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding and values – playworkers who have ‘grown up’ in a setting often have the values of playwork from a young age • Unmade choices – often at this age young people haven’t made up their minds about what they want to do • The new Society, Health and Development Diploma may encourage young people to do play in school from an earlier age • The degree is useful for preparation for development roles
Cons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Playworkers at this age many not be suitable for the job of ‘leading the sector’ • Changes to the Ofsted register may make this Model difficult in reality • Playworkers at this age have sometimes left school precisely because they don’t like studying
Barriers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The hours are predominantly part time, which can mean that... • Pay and conditions are not attractive to newly

	<p>qualified graduates who may have lots of debt</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is no real career structure that is mapped out for young people. • Careers advice and guidance is seen by many in the sector to be inadequate • Access to training is patchy across the country
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Focus Group analysis

We will start by looking at some of the potential advantages to this Model before looking at the disadvantages and barriers that might exist which could make the Model's application difficult.

Advantages

The focus group data would suggest that there was no real consensus of opinion about what advantages attracting school leavers into the playwork sector might bring. Several advantages have been identified, but a clear pattern has not really emerged. Nevertheless, we will begin the analysis of this Model by outlining the most popular reason why participants thought this Model could offer something to the sector.

Understanding and values

The focus group data show that the one thing many participants in the groups liked about this Model was that children or young people who have grown up in a setting often have a good understanding of the environment in which they're operating, having experienced it as a youngster. More than half of the groups discussed this Model in this context and highlighted this as an important point.

One employer in the South West suggested that qualifying school leavers to degree level in Playwork could definitely be an option for a young person who had grown up in an out-of-school setting and thus knows 'a little bit about it'. These youngsters 'find out about things' and they are given the right encouragement from an early age. One employer in Yorkshire and The Humber calls this 'growing your own' – a child attends an after school club and then goes back as an adult worker. All of this is summed up well by a Play Development Officer working in the North West:

"I think if a young person has grown up in a play setting – my mum's a playworker so I followed that interest. I grew up on the adventure playground and grew up with the principles of play."

The comment was qualified by the same participant who said that this represented a very small number of playworkers compared to the whole. Another playworker in the North West group argued further that many staff from some of the strongest voluntary sector organisations in Manchester went to adventure playgrounds when they were ten, 11 or 12 and they are 'fantastic':

"They didn't just leave school and think 'Oooh, play!'"

These sentiments were supported by those in the North East group who agreed that their understanding of the environment means they have been attracted into the sector as playworkers. A further point was made by this group however about the need for there to be an 'aspiration horizon' for these young adults as well. Speaking from personal experience, the Senior Practitioner told how young people can get sessional work because 'they have a good relationship with their playworker', they 'did some useful stuff there'. But as a further element to this, they went on to say that they thought it was important for current practitioners to help young people who attend their setting to see playwork as a career as well.

One group felt quite strongly that this was important as once you got young people through the door they were much more likely to stay within the sector. The problem is one of information, advice and guidance, which needs to be better to make the sector more attractive.

Unmade choices

Another positive of this Model surrounds the choices teenagers make and the age at which they make them. The argument here is that decisions about future direction are still in their formative stages and thus this is a good time to 'strike':

"I think this is the right age because once pupils have gone on to do A-Levels they have got a specific career focus and might choose their

A-Levels based on what they want to do. Like if they want to be a doctor, they might choose biology and chemistry. But school leavers would be a good age as they haven't come to firm decisions about their career."

Indeed, this same argument was actually offered as a reason why this model might not actually be *that* successful. One playworker in the West Midlands suggested that when she was 16, she wanted to do speech and language therapy, but since this time she has done everything since. Put in a negative sense, it's whether people really know what they want to do at this age.

Society, Health and Development Diploma

There was a feeling in a small number of groups that the new 14–19 Diploma in Society, Health and Development may help to raise the profile of playwork with the school leaving age range. The South East group suggested that this could provide entry for young people into a playwork career. Those in the North East conferred with this synopsis:

"The 14–19 diploma that has just started...it's a golden opportunity to put forward playwork and youth work as professions."

A playworker in the East Midlands questioned whether Model 2 was particularly for post-A-Level students as with the SHD Diploma there was now room for starting before this:

"Say a kid leaves school straight after their GCSEs, they're going to want to pick a career just like those who have done their A-Levels. You could stick them on a Level 2 or 3 course and progress them up – if you get there early enough."

This new qualification may take on special significance in this sector given that there has been little by way of training for play in schools before now. One Play Development Officer in the North West suggested that with most degrees there is normally some kind of precursor to it at school. For example, if you were to do a Sports Science degree, then in the Physical Education A-Level there is some cross-over.

Useful for development roles

One Play Development Officer in the Yorkshire and Humber region stated that they took up their role *before* undertaking a Foundation Degree in Playwork. The

participant stated that they would have preferred to have done their Foundation Degree *before* going into a strategic role. This view is not supported by any other data, but nevertheless could be quite significant in that, in this particular case, a strategic job was difficult to do without having studied at a higher level. The participant said that having lots of practical experience before doing a degree made doing the degree difficult because it was ‘all the theory side’. It is interesting to note however that the person felt that they were more able to do their job having got the degree than vice versa. This could be potentially significant when thinking about the roles that school leavers might best be suited to – strategic roles may prove difficult if they haven’t studied at a higher level.

Other advantages

Other advantages of this Model were identified by individual groups that are worth mentioning briefly here.

- One group felt that encouraging young people into the sector would bring ‘fresh ideas’ to playwork. It was not suggested what these ideas might be, but it was argued that young people would bring different experiences into settings with new concepts and different aspects of play. These ideas were not discussed in any detail as the conversation moved on to talk about information, advice and guidance.
- A member of the London group suggested that young male teenagers qualifying in playwork may be the beneficiaries of positive discrimination. He drew upon his own experience of being the only male in his degree class – ‘the number of males is always going to be low’. With regard to careers this could be significant, as it is argued that as a male ‘it’s a lot easier to work your way through’. As you are underrepresented it is easier to find the senior jobs as ‘people want to balance the workforce’.
- One participant in the Yorkshire and Humber region felt that the playwork degree could be suitable to a ‘wide range’ of jobs within Children’s Services but that work needs to be done to identify them.

Disadvantages

Having looked at the possible advantages to this Model, this section summarises the main disadvantages of the Model that participants felt existed in this context. By disadvantages, what is meant are factors that would be detrimental to this Model even if any barriers to the learner were identified and removed.

Suitability for the job

One major disadvantage of this Model is that generally it was felt that graduates, having gone straight from school to university, may actually struggle to do the job of being a playworker. In some instances, the issue was that new graduates might not be the best person for the job in any kind of role or deployment. Another issue is that even though school leavers might be suitable for certain jobs or roles, they are not suitable for managerial positions, or to be the core that 'leads' because of their age. We will look at each issue in turn.

It was the view of some that graduates may not be the best group to target as they may actually struggle to do the job. One employer in the North of England said that it was his hypothesis that this group of people would actually be the best playworkers who might best engage with the children. He thought that they would be the 'perfect playworker'. However, this private provider has started to notice that in his particular setting 'the reverse is becoming apparent'. The following quote summarises this view well:

"A lot of it has to do as well with the fact that they are only just coming out of school, and so they have got this institutional way of going about things – they've not had time to remove themselves from the school agenda. They just – they just sort of don't get it. They've not had enough time to remove themselves from the school sort of remit...They are very agenda and disciplinarian driven, very proactive rather than reactive, and obviously it's a reactive role that we have as playworkers."

This provider went on to argue that the best playworkers he has seen so far are the ones that have had one or two jobs, 'but have had that gap between school and employment, to find self, if you like...'. In his experience, 'they don't build the best relationships with the children'.

This view was supported by practitioners in the Midlands, who argued that experience of working in a setting was absolutely vital:

“One of the drawbacks would be if you’re getting an influx of graduates, albeit in playwork, but if they’ve never worked in a setting, they wouldn’t actually be that useful.”

The Yorkshire and Humber group also shared this view. It was their view that the degree ‘doesn’t always prepare you to do certain aspects of a role you might get when you leave university’. It was argued that deploying this group might put pressure on existing colleagues whilst the new worker ‘finds their feet’. Those in the West Midlands also contributed to this point, arguing similarly that ‘you can have studied your degree and read the books, but not know that much about [playwork] compared to somebody who has lots of experience in the field’. The argument is very similar to those made already, that ‘just because you have a degree doesn’t mean you have the gift of being able to engage children’. In the South West, playworkers were described as ‘octopuses’, making links between the setting and the community which can be difficult for one so young.

The other issue here is to do with management. The London group felt that this group could and do make ‘excellent playworkers’, but that they should not be asked to lead others – they should not be the ‘graduate-led core’. This view was supported by other groups, but particularly in the North East where it was argued at length that this group wasn’t really suitable to be graduate leaders. Speaking in the context of Model 2, one practitioner argued that the playwork sector is really in a period of transition – the ‘theoretical backbone’ of the sector hasn’t had time to be translated into practice:

“We’re always banging on about being reflective practitioners – we actually need a period of reflection which is based on a period of consolidation.”

It was also argued at this group that a graduate course is where you learn to be reflective – you don’t learn the ‘values’ of being a playworker at degree level – you learn this and ‘get your understanding’ at Level 2 and Level 3. The degree is for helping you ‘[reflect] back on this professional perspective’. It would seem from this data that those more suited to graduate roles would be those who have experience of trying to put theory into practice.

The ‘end’ of a process

Related to this is the view that graduate-ness should be the ‘end of a process’ and not the beginning. One playwork graduate, now a strategic worker, said that what really made him want to do a degree was completing his Level 3 in playwork. Thus, in a progression line, becoming a graduate is the end of the process, not the beginning. This sentiment was shared by a senior Practitioner in the East Midlands who questioned the wisdom of starting with Higher Education. His point was that

those leaving school at GCSE age are still going to want to pick a career, just like those who leave at A-Level age.

Ofsted register

There is one problem with this argument however, and this was highlighted in the South West group. It concerns the Ofsted Compulsory Register and the changes that have recently taken place. It was pointed out that the register now determines that a playwork setting cannot actually employ a 17 year old if their provision is for five, six and seven year olds.

“You can have 17 year olds working with the Early Years Foundation Stage with four and five year olds, but not on the Compulsory Register working with five, six and seven year olds. But they *can* work with the over eights.”

This quote highlights a problem that might exist if a setting is trying to employ somebody of pre-degree age in order for them to develop and progress to degree level. As this employer put it, ‘if you’re paying a 17 year old, you need them to be counted in the safety ratios’.

Profile of target group

Some groups argued that many young people chose to leave school at the age they did precisely because they are not the ‘academic’ type. It was argued in the North West that although some young people would jump at the chance to do a degree, it would nevertheless scare off many ‘who have left school precisely because they don’t want to do a degree’. The London group discussed the fact that many choose the sector because of its vocational nature, or else they just ‘fall into it’ or do it because ‘they’re passionate about it’. This makes doing something ‘academic’ difficult, because the job is so vocational and has been chosen for this reason.

Barriers

The focus groups identified many issues that could potentially inhibit this Model from working successfully. These will now be taken in turn.

Part-time working

All the groups raised concern about the hours that are available to playworkers who qualify with a degree straight from school. The issue seemed to have greater pertinence in the context of this Model than the other models. The possible reasons for this are outlined in the following discussion.

Most groups couldn't see what motivation there would be for somebody leaving school to spend three years training 'to work part-time for the rest of (their) life'. Some argued that for a lot of people it isn't actually viable to work in playwork simply because there are no jobs out there.

The issue is perhaps more pertinent in this Model because participants saw the lack of jobs in the light of making career choices and career structures. The following quote is from an employee in the South of the country and reflects the feeling that pervaded in many groups:

"I must say, I'm 25 now, and I've worked only in the Leisure service for the last eight years at various different leisure centres, and my role and my niche has always been leading play at those sites. I've been fortunate enough in the last year to spread what we've done to other sites. And to be honest all we did was the holiday stuff. For me, although I love doing it, and co-ordinating it, and achieving good standards with Ofsted and everything, it was still only 13 of a 52 week year – which makes it difficult for it to be a career path. Now I have been lucky in that I have the opportunity to work across many different sites, but this is just one job across 14 different sites right across the town."

A participant in London supported this position – he said that there were perhaps ten full-time jobs in his area – 'and they are all taken'. The following quote from a playworker in the West Midlands is helpful because it highlights the thought processes that a young person might be going through when they are deciding upon a degree subject:

"If you go to university on a course with 30 people in the room, you know you will all pass, but you know you will all be fighting for the same jobs, there's that competition there as well. I did six years part time – it was a long slog – but at the end of the day I needed to know there would be a job for me... "

Indeed, it was argued that if a young person wanted to work with children, they would choose degrees like teaching or psychology as they are more likely to get you into employment. As a playworker from the East region put it, 'given the choice between doing a degree in playwork and a degree in computer science, which one

are they going to chose? Computer Science, as there are loads of jobs out there.’ This participant had begun by stating that she thought there were many full-time jobs available, such as play rangers, and those that work on play buses. However, she identified a twofold problem: poor publicity so that people are unaware of them, as well as the real quality jobs being ‘few and far between’.

One other point about the lack of jobs comes back to the work people with a Playwork degree are doing now. One Playwork student argued that all the people on his course had now left the playwork sector in pursuit of full-time work. It was his suggestion that we try and temp these people back first before we ‘generate more graduates’.

Pay and conditions

Related to the subject of hours is pay and conditions. We have noted above that these factors are related because low numbers of hours often means that pay is low by definition.

Another point made about terms and conditions is similar to a point made above about knowing there will be a job at the end of a course. Practitioners are talking about ‘carrots’ that are placed before young people to attract them to certain industries – ‘if you get this degree, you’ll earn so many millions of pounds’. The argument here is that a young person with aspirations of a high salary would probably not be attracted to a playwork job.

A Play Development Officer in the Yorkshire and Humber region argued that ‘as a graduate, you are thinking about pay scales, especially when you come out with thousands of pounds worth of debt’:

“If I’m not earning a decent salary then there’s no point me studying.”

Another point concerns the level of pay relative to the level of responsibility held. The following quote from a strategic worker illustrates this point well:

“There are often jobs advertised on a Saturday morning for £6 per hour working with severely disabled people. My son was looking for things at the time and found he could earn more stacking the shelves at Sainsbury’s. Would you take the responsibility?”

A playworker in the North East had a similar story of *his* son, who is 19, earning 60p an hour more in a bar than those currently going through a Level 3 course in Playwork. The following quote is included not to prove the point again, but because it is particularly striking:

“I work with people doing CACHE Level 3 playwork...working and supervising two or three sessional playworkers as well. They’re working through the day, starting in breakfast clubs, grafting away through a Level 3 course because they’re being forced to at 9 o’clock at night. It’s just not good enough.”

The case highlights the fact that at 19 years of age, you can already earn more than experienced playworkers undertaking a Level 3 course in the North East. This does have potentially serious implications for those who are choosing career options.

Career structure

The nature of playwork has implications for career paths. All the groups talked about the lack of career paths for graduates once they have graduated. A playworker in the Midlands talked about the need to map career pathways:

“If we’re looking to attract the best graduates and keep them, you need to show people where they can progress to. It seems like the progression is to being a manager, but I’m not interested in that as I want to be face-to-face.”

One participant in the North West argued that career paths needed to be in place specifically for this type of person. But there was some debate about what should come first – the career path, or the young people to use the career path. It was acknowledged that ‘it is difficult for one to exist without the other’.

One of the consequences of this is that parents and other influencers in a child’s life can often encourage young people to take alternative routes. One focus group participant in the North East said that this happened to her – she was pushed into doing a business course for three years. It wasn’t until she did some spare hours in an after school club that she got into playwork. Now she is running a setting. Moreover, there were at least two examples of current playworkers in the groups with parents who didn’t think their children had ‘proper jobs’. One in the North West argued that this was a cultural thing – ‘would you as a parent encourage your kid to do playwork?’.

Careers advice

Careers advice was a subject that received a lot of attention throughout the groups. This was not just about official careers advice, but also about the general perception that prevails about careers in playwork.

One group felt that a lack of good information, advice and guidance (IAG) was the biggest barrier to making this Model work. The prevailing view across many of the groups was that careers advisors such as Connexions are not promoting playwork because it is seen as 'part time and badly paid'. But the question is whether or not this should be an issue – if playwork is seen as a 'professional role', does it matter if the roles are part time? It was argued in the South East that lots of professional jobs are part time.

The perception of many was that playwork was sold to youngsters as 'an easy option if you're not very academic'. The following quote is from an employer in the Midlands:

“We are seen as an unskilled workforce, and we're only just getting our local careers advisors to stop sending everyone without grades A–C. Childcare is the easy option – 'you think like a child, why not work with them?'.”

A senior practitioner in this group said that when he was this age 'the thought hadn't crossed my mind that you could do a childcare degree'. He went on to say that this Model will 'not be very successful without it'.

In the South West, it was argued the even the new 14–19 Diploma has been 'mis-sold as an easy option' – one senior practitioner said that she has 16 year olds as playworkers and the careers advisor had no idea.

Access to training

We have discussed the lack of access to higher education under a similar heading in the analysis of the previous Model. It is worth noting here however that access to higher education provision was discussed by one group in the context of Model 2. A playworker in the South West highlighted that in that region 'young people are missing out'. She had people waiting to do degree level courses but did not have anywhere in the close vicinity for them to train. Because of this, many of them were 'going into new occupations'.

The North East group talked more broadly about the lack of access there is to Level 1 and Level 2 courses – one practitioner thought that this was a key omission of the

Children's Plan. One employer cited a recent experience of running a training course where 50 per cent of the attendees 'wanted to go onto do Entry Level or Level 2', but there was no funding. The argument was that if this is missing, 'how do we get them onto Level 3?'. Another group talked about how they cannot access funding for a Playwork course in the Yorkshire and Humber region.

Sometimes, the problem is not about access to funding but rather access to the courses themselves. This too has already been documented above, but again it is worth noting in this context also. In the North West, when children come out of school at 16, they go 'straight into...CCLD'. This was also a problem in the East Midlands and parts of the North East.

Depth Interview analysis

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)

Advantages

The Higher Education Institutions identified some advantages to school leavers obtaining degrees in Playwork. Again, the aim here is not to repeat previous data but to highlight the similarities, whilst marking any differences.

Unmade choices

Similarly to the focus groups, the HEI Depth Interviews also suggested that this Model could be advantageous for students who haven't yet decided upon a career. One representative put it in the following way:

“School leavers wanting to work with children but not sure about teaching or youth work, don't want a qualification that will pin them down. Playwork is broad and does not commit them to one professional practice.”

This feeling was echoed by another, although the point here is slightly different. The reasoning here is that perhaps degrees should be wider in order to encourage more youngsters into the sector:

“Graduate opportunities need to be broader than just Playwork and incorporate other sectors to attract school leavers who aren't yet sure where they want to work, but know they want to work with children.”

Related to this is the development of the Integrated Qualifications Framework and the 'transferability' this should allow between sectors:

“The IQF is an important part of the policy framework. If an 18 year old gets a Playwork degree they need to understand they are gaining an IQF qualification which can provide transferability.”

Another institution argued that there is a great opportunity with the common core and IQF to raise the profile of Playwork with regard to other sectors. Another said that the common core and IQF 'should enable core study and sufficient professional identity to be available'. Further, 'playworkers need to sharpen their rationale on other Children's Workforce staff'.

Other advantages

One HEI representative thought that an advantage of this Model surrounded the issue of debt, and how getting into debt is sometimes not an option for those later on in years. However, this might not be the case for school leavers:

“[Funding and debt]...has a massive influence, but much less so for school leavers/18 year olds. School leavers are expecting debt, are starting with a clean slate, can travel because they have fewer ties and have not become accustomed to earning a decent wage.”

The point being made here is that it is perhaps easier for a school leaver to make the choice to be a playworker than others who might have things such as family commitments, for example.

Disadvantages

One criticism of Model 2 in the focus groups was that school leavers would not necessarily have the life experience they need in order to be an effective playworker. Certainly this was raised as an issue in a few of the HEI interviews, although not all. This, however, could be a reason why many institutions considered that placement opportunities should be an important element of the Playwork degree. Speaking in the context of Model 2, the following points were made:

“There should be a very strong work based learning element: placement, observation of practice, assessment in the workplace all need to be embedded in the programme. The knowledge students are gaining needs to be applied.”

“We...have school leavers, but the work based learning / placement needs to be very strong. In two or three years study they can get enough practice. It can be a challenge to teach both existing, experienced playworkers and school leavers in the same room.”

One respondent also talked about gap years, and the benefit these can have on those that are younger in years.

“Gap years should be promoted, as students need life experience to get better jobs, rather than moving from school to university straight into work. Year 2 students often have no concept of time – a three-hour lecture is very long for them – and a gap year working somewhere would help them do eight-hour days once they graduate. International trips and placements can also be very valuable. There are interesting things happening in other countries – China, India,

Brazil, Russia – and a student’s Playwork education will be enhanced enormously by experience of playwork in other countries.”

This again supports a point made at the West Midlands focus group about the positive effect that gap years can have on the quality of the graduating student.

Moving out of playwork

An interesting point made by one HEI was that in their particular institution many of the school leavers who had done the Playwork degree had not actually chosen to do a Playwork degree course:

“We have recruited loads of school leavers who enjoy the Playwork degree course but don’t go into playwork. They go into teaching or health and social care sectors. A broader degree would provide more possibilities. The joint Honours programme covers a wide spectrum of learning and, this year, many of the students are undertaking dissertations on play although they are not undertaking the full Playwork route through the programme.”

Another potential disadvantage to this Model raised by one institution is that it’s not altogether clear how many school leavers actually positively choose Playwork as a degree course:

“UCAS are often over-subscribed with people wanting to do teaching and childcare courses and thus many get put on playwork courses as a result. It shows that they haven’t positively chosen play as a degree choice.”

The issue here could be things such as career advice needing to be better, all the way to incentives that are not really in place. One institution said that they have ‘many students’ going on to do Early Years Professional Status ‘precisely because it is funded and students can progress onto BA (Hons) as a part of the course’.

Barriers

Many of the barriers mentioned in the HEI depth interview analysis in Model 1 could also be listed here as barriers also to this Model. The issues about pay and jobs were mentioned in this context and well in the context of Model 1. Other than this, perhaps the biggest barrier to this Model identified across HEIs concerned information, advice and guidance. There were also references made to the

importance of marketing. The following quote is a good summary for what was said in this regard:

“All models are a ‘goer’ but all need some work. There is so much work needed with school advisors. I went to a conference last week and I met a careers advisor and at least they had heard of it, so that was a bit better.”

Other comments also included:

“We really need materials to promote the sector, as well as links to sport and leisure.”

“It would be a good start to have some leaflets on ‘what is a playworker’, and careers guidance for people doing the 14–19 Society Health and Development diploma.”

“The fact that it’s called Playwork is a barrier, particularly to men entering the profession. The name of the Community Playwork course being developed at the university was advised by men to give it a more attractive name.”

One institution said that many of the teacher training applicants often have experience of play settings and that it would be good if some of these could be attracted to the play sector:

“It’s very common that teacher training applicants have worked at some time in a play scheme before applying to train as a teacher. It would be good if they could be encouraged to stay in playwork. Is there a point at which we could intervene? Not everyone succeeds in teaching and not everyone wants to set targets for children and young people. Can we somehow capture them to be playworkers?”

It is possible that information, advice and guidance could help in this regard.

Employers and employees

Employers and employees tended to say less about Models 2 and 3 than they did about Model 1. This is probably because Model 1 was the actual experience of many of the employers and employees interviewed and so they could relate to the issues with greater awareness. This was possibly also a function of Model 1 being the first Model to be tested.

Employers

Lack of experience

The main disadvantage of this Model that was identified by most employers follows closely the main reason given in the focus groups as to why this Model might not be the most successful. Employers generally considered the lack of experience young people have to be a reason why they may not be fully able to meet the requirements of a 'graduate-led core'.

One employer argued that this Model could be the least effective of the three:

"I don't think this is really appropriate at all. Passion for playwork is grounded in experiential practice. Even the best and most theoretical approaches to playwork learning have a massive experiential base. The degree done would have to be at least 70 per cent field experience."

Another employer spoke about the confidence that only age can bring:

"There is one problem with this Model about the age of people leaving school. In playwork, it takes a long time to gather enough kudos to make the necessary changes within a setting. Young people will be set up to fail. One of things you really need in playwork is tons and tons of confidence."

Other employers said that something like the Early Years Professional Status should exist for playworkers, as the theory gained is linked to practice. It was argued by some that although a graduate could have *some* 'development work' (that is, non-face-to-face work), any degree undertaken should be linked to practice. Nearly all of the employers surveyed said that practice is essential to maintaining the playworker's understanding of the sector.

One employer suggested that this is why many Play Development Officer posts now require the candidate to have both a Playwork qualification as well as something in

the region of two years' experience. This is then good 'because you can really help employers given that you have the experience yourself'.

Placements

Linked to the issue of experience are placements, and the value these can add to the sector. Again, some Depth Interview respondents used their knowledge of the Early Years Foundation Stage to argue that a lot has been learnt from this and should be used to help the playwork sector. In the words of one employer:

"A lot has been learnt from the Early Years – we have a lot of placements with our pre-school as a part of the learning system. We get free labour and you can't really work with children unless you have experience of working with children – to me it's as important as going to college."

The same employer also used this theme to talk about the importance of experience:

"All the people I have recruited with degrees have been useless – if you've done an NVQ you've had to do a placement and they're usually much better. I would actually employ somebody with an NVQ over somebody with a degree any day. I would say that the course should be at least 50:50 practice to theory."

Students 'hard to keep'

From an employer perspective this Model also had a disadvantage because many employees in a setting are often of university age. One big problem with this age range is that many are studying other degrees whilst working in the play setting. According to one employer, 'many are using playwork to get into other careers':

"Many are at university themselves but they're not doing playwork. Many are using playwork to get into other careers. Those that do stay always have more than one job."

This experience was shared by another who employs playworkers during the time that they are studying for their A-Levels:

"The trouble is, once they've left school, they tend to leave the setting, so staff are always changing and there is no continuity for the children. It's always a real headache for us too as finding staff is always difficult."

Another sub-issue mentioned in this context is that students can be hard to keep for face-to-face work. Students can be tempted into jobs that offer full-time hours and better wages than face-to-face work can give them. As one Local Authority employer said:

“Graduates would go into jobs like mine! The difficulty with this is that there’s not much opportunity to do any play. It’s so important to keep practice and relate the degree to practice.”

This actually confirms the analysis of Model 1 where respondents were saying exactly the same thing. But as this employer stated, it is young people especially who may choose development roles over face-to-face roles as they are more likely to have issues with things such as student debt.

A positive

Some employers thought of this Model positively just because they considered it good to have young people who can advocate the playwork cause. One employer in particular felt strongly that the sector has ‘a responsibility’ to get young people into the sector and develop and ‘nurture’ them through to leadership roles:

“It would be brilliant to get more young people into higher posts – we need lots more young people in the sector – but it’s actually really difficult to get them into higher posts, which is a shame. Until the terms and conditions are more attractive it feels wrong to be persuading them to come and join us.”

Another employer told of her experience with those who have recently graduated with a Childhood Studies degree. Many of the disadvantages previously identified with this Model seem to be centred upon the lack of experience that playworkers at this age would have. However, the experience of this employer had led her to see things differently:

“I work with some graduates who have just completed their Childhood Studies degree – I have to say that I’m presently surprised by the 18-plus year olds. I wouldn’t have expected their level of maturity.”

Information, Advice and Guidance

Employers here also echoed what employers in the focus groups were saying about information, advice and guidance for young people:

“School leavers could be good but they’re not encouraged by the school – we desperately need some IAG...”

Employees

Employees reinforced many of the issues we have discussed in relation to this Model. We present them again briefly here to show the extent of the agreement, but seek not to repeat concepts that are argued elsewhere.

Lack of experience

A clear pattern emerging from the data is that respondents generally feel that school leavers will not have enough experience to be ‘graduate leaders’. This finding was confirmed by the employees interviewed.

The first example is from a practitioner with over 30 years’ experience of working with children, first as a teacher and now as a playworker. In her experience, young people might struggle to do everything they needed to do were they in a leadership position:

“I don’t feel as though 18 to 21 year olds would be able to manage a play setting. You need more experience than this. All sorts of things go on in a club that you must be able to deal with. You have to deal with people who are an awful lot older than you are and who have been in the game an awful lot longer.”

Another employer, a Playwork graduate herself, was also concerned about school leavers being the graduate leaders:

“I have to say that I’m worried by the school leaver aspect. Somebody at that age may choose a course because it seems like a good thing to do at the time, but in reality by the time they’ve finished their degree, they don’t have the life skills that they need to put theory into practice. In my experience, I have always done the job first and then got the theory.”

This confirms what was said in the focus groups about not always knowing what you want your career to be when you choose your degree. The example given in the West Midlands group concerned an employee who had done everything in life other than the thing she really wanted to do.

The other point here is about the impact that young leaders could have on the rest of the sector, or at least indeed the workforce of an individual setting. One employee was particularly concerned about this:

“There is also a debate we could have about what we mean by the term leaders – how can you be qualified to ‘lead’ at such a young age? It could cause conflict with other, more mature members of staff who feel like they know an awful lot more through their experience than a recent graduate who has a piece of paper which only proves that they understand theory.”

Another employee felt that a lack of experience and ‘hands on application of theory’ in the course would be an issue. This supports the feeling that two employers made passionately, that a course should be 50 or 70 per cent experience if graduates straight from school are to be tomorrow’s leaders.

Careers advice

There is certainly a strong feeling that information, advice and guidance for young people needs to be improved. This was even argued by some who didn’t think that this Model would work. One employee argued that although she didn’t think this was the best model, playwork still needed to be publicised better in order for this Model to work in future years. This employee works in a place where playwork is called ‘playcare’:

“It’s been difficult for playwork because Early Years has taken precedence so often – and now we’re doing ‘playcare’, not playwork. There’s a subtle difference in that playwork isn’t childcare – obviously one is a by-product of the other, but really the connotations it gives out are undesirable, especially to young people who have never heard of playwork.”

The same employer went on to say that:

“Most importantly I think the more graduates there are, the more difficult it will be to ignore us. Who knows, but if there had been more graduates able to articulate what playwork was, we wouldn’t have been in the position where playwork gets turned into playcare.”

Thus the issue actually comes back to parity across sectors and the influencing role of which so much has been said across both the groups and the depth Interviews.

Not a positive choice

Other employees also suggested that information, advice and guidance should be improved and made the point that people did not really choose playwork as a career choice, but rather tend to fall into it later in life:

“Part of the problem is that people don’t tend to do play unless they fall into it by mistake, or stumble upon it by accident.”

This was a point made by one HEI and is also supported by some data obtained from one Higher Education Institution. Out of ten students studying in their final year, about half of the students hadn’t actually chosen to do the Playwork course but were doing it either through clearing or as their back-up to the course for which they didn’t get the grades. Further, at least four of the ten didn’t expect to be working in playwork once they had qualified. One stated that this was because ‘there aren’t any proper jobs’.

Recognition

In line with the rest of the data discussed so far, employees also considered the issue of status and parity to be significant. This quote was said in the context of Model 2:

“The biggest barrier for youngsters is that the profession is not recognised. The profession is not recognised for what it is. It’s really important that you are recognised as having key skills and transferable skills – playworkers have a vast body of knowledge and not many people know that they do.”

The argument that young people generally may not have heard of ‘playwork’ is supported by one employee who said that even though he had been working in a setting from school leaving age, he had not heard of the term. He related his experience of having filled in at a playwork setting for six months when he had just left school:

“When I’d done my six months, I was offered the job full time and employed as a ‘playworker’ – I hadn’t even heard of it before, and I’d been working in a setting for six months. I don’t think young people generally know what playwork is, let alone have chosen it as a profession.”

One Depth interviewee was formerly a teacher, and said that before she became involved in the sector she too had never heard of the phrase. Having worked in

reception classes, 'Early Years' was a familiar concept, but playwork as a discrete profession was not.

Pay and hours

Employees were well aware that young people working for settings such as out-of-school clubs would not earn a full-time salary. Again, the following quote represents the views of the main, although employees were more likely to talk about this issue generally as a part of Model 1 because this is mostly their experience:

“Probably another barrier is that people don't want to pay the price that graduates demand – when you can get something for less, often you choose to do so. But this could mean that we lose creativity with adults and children. But if the Early Years sector has it with the Early Years Foundation Stage, why shouldn't we?”

The same could be said for arguments about the number of hours people work. The following two quotes perhaps best sum up this issue:

“At the end of the day, graduate-ness to improve the quality of play, but there just doesn't seem to be anywhere to go – for the youngsters, for example, there is nothing in it for them. That's the reason why they go for Early Years.”

“In an ideal world we would offer all models – at the moment, you would have to go top down as youngsters are more likely to go into childcare and Early Years because of full-time jobs.”

Model 3

Model 3 is about encouraging workers from other sectors who are qualified to degree level to transfer into the playwork sector. The individual would need to undertake some graduate or postgraduate training in Playwork. Many respondents also talked more generally than this, also discussing the relative merits of people coming into the sector even if they have no degree.

The following table summarises the key points of Model 3 from the desk research.

Model 3: Graduates from different disciplines transferring to Playwork	
Description	Attract graduates from other disciplines to Playwork
Intended target	Graduates, with or without playwork experience
Characteristics	Graduates who are likely to be female, interested in working part time to fit in with family life
Likely qualification route	Could be either: a) Playwork Professional Status (along the lines of EYPS or HLTA status), or b) Postgraduate qualification in Playwork
Pros	Provides graduate level workers with experience of playwork Could appeal to playwork workforce profile (i.e. women who want to work part time) Has minimum commitment to long-term training Could increase stock of Level 4 qualified playworkers relatively quickly Has most immediate impact of quality of workforce

	<p>Has most immediate impact on quality of service</p> <p>Create more progression routes (if this is the case)</p> <p>Provide incentives to seek employment in playwork</p>
Cons	<p>Does not increase the stock of Playwork graduates</p> <p>Need for careers campaign to sell Playwork</p> <p>Lack of mobility due to family commitments</p> <p>Need for local postgraduate or Professional Playwork Status scheme provision or flexible, distance learning</p>
Opportunities	<p>Develop a new high calibre workforce</p> <p>Provide higher proportion of Level 4 qualified playworkers</p> <p>Increase quality of service</p> <p>Make best use of experienced playworkers</p> <p>Maximise life-stage trade-off factors or 'satisfiers'</p>
Barriers	<p>Restricted mobility created by qualification requirements for each sector</p> <p>Need to develop transitional modules or cross-child sector qualification</p> <p>Capacity issues – provision of sufficient places</p>

Model 3 – a summary

Model 3: Graduates from different disciplines transferring to Playwork	
Description	Attract graduates from other disciplines to Playwork
Intended target	Graduates, with or without playwork experience

Characteristics	Graduates who are likely to be female, interested in working part time to fit in with family life
Likely qualification route	Could be either: a) Playwork Professional Status (along the lines of EYPS or HLTA status), or b) Postgraduate qualification in Playwork
Pros	According to the data, the potential advantages to this model are: That graduates from other sectors might increase the quality and skills in the sector That hard-to-fill vacancies might be filled with these people That people working part time in other sectors could make up a portfolio of jobs with part-time work in this sector
Cons	The disadvantages are potentially that: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People from different sectors often have different philosophies about education and play • Some personality types are not suited to playwork jobs • The prerequisites for entry into the sector might not be 'tight' enough
Barriers	The things that might stop graduates from other sectors entering the sector are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The parity of the sectors with regard to remuneration

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The issue of part-time working • A lack of career progression
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The focus group discussion of this model is now presented.

Focus Group analysis

Advantages

Focus group respondents highlighted many potential advantages in attracting individuals from other sectors into the playwork workforce. It is fair to say that the positives of this Model were not, in many cases, identified by a large number of groups. Nevertheless, they are still significant.

Increasing quality

The most commonly identified potential advantage to this model across the groups was that graduates from other disciplines can be excellent and bring many valuable skills to the sector. The group in the West Midlands discussed this particular issue:

“Most people four or five years ago were coming from different sectors anyway. I did fine art, environmental work. If there are people who come from many different backgrounds then they have lots of skills they can use with play settings. If they come from arts or sports, then they can do playwork.”

The description went on to detail the kinds of skills these people can bring to the sector:

“Somebody who does Forest Schools coming on to a play setting is more likely to do activities that more traditional people on a play scheme might not feel comfortable to do, like tool use.”

This sentiment was shared in other groups. In the East region, it was felt that this Model could be beneficial if it brings in people with IT skills or people with Leisure Management/Tourism links from their previous career. This was also seen as

beneficial by providing 'role models' for children – people who have left careers in other areas for a career in playwork.

The group in the East Midlands also cited examples of graduates from other disciplines who have transferred to working in the playwork sector. The argument here was that people often wanted to transfer to working in sectors such as playwork because they wanted to 'make a difference and are getting frustrated that they can't do so elsewhere'. In the North East, it was suggested that often people become 'disillusioned' with their own sector and thus look to transfer into play. In the East Midlands, the organisation advertising graduate posts had been 'inundated' with applications from graduates:

"I would say that there are examples and I've come across this when recruiting people. Sometimes you recruit somebody and they're a graduate. Sometimes they find this need within the interview to say 'I know you're probably thinking "Why am I applying for this job". The two examples I've got are medicine and the other one's engineering. 'When I was going to university, I was really put pressure on to do this type of degree. But actually, I've got this type of degree, but actually, I don't want to do this at all.'. They've felt for whatever reason, one of them was to please their family, or the kudos of going into engineering."

One other group concurred with this same argument. Following on from this, there were at least two examples of private providers in the groups who felt that graduates are generally skilled enough to fulfil the requirements of the job to be done:

"If somebody has got any degree, they have the level of intelligence that we're looking for. They could probably then get what they needed for playwork from an NVQ to be useful."

The significance of this is that at least two private providers didn't consider being qualified in playwork to be necessary in order to be of value to their setting.

The London and West Midlands groups developed this idea by making a distinction between managers and practitioners. A private provider in the latter group reflected that as a manager with no face-to-face contact, she didn't need to be qualified in playwork, but that her degree in mechanical engineering gave her the necessary skills to run her setting. The same view was expressed in London by a strategic worker who argued that the sector needs degree level practitioners, given that 'strategic thinking can come from business and is not unique to play'.

In the Yorkshire and The Humber group, another option was suggested: to encourage people to do a Foundation Degree in one subject, say Playwork, and

then top up their third year with another subject such as Youth Work. In the case of people coming into the sector from other disciplines, then the reverse could happen.

At the West Midlands group, a point was raised about motivation and how this can impact upon how much value a graduate can have in a setting. Sometimes graduates are employed for about six weeks in the summer due to the nature of the work – ‘is it that they just want the money, or do they want the experience?’. It was suggested that if it’s the former, they can ‘sit back and let others do the job’. If it’s the latter, ‘they can be a real asset, and they are really able’. Again, the suggestion here is that what is important is the *level* of qualification more than the qualification itself.

Filling vacancies

One benefit that this model could potentially have is its ability to satisfy hard-to-fill vacancies at points where they exist within the sector. In the North East, for example, Big Lottery funding within Northumberland allowed play rangers to be employed. The employer reported however that they weren’t able to appoint people with playwork qualifications because ‘there weren’t those people there’. She continued:

“A couple of the people who have got jobs have got sports science degrees, but they are fairly used to adult-led activities. One has just started his NVQ Level 3 in Playwork as that is all that is available.”

It is significant to note here that *some* playwork training was deemed necessary for graduates coming from other disciplines into playwork. This was just one example from a group in the North East, but nevertheless it highlights an important principle that could have a wider application.

Another point that was raised in the West Midlands group concerned the fact that employees from other sectors might work for a play setting on a purely voluntary basis and then find that that they actually want to go and do some training.

Job returners

In a similar vein, it was suggested by someone in the same group as above that parents who are graduates and who have looked after their children at home and are now re-seeking employment could be an ideal group to engage.

Portfolio of jobs

We have explored the issue of part-time working in this report, and the significance it potentially has with regard to the deployment of graduate leaders in the sector. At least two groups suggested that this model could actually help this situation by allowing people who work part time in other sectors to make up a full-time job by combining a part-time role in the playwork sector. For example, one instance was given of somebody who is undertaking an NVQ Level 3 in Playwork as a 'bolt on' to the Higher Level Teaching Assistant qualification (HLTA). The East region also suggested that teaching assistants might want to make up a full-time job by working in holiday play schemes during the school holidays.

There was some caution expressed against this by one Play Development Officer in the North East:

“Whilst this may be fine for some, there may be others forced along that route for whom the work/life balance may be too much to cope with. It is very much a shift system and I feel it should be approached with caution.”

It must also be recognised that the discussion did not consider whether or not this should be a 'graduate role'.

Pedagogy

A small number of groups talked about pedagogy and whether or not there should be some type of degree for the whole of the Children's Workforce which allowed a candidate to then specialise in certain areas. Similarly to this, one in the South West related that this Model could be beneficial if those doing other degrees could choose to do some playwork modules as a part of their study:

“There may be graduates who are doing joint Honours – they started off doing social work, teaching, psychology, or art or drama or education or woodwork, or technology – and they're curious in that they might have done some summer play scheme work. It would be good for them to be able to drop in some modules at the university course to get a combined Honours. Like having accumulated some playwork units. Thinking about the longer term, the whole drive of the CWDC and government is to have an integrated workforce where all have the common core. If this were in place it could help.”

This Model is actually slightly different to pedagogy, where all would cover a core of learning and then do additional 'strands to specialise'. However, the same

participant thought that this didn't seem to have worked very well in Scandinavia as far as playwork is concerned. She cited research which suggested that fewer and fewer people in these countries were doing the playwork specialism as 'there weren't the hours or the jobs'. This led to a situation where there were not enough playworkers to fill the posts available and so there has been a reversion to pure playwork courses.

Disadvantages

The focus groups identified several disadvantages that could make the application of this Model difficult. Some of the perceived disadvantages were universal, whilst others were considered only by a few.

Different philosophies

The perception of many group participants was that this Model would be difficult to implement successfully simply because people that work in other parts of the Children's Workforce work very differently to playworkers and have a very different 'value base', or personality type.

Some participants in the groups felt that in their experience different professionals deal very differently with the same child depending upon their particular role. The following quote from a manager of an out-of-school club in the North East region summarises this point:

"A lot of people who I work with who have got Early Years or Childcare [qualifications] work a lot differently to the way I work. I'm a lot more laid back and let children get on with it, whereas they wrap children up in cotton wool basically."

This experience was shared by a play ranger in the West Midlands who suggested that playwork settings often employ people during the summer who are from teaching-related professions, such as teaching assistants. She reflected that often the 'philosophy' of these people is different and they 'don't marry up very well'.

The following quote is from a practitioner in the North East group who has also been responsible for some training provision for non-playworkers in the area.

"One of the biggest problems [is that] the value base has a massive clash...I've been in this situation where I've been trying to train people

from a playwork perspective and they just can't get over that 'outcome based' approach – it must be outcome led as that is what the Government is telling us. This clash needs to be sorted out.”

A private provider in the North West group also had this perception. He argued that often school leavers come out of school and then do Childcare courses (as playwork is not available) 'and the disciplinarian approach compounds the problem'. Another group participant in a different region argued that 'It's very difficult for teachers to be playworkers. It's a real culture change for them.'

Taking this argument a little further, one practitioner in London said that she felt 'let down' by the education system because it often 'misses the point':

“The distinction between Playwork, Youth Work and Early Years is not about knowledge but about the application of knowledge, not the knowledge itself.”

She went on to say that integrated qualifications could be 'really good', and yet it sometimes misses the point 'because qualifications are linked to job roles and not value bases'.

Personality types

At least two groups said that this Model is not only made difficult by differing values, but also personality types. There was a concern that people might move into the playwork sector for financial reasons without having the value base spoken of above. One practitioner spoke of his experience with social workers and argued that they have a certain personality type – 'it's not negative, but they're not playworkers'.

The East Midlands group actually described this issue as 'the elephant in the room'. The following quote from a senior practitioner illustrates this:

“It's about human nature more than education. If you have somebody who was absolutely wonderful at admin but not really very good at interacting with children, you wouldn't put them in a setting. Education is wasted if not applied in the setting. If you're not playful, you won't do very well at it.”

Many members of the group agreed with this sentiment. This sentiment was also articulated by a member of the North West group. Her concern however was that this Model might not work because the playwork sector has become 'too protective of itself'. The London group also commented on this but it's unclear from looking at the data quite how well supported this view was.

Flexibility needed

The following quote from a Play Development Officer in the North West calls for some ‘flexibility’:

“Not everyone is the right person for a particular job. We come back to the concern about making an exclusive club where only the right people are in there. People come into employment, they grow into the job and to love the job and expand that way – you can’t stop people coming in at any level.”

Prerequisites

Some groups felt that this model could be disadvantageous to the sector if the person transferring into the sector did not have any substantial childcare experience. One participant in the London group said that a lot depends on exactly what the prerequisites of the postgraduate course are, but still had the following reservation:

“To say that the future leaders are those without substantial experience [of the sector] is where the tension lies for me. It would be great to have people doing post-grads, but I have to say that I’m a bit uncomfortable with the leaders being those who don’t know about playwork.”

While this model could work on a different level, when it came to group leaders and who should ‘lead’ the sector, the picture is different. In the same manner, one participant in the South West group spoke of her experience of doing the Early Years Professional Status course. She said that ‘all but two of the students have degrees in other subjects’...‘who won’t even have the basic knowledge’. She talked about the necessity of real experience and her desire for the ‘degree in other subjects’ to be childcare related.

Related to this was a concern in one of the groups that as playwork is considered an ‘easy option’ at the moment, even so might the qualification developed be seen as an easy option for graduates in other sectors. But the trouble with the Model according to this view is that with only one year’s experience, they would have a lot less experience than existing playworkers – ‘so where does this leave the quality?’.

Barriers

There were a few barriers identified to this Model across the focus groups. One barrier, parity across sectors, was significant and was discussed in all the groups. Other barriers were less frequently identified by the groups and yet could nevertheless be significant.

Parity of sectors

Rewards

A practitioner in the East Midlands described Model 3 as having one major drawback:

“If you have somebody who is a graduate who then wants to get into playwork, the biggest drawback is the amount of money you would earn. Unless you have a passion for play you wouldn’t choose it as it would be the lowest paid and you would get more money in other parts of the Children’s Workforce.”

The concept of passion seems to be important in many different contexts. In this context, the practitioner is arguing that unless you have a real love for play, you won’t really want to work in the sector because there aren’t the rewards that can be gained in other sectors. Others in the focus group agreed:

“What is going to want to make [an engineer] come out of a very well paid engineering job to go into a playwork job? In all honesty, what incentive is there?”

When this Model was put before the South East group, one initial reaction was to say ‘What, like a hedge fund manager?’. In the West Midlands, it was thought that a lot of marketing and advertising would be needed with cost/benefits and rewards mapped out. The North East group gave the following example:

“When people read the *Chronicle* on a Thursday and you’re looking for jobs, playwork jobs are £4k and £5k less per annum than other professions, and they’re part time. And if they’re full time, they’re much less well paid than other jobs in the Children’s Workforce.”

These quotes highlight the challenges that this Model potentially presents. What is being argued is that pay and rewards will be a barrier to mobility – as one in the North West said – ‘only if you could afford it’. A few groups did indeed highlight the point that for some the low pay, although not desirable, is okay because they have a partner who is the main earner and a household is not reliant on the income of the

playworker to live. But in instances where this is not the case, the issue is a very real one.

The North East group spoke at length about pay scales as the situation in Newcastle is different to other parts of the country in that it has recognised pay scales for those in the playwork sector. One has to be working towards a qualification or already have a qualification to be a professional playworker in Newcastle. The following quote highlights the way this was done in this region:

“What made it happen [in Newcastle] was play and youth work were merged together, but now that they’ve split apart again, the pay scales have been maintained because the unions got involved. The influence of the unions is one thing, but the argument from the management is that we are on a par with the same kinds of work with the same qualifications and same responsibilities.”

The other significant thing about this region is that Newcastle has a separate play service, ‘so they are recognised as more of a body.’ A different group member highlighted the regional disparities:

“In other authorities, childcare and play is provided by the voluntary and community sector so that’s when the pay scales aren’t at that level. It’s not possible for Northumbria where the rural area makes this difficult as costs are higher.”

This highlights the differences that there can be between the statutory and the private/voluntary sectors. Thus, when the North West group discussed pay scales, a Play Development Officer thought that developing these would be a ‘key part’ of developing the Model. The private provider countered this by suggesting that it really depended on the employer as to whether or not the pay scales would be payable, as if they’re not payable then the business ‘becomes unsustainable’. A private provider in the East region, who has just agreed pay scales for their staff, advised that businesses have to be ‘very careful’ about affordability of this with regard to the ability of businesses to pay.

Sometimes the issue is not just about financial rewards, but other incentives also. One private provider suggested that she didn’t think there would ‘be enough of a challenge’ for graduates from other sectors. In the context of the private and voluntary sector, the reasoning is quite powerful:

“At the level we have, I am the only one with seven settings in the county, most of them one-man shows – how do you fund somebody coming in from Leisure...what would be their role?”

This employer had a genuine concern that within the private and voluntary sector there are not the opportunities for the sector to sell if it wants to attract these people in.

Part-time jobs

The significance of part-time working in the sector has been documented in previous sections. However, the issue was raised again in a number of the groups in the context of Model 3. The South East group thought that it might be necessary to require that each setting employ a graduate, simply because otherwise there might not be an incentive to study if you can only come to work in a part-time job. The East region also talked about jobs and especially HLTA status – these jobs have been created at this level, so why should they not be created in the playwork sector?

Logistically, the nature of part-time working could mean that somebody transferring into the sector would possibly need to find more than one job before it was feasible for them to move into the playwork sector. This quote from the North East summarises this:

“I’m a manager in an out-of-school club and work 3 to 6 pm weekdays and all school holidays and hours have been a problem as I’ve had to find other work to supplement income. It puts people off.”

This has implications because people are thus more likely to transfer into playwork from another sector into full-time jobs, and, as at least one region commented, these are the jobs that tend to be strategic and not face-to-face. This however is not necessarily true across the board – there research found good examples of full-time jobs that are paid well and attracted graduates in from other sectors. However, these jobs were nearly always funded by Big Lottery funding. In the South East region it was reported that a county has been given money from this source to fund a Rural Play Officer, for which a degree in playwork was an ‘essential requirement’. One problem with this however, which was noted in at least three groups, was that this funding is mostly short term in nature and thus people might be reluctant to transfer to jobs which are funded by the Big Lottery for fear that they would be unsustainable. One practitioner in the West Midlands argued that the success of this Model really lies in what jobs will be created.

Career progression

The perception among focus group participants that there is a lack of career progression in the playwork sector has been discussed in previous chapters. It is significant however, that this issue was also raised in relation to this Model as well.

Depth Interview analysis

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)

There was no clear consensus about Model 3 among Higher Education Institutions. All the Institutions had reasons why they thought this Model was either likely to be successful or not. Although many felt positively about this Model, there were also those who were sceptical.

One HEI representative thought this Model was a really good idea:

“I think this is a very good idea. People often realise the value of playwork later in life and this also gives a chance to gain those higher level skills. Playwork lends itself to graduate thinking.”

This respondent saw this Model as having the following benefits:

- the quality and life experience that graduates bring from other sectors can often be beneficial to the playwork sector
- you'd get motivated students making an informed choice to join the sector.

It was argued that the programme would have to have a strong Playwork element to it however, in order to ensure that those coming into the sector understood the playwork ethos.

One other institution also thought that this was a good Model. This institution cited research which suggested that there was a market for giving those with degrees in other sectors the chance to study something at postgraduate level. They also argued, however, that some had a 'feeling' of 'graduate-ness' about them, even with just a Certificate of Higher Education, and so the issue is not 'black and white'.

This is because a lot has to do with different personalities. For example, it was argued that somebody who had 30 years' experience of playwork and a Level 3 qualification might well be able to articulate what is unique about the sector to an external audience, whereas somebody who is a graduate might not be able to do so.

A different institution suggested that Model 3 would work best if Masters level qualifications were developed:

“I think Model 3 works best if existing graduates are offered a Masters degree. Playwork is exempt from current ELQ regulations but making a graduate go through an undergraduate course does not help self-esteem. They will probably come through with some experience anyway.”

A different institution disagreed:

“We need Level 6 modules rather than postgraduate qualifications. There is some confusion about the level of postgraduate qualifications, some of which are Level 6 and not any higher anyway.”

Some institutions were sceptical about whether or not there was enough reward for those in other sectors to come into playwork:

“Unless salary changes are made we are unlikely to attract graduates from other disciplines anyway.”

This was echoed by another who argued that if people coming into the sector at postgraduate level were to be paid more than those already in the sector who are ‘long-standing’ playworkers and have not yet studied to HE level, there could be resentment. This triangulates what was said in the South West focus group about those with Early Years Professional Status earning more than more experienced workers in the same setting.

When asked about how this Model could be made to work, one institution gave the following advice:

“Develop Masters level qualifications. But we also need a core to deliver and availability needs to be increased. There is a great opportunity with the common core and IQF to raise the profile of playwork. Materials are needed to show the benefits to the individual of gaining a postgraduate certificate. There are more people on the play and therapy module at our institution who are not playworkers than who are – it is a highly popular course.”

Perhaps the opposite end of the spectrum to the first view presented of this Model is that this is not a Model that is workable for the playwork sector. Speaking of Model 3, one institution gave the following response:

“It’s not good. What about the playwork values? Graduates from other disciplines may not have the playwork ethos and values. I’ve come to believe that you can teach a skill but you can’t teach a value. People either are or are not ‘natural playworkers’. It takes up to three years to teach values, and it can’t be done in a one-year postgraduate programme.”

Another institution also questioned this:

“The issue about postgraduate study is: would a year be long enough to embed playwork practice?”

One argument against this Model was that in essence this happens anyway and so therefore it doesn’t need supporting.

The following quote from an institution summarises this section:

“From observations of graduates, while lecturers are cautious of theory, graduates are confident of theory and putting it into practice. They are the next generation of playworkers. They, and we, should always be critical. Graduates who can engage in theory are necessary.”

It was argued that Model 3 is likely to be favoured by HEIs:

“In universities there is a battening down of the hatches – a levelling off of student numbers and a reduction in 18-pluses in the population. The third Model is likely to be the one that HEIs will favour.”

Depth Interview analysis

Employers

Similarly with employers, there doesn't seem to be a pattern emerging from the Depth Interviews about whether or not this Model is suitable for graduate deployment. Some employers seemed to be reasonably in favour of this Model, identifying the discrete skills that others can bring into the workforce. The following quote summarises this position:

“It is so important that we find ways to cross over between professions. There is so much commonality across things like health and safety and child protection issues.”

Other employers seemed to be totally against the idea, even in principle, which is summarised by the following statement:

“We don't want to bring in people with other degrees – the sector doesn't like them and they're not accepted.”

Yet some others seemed to belong in the middle of the two positions:

“The thing with this is that you don't say what type of graduate!”

The position of some employers was that this Model could work depending on what type of graduate was being allowed into the sector. This is supported by some of the focus group data.

Full-time hours

Again, just as in the focus groups, employers argued that much of the current sector would be unattractive for a graduate to transfer into, given the lack of hours available in many settings:

“Perhaps the biggest barrier we have is the amount of hours that we can offer staff. This doesn’t really matter when you’re talking about A-Level students or those that really want to work part time like people returning to work, but when you’re talking about those with a degree it’s a bit different isn’t it?”

One employer had tried to find a way around this issue:

“When full-time work is a necessity for somebody, you have to think laterally in order to gain the best staff. It’s no good moaning about not being able to get full-time staff if you’re not prepared to do something about it. I thought about other areas in the school and other jobs that people have. It’s good to try and encourage people like Teaching Assistants to become playworkers when they have finished their ‘day job’.”

Differing values

Employers here also picked up on the issue of ‘values’, and how they were difficult to teach or train. One employer linked this issue with the issue of part-time working and the necessity there is for many in the sector to have more than one job:

“There is an example of Teaching Assistants – I know it’s not graduates coming into the sector, but the principle is still the same. If a Teaching Assistant has been a Teaching Assistant all day, then it can be quite difficult to ‘swap hats’ in an instant.”

Another employer linked this problem to local training provision:

“When you encourage others working in different sectors to come and work in playwork, it’s really important for them to understand the differences between the professions in which they work. This can be difficult, especially if training is not available locally.”

Employees

A few employees liked the idea of Model 3, especially if it was the right type of person transferring across into the sector. One argued that sometimes the playwork sector is hypocritical, as it can often see the benefits that *it* can bring to other sectors, but often is protective of itself and doesn't like to think that other sectors can benefit *it*. One participant thought that this Model was a good idea:

“I like the idea of those with other degrees in other subjects converting across – for example, people like teachers and those working in sport and leisure. Early Years people could convert too, and then other sectors might begin to understand the vastness of playwork and the subject as a whole.”

Another argument was that this could be a good idea but it would really depend on what modules the graduate in the other discipline had undertaken as a part of their first degree. This echoes sentiments that were discussed in the focus groups about how Model 3 could work in the future – people from other sectors might ‘drop in playwork modules’ to their degree in line with the IQF.

Parity

As expected, another issue mentioned by some employees, supporting previous data, is that those with degrees working in other sectors are possibly not very likely to want to enter the playwork sector as there are significant issues around full-time jobs and salaries. One employee thought something needed to be done to encourage transferability:

“We need to bring the pay scales up so they are the same as other sectors – only then would a social worker become interested in swapping careers from one that is well paid to one that isn't. We can't expect people to swap careers if they are going to have to take a pay cut, even if some do.”

Dislikes

Some employees were against the use of this Model for deployment. One out-of-school club manager, a Playwork graduate, felt like this:

“I definitely don't like Model 3, definitely not – I don't want to be dictated to by others who don't have playwork qualifications.”

Just like in the focus groups, one employee felt ‘uneasy’ that people from other sectors with a degree in a different subject could be the ‘graduate leaders’. Their experience of the Early Years sector had formed their view:

“If you look at the Early Years Professional Status, I can’t do this as I don’t have a degree, but I couldn’t do a degree. What I really don’t like is that somebody with a Biology degree can come in and be a professional in my setting and actually earn more than me – they should have the knowledge.”

Need for a practical element

Employees generally argued fairly strongly that Model 3 would have to have some face-to-face element in it to ensure that those coming into playwork from other sectors had the necessary skills and experience to be effective in the sector. An experienced playworker said the following:

“Model 3 would have to have some face-to-face element. Having come from a teaching background, I had to learn that play was very different. It took me a little time not to be so ‘hands-on’.”

Another also highlighted the importance of face-to-face playwork:

“Face-to-face experience is important in order to gain an authentic understanding of playwork, not theoretic. If you haven’t seen an actual setting and how it works, you’re only getting half the picture.”

It was also argued by a playworker at a private club that strategic workers in local authorities can quite easily become removed from the day-to-day task of being a playworker, even though these people are quite often well informed about play. This supports what was said in the West Midlands focus group about the desire of one participant to do some top-up training because he fears that his values have been eroded by those around him as he works with those in other professions.

Personality type

Much of what was said about Model 3 in the focus groups concerned personality types. We have seen this sentiment echoed in the HEI Depths above. Some employees also felt that this Model would only work if the person transferring from another sector was a certain personality type. This came from a senior practitioner:

“Within the heart of a playworker there needs to be a mix and affinity for wanting to work with children. Can you train this? You have to be of a certain disposition. There is a certain something that playworkers have.”

This playworker actually went on to say that if you have this disposition, it can be massively enhanced by studying to degree level. The reason given for this was that the degree helps you to become ‘reflective’ in practice. This is a slightly different argument to discussions that were had in the focus groups. The argument in some of the focus groups was that ‘graduate-ness’ was enough, in and of itself, or else that experience was of more value than qualifications. The interviewee here was arguing that the personality of the practitioner is important, but that the right person with a Playwork degree ‘has the best of both worlds’.

The hospital play specialist argued that this certainly seemed to be the case in her sector:

“I would also say that sometimes it’s about your personality. I can only speak from experience, but in my field, I’m aware that some of the nurses are very clever. However, they don’t necessarily have the people skills that they need and which would make them really good at their job. The softer skills are very difficult to teach. From what I’ve seen, these are the ones [nurses] that sometimes struggle. I feel that there is a danger in qualifying too many graduates in Playwork if they are not the right type of person – what you could end up with is all the wrong people qualified to do what I think is a really important job.”

It was also argued that teachers are not the right kind of personality to be playworkers:

“Teachers bring education views with them – you need to be [a] certain type of worker, getting the right balance.”

This is echoed again by another playwork employee who thought that there was value in this Model:

“I think there is definitely the potential for diversity and enrichment to come from other sectors, especially things such as psychology. But definitely not teachers – they find it hard, on the whole, to understand playwork and the differences there are between the interventionist, disciplinarian approach and the playwork approach. So Model 3 could work, but it really depends on who the person is and what discipline they have come from.”

The argument about the disciplinarian approach is familiar as this too was talked about in the North West focus group.

4 Summary and conclusions

Model 1

The evidence in this report has shown that employers, employees and Higher Education Institutions generally feel that Model 1 would potentially be the most successful Model for graduate deployment at least initially, should something like this Model be used. A key theme emerging from across the different methodologies is that current playworkers are probably the most likely group to want to undertake a degree in Playwork, which gives Model 1 an advantage to the other two possibilities. We presented evidence from both the Focus Groups and Depth Interviews of current playworkers already using this Model for their own personal development. This is perhaps the key advantage of Model 1 above the other models – those with the values and ethos of the subject will probably find studying it further an attracting prospect. The effect of this could potentially be to create people who will be ‘role models’ or ‘champions’ of the playwork cause.

Perhaps the key disadvantage to Model 1 is the temptation there would be for current practitioners to move away from face-to-face roles upon obtaining their qualification because of factors such as employment prospects. This could lead to a situation where all of the graduates are either managers or working in development roles. The data suggest that the one of the advantages a graduate-led core could have would be in having responsibility for delivery as a part of their role. Data from both methodological strands suggest that this could be a disadvantage of this Model.

The barriers to deployment associated with Model 1 are similar to the barriers that were identified in relation to all the models. There are few full-time jobs in the sector, and a predominance of part-time work with a lack of career structures could mean that current playworkers do not have a sufficient incentive to study at a higher level, especially given that many have to pay their own fees. In relation specifically to Model 1, the data show that one key barrier could be the profile of current playworkers. It was argued both in the groups and by many of the Depth interviewees that some playworkers have not been in education and training for some time, and may not find it easy to engage easily now, especially if they have family commitments.

Model 2

The aim of Model 2 would be to get more school leavers to choose Playwork as a degree choice, leading to a career in playwork so that they could be the next

generation of graduate leaders. On reflection, the data would suggest that this Model was the least well supported by employers, employees and HEIs. One key advantage to Model 2 in comparison to the other models was identified by the focus groups as well as some Depth interviewees. This was that young people quite often have yet to come to firm decisions about their choice of career, and thus recruiting school leavers could be successful if they can be engaged successfully before career paths are chosen. Another potential advantage of this Model is that young people who have attended a play setting from a young age might potentially have a really good understanding of the playwork ethos.

The biggest disadvantage of Model 2 identified by many respondents is that young people might potentially find it difficult to be graduate leaders without having any substantial experience of working in playwork settings. Some felt that this group could not be expected to be the next generation of 'graduate leaders' without this substantial period of experience. Some suggested that if this model were to be used, any degree course would need to be at least 50 per cent fieldwork. Another disadvantage of Model 2 which was highlighted across the board is that even if many young people were qualified to degree level, it could be difficult to keep these people in the sector because of a lack of substantial opportunities for graduates. The evidence suggests that some current Playwork students do not choose play positively as a career, but rather do it for different reasons. Other evidence presented would also suggest that many playwork graduates do not stay in the sector but go on to work in jobs in other sectors.

The barriers to this model are similar to the barriers mentioned above that are also relevant to Model 1. However, a barrier particularly significant to Model 2 is the level and quality of careers advice. This was identified by many as a key barrier to all of the models, but it has particular relevance to Model 2 in the context of school careers advisors and especially with regard to the new SHD Diploma which could act as a pathway through to studying playwork at a high level.

Model 3

Model 3 is the Model that had the least uniformity of response. There was some disagreement about the principle of Model 3, regardless of whether or not it would work in practice. The Higher Education Institutions, although when aggregated were generally supportive of Model 3, were nevertheless polarised in their opinions. The employer and employee Depths also show a polarisation of opinion. Many thought it could work well, especially if there was a substantial practical element to the postgraduate qualification. Others, especially in the group discussions, suggested that it would only work well if the 'degree' required of those transferring into the

sector was in a child-related subject. One key advantage to this Model cited by those in favour both in the groups and the Depths was that new and different skills like art or drama could be brought into the sector which could add value to playwork settings.

The counter-argument to this was that a postgraduate course would not be enough to teach the values and ethos of playwork. Others felt that with just a one year transfer, there would be tensions between those who are experienced and established in the sector and the new graduates from other disciplines. Being 'led' by people whose substantive knowledge is not in playwork was uncomfortable for some. One potential disadvantage to Model 3 that gained more support even from those broadly in favour, is the perception that playworkers have a certain personality type, and thus it is not easy for all employees/employers from other sectors to transfer into playwork.

The barriers that could stop Model 3 working were almost universally identified and were very similar to the barriers that could stop the other models also working in practice. Of specific importance to Model 3 is the issue of remuneration, and the difficulty that somebody could have in transferring to a playwork role if they are currently earning a full-time wage. Thus relevant available opportunities would need to be in place to make this Model successful. The data presented examples of how full-time jobs created through the Big Lottery funding had indeed attracted others into the sector, even though concerns were raised about the sustainability of these posts. It is likely that parity across sectors will be a significant issue here.

Final thoughts

This primary research has identified many barriers that exist which may make the reality of enabling a graduate-led core a difficult one to realise. The predominance of part-time employment and the impact this has upon salaries could be potentially significant issues for all of the models. Looking across both the focus group and Depth Interview data however, there is strong evidence that Model 1 has value because many of those who currently make up the workforce choose to train to a higher level regardless of these barriers. The evidence would suggest that they do it because of the passion they have for playwork.

The evidence is also fairly clear that in some circumstances Model 2 could also be good, but that generally these newly qualified graduates will not have the level of playwork experience needed to be the 'graduate-led core' of playworkers. Significant barriers exist that make it difficult for school leavers to positively choose playwork as a career choice, and the weight of evidence would suggest that work should be done to promote playwork as a career to young people.

Model 3 also has potential for graduate deployment, although the evidence would suggest that significant levels of success are unlikely in the current climate given the issues of parity across sectors and part-time working that exist. The creation of more full-time positions could change this situation.