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The shifting landscape of work and working lives

**Recruitment and workforce
development challenges in
low-status sectors with high
labour demand – childcare work**

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Even before the UK's decision to leave the European Union, UK employers in many organisations and industry sectors were experiencing difficulties in attracting, recruiting and retaining a skilled and/or sufficiently qualified workforce. This is particularly so in areas such as social and childcare ([Read and Fenge 2019](#)). Regardless of whether the focus is on profit or non-profit organisations, the recruitment and retention of staff remains a primary human resource challenge ([Ban et al 2003](#)).

The early learning and childcare (ELC) sector in Scotland is currently undergoing a significant policy-driven expansion, with an estimated 20,000 new jobs needed to deliver the increase in provision promised by the Scottish Government ([Audit Scotland 2018](#)). The policy offers 1,140 hours of free childcare per year and is doubling the free hours per child aged 2–3 and 3–4 from 15 hours up to 30 hours per week. The sector has been preparing for this by recruiting and developing their workforce for a variety of diverse roles, which include managerial and professional, but mainly lower-skilled entry-level childcare and support roles. On the one hand, the ELC is considered a key strategic sector with particular social and economic importance at the local, regional and national levels. As childcare offers multiple employment opportunities and has a direct impact on parents working across other sectors of the economy, it is considered to be a vital link in sustaining and improving productivity ([House of Commons 2018](#), [European Commission 2013](#)). On the other hand, the low status of the sector continues to be a challenge to the successful recruitment and retention of staff.

The specific issues of ELC reflect wider cross-sector recruitment and retention challenges, such as insufficient levels of skills and expertise amongst the workforce or a poor fit between the person and the organisation, profession or a specific job ([Ellis et al 2017](#)). This poor fit most often manifests itself as a mismatch between organisational culture and needs, and individual values, personal attributes or ethos, and work behaviours ([Bowen et al 1991](#)).

Even when employers manage to acquire suitable staff, they often fail to retain them due to inadequate pay and rewards, limited ongoing training and career development opportunities, or overall low employee job satisfaction ([Larson et al 2005](#)). Local employers often do not look at the recruitment challenge either from a strategic commercial perspective ([Akingbola 2006](#), [Armstrong and Baron 2002](#)) or from the perspective of potential recruits. As a result, they fail to adequately include the long-term orientation of people's career development when advertising and recruiting for jobs. To fulfil the demand for labour in a relatively low-status sector such as ELC, it is important to consider the distinctive perspectives of the recruiter/employer, the prospective or existing worker, and also the Government, parents and their employers so their distinctive sets of needs and motivators can be identified and fulfilled.

This paper, first, describes the key challenges impacting recruitment and retention in the ELC sector. Second, it presents key considerations for overcoming the recruitment difficulties in the ELC sector by improving the sector's professional status and its overall employment attractiveness. More widely, these considerations might be useful for addressing recruitment challenges in other sectors/workplaces with similar low reputation but high workforce demands.

Evaluating the views of multiple stakeholders

This short paper is based on the research findings of a largely qualitative study ([Webb and McQuaid 2018](#)). The qualitative data was collected through seven semi-structured exploratory interviews and three 'triple helix' group meetings and workshops, an approach that brings together academics, industry experts and government policy-makers. In this case, we involved a range of stakeholders currently participating or interested in the development of the ELC sector,

including the Scottish Government, vocational training providers, local authorities, trades unions, skills councils, ELC providers and other social organisations.

Secondary data was gathered from reports and projections published by the Scottish Government, Skills Panorama, UK Commission for Employment and Skills, Scottish Social Services Council and the Skills Development Scotland's Regional Skills Assessments and Skills Investment Plans. A thematic analysis approach was used to analyse primary qualitative data, which were supplemented by additional evidence from the secondary sources and existing literature.

Perceptions of low value in the sector

A key finding central to understanding the recruitment and retention challenge was the gender-segregated and perceived low value of the ELC sector and its workers. This supports earlier evidence on early care professionals (for example [Carroll et al 2009](#), [Jovanovic 2013](#), [Rolfe 2005](#)), where ELC work is commonly referred to as a low-skilled and low-paid sector, unlike teaching professions. The low pay and overrepresentation by low-qualified women seem to underpin a substantial gender imbalance in the sector. The caring roles encompassed in ELC have traditionally been performed by female workers, as they tend to carry out these roles in domestic, non-paid, informal environments.

Such biases in who undertakes different roles means that caring roles, including ELC, have been dominated by young females, which over the years contributed to the sector's gender imbalance and very little gender, and other, diversity. In consequence, as many key stakeholders argue, these female jobs became undervalued and underpaid and have currently a lower socioeconomic status. There may be attempts to improve the sector's diversity but currently the representation of males working in the sector is extremely low and this helps perpetuate the existing inequalities. Although childcare work often requires low formal qualification at entry, it is actually quite highly skilled work, requiring an advanced level of communication, social, organisational and caring skills.

Partial professionalisation and its effect on recruitment and staff turnover

There are a number of different routes into the profession. In Scotland, college-based courses provide opportunities for qualification gain in ELC, SVQ work-based qualifications, apprenticeship programmes and placements as well as, for some higher-level posts, university degree courses. There is a wide range of training courses provided by further education colleges and some by higher education (HNQ/HND, bachelor's/master's degrees), as early years and childcare degree programmes are now being offered by both further and higher education institutions. The uptake of childcare and childhood practice degree courses have been gradually rising since 2012 ([SDS 2016](#)); however, university qualification is more common in childcare management and for lead practitioners' roles. Most employees in the sector (especially at the lowest qualification levels) are currently young women or women returning to work after looking after their own children, and so most opportunities related to the sector's growth are likely to be targeted at low-qualification females. The pervading perception of childcare workers as low qualified is also a cause for the sector's inability to retain a high-quality, diverse and committed workforce to meet current and projected workforce demand.

A two-tier system: public and private sector employment

Another point of concern in relation to the recruitment in the sector is the two-tier system of public-private employment. The employment conditions vary between public and private employers. The former often offers better pay and training and thus has a greater ability to attract prospective employees. As a result, an additional layer of recruitment and retention challenges is experienced by private employers. This is caused by local skills gaps and an outflow of talent to public sector employment and, importantly, to different geographies/local authorities. Unlike the teaching profession, there is no national pay scale for ELC workers. A discrepancy in pay across different local authorities has been observed, with occasional differences of £6,000 or more per annum. While few workers leave the sector citing low pay, the pay has been openly declared as the most significant barrier to recruiting new entrants.

The need for clear career pathways

Finally, and related to the last finding, the lack of clear information on career pathways in the ELC sector can cause problems. This lack of clarity is reflected in a variety of job titles for childcare workers, for example childcare practitioners, early years workers, nursery nurses, nursery teachers, child/early years educators.

Wider debates are currently taking place on whether childcare workers are paid adequately for their level of responsibilities, and whether their vocation can be mapped out in terms of career progression. Advocates for professionalisation of the sector would like to see childcare workers as carers and educators. However, it is unclear to what extent educational activities are undertaken as a part of the role, and whether these align with parental needs (including affordability in the absence of major increased public spending) and expectations of childcare service.

Improving the attractiveness of the sector

Based on the learnings from the Scottish ELC sector, the most important step in resolving the current recruitment and workforce development challenges is increasing the sector's attractiveness to potential new recruits, career-changers, returners and older workers who have relevant attitudes, skills and aptitudes for pursuing a career in childcare. Considerable efforts need to be made to uplift the status of the ELC sector and its workers. However, overcoming the perceived low status of childcare work is a complex problem. Therefore, co-ordinated activities need to be focused on a number of key areas. The following three strategies could be implemented to help improve the professional status and the overall attractiveness of the ELC sector as a context of work and career in times of its largest workforce recruitment need, and beyond.

1 Improve pay and conditions of work in the ELC sector

Decent and fair work conditions and pay are needed to improve the overall attractiveness of ELC work as a career choice. Making childcare work 'pay-attractive' will, first, help meet the recruitment need; and second, potentially widen and diversify the workforce by attracting under-represented groups such as males and people currently working in other sectors. The profession should make concerted efforts to become less gender-stereotyped and major efforts need to be made to attract males to the profession as well as increasing other forms of diversity.

Poor working conditions and pay need to be eliminated, and the value of ELC work needs to be better recognised. A national pay scale linked to distinctive roles and detailed job descriptions could help to assure consistency and professional standards. Unemployed women, particularly lone parents, young to middle-aged men and women, or those with low qualifications will then be entering a sector that recognises the value of ELC work, as well as the level of engagement

and responsibility required to do childcare well. A co-ordinated approach is needed to eliminate discrepancies that currently exist across local authorities and employers.

2 Offer multiple training and development opportunities throughout workers' careers

A focus on learning and skills development throughout the span of people's career, and through multiple flexible career pathways, is important to challenge the perceived low qualification level in the sector and rehabilitate the fractured professional status of childcare workers. An ongoing investment in training will transform the workforce and can substantially reduce the currently high turnover of staff across the sector. In addition, considering the following actions could help improve the level of skills in the sector:

- Raise standards of expectations and practices for training.
- Provide paid release from work to engage with learning activities.
- Involve all social actors such as employers, public sector, Scottish Social Service Councils (the sector's professional body), training providers and trades unions, in supporting a strong training framework for staff in the sector.
- Include a strong role for mentoring throughout all career transitions (for example from high school to college, from college to labour market, and in the workplace).
- Promote a 'fair work' ethos in the sector.

Overall, strong support for lifelong learning opportunities for existing staff may be needed to help them increase their skills, better adapt to changes, achieve career progression and help the sector avoid staff retention problems. Training and development are of particular importance if the sector's workers are to be considered as educators rather than solely as child carers.

3 Promote careers in childcare work through positive advertisement and communication

The efforts outlined above have to be supported by positive communication. Actions focused on raising the ELC workers' professional status will require promotion and publicity around the career benefits of ELC employment. A successful national campaign needs to be designed to communicate the benefits and opportunities that the ELC sector offers in terms of work and career for individuals considering such a vocational choice now and in the future.

The campaign needs to address all the challenges related to the current misperceptions around the sector as an unattractive work context and tackle the perceived low status and gender-stereotyping of the profession. For example, communications could emphasise the vocational calling, high levels of intrinsic rewards and satisfaction of ELC careers, and the work-life balance this line of work offers. It is also worth considering reframing strategies to use positive language when referring to sector workers, for example calling ELC workers 'early years educators'. In addition, it is important to be aware of approaches, policies, strategies and practices that are being adopted in other countries in Europe. Identifying good practices and learning from successes of other countries can be insightful and practical.

The need for 'good work' in ELC

For many prospective employees, and especially graduates in relevant disciplines, their choice of job is heavily influenced by their expectation of a dynamic work environment with clear opportunities for development, skills enhancement and career progression ([Gerwel Proches et al 2018](#)). A deeply shared expectation among many professional groups is a need for 'good work', that is, meaningful and satisfying work ([Schumacher and Gillingham 1979](#)), or fair work

that offers *'effective voice, opportunity, security, fulfilment and respect; that balances the rights and responsibilities of employers and workers and that can generate benefits for individuals, organisations and society'* (SFWC 2016).

Non-monetary rewards, belonging to a professional group or a community of practice with shared professional values or doing work recognised as socially important are often listed as important aspects of satisfying work (Kappia et al 2007). These traits should be clearly communicated when attracting new entrants. If jobs are designed well and employers can provide a supportive environment focused on learning and development for employees, positive recruitment communications highlighting these advantages should be designed and implemented in parallel. If such conditions are yet to be achieved, the disconnect can be resolved by improving the professional status and the overall attractiveness of employment, and this should become a key focus for employers.

A collective approach to breaking stereotypes

The recommendations above provide a starting point for some of the action required from regional and local decision-makers, the sector's employers, recruiters, and experts in workforce development programmes. There is a need to break away from a stereotypical view of the sector that makes recruitment challenging and can cause supply issues long term. Overcoming the perceived low status of the ELC sector and uplifting its status is a vital mechanism for attracting a diverse but suitable range of prospective workers to ELC careers and developing their skills in a fast-changing world of work. A three-step approach is needed:

- 1** uplifting the status and pay and conditions
- 2** promotion of training and career and developmental/progression opportunities
- 3** positive communication consistently explaining professional values, aspirations, behaviours and practices in ELC.

Individual childcare workers/educators have a role to play in transforming the public's perception of the ELC sector, by displaying professionalism, a commitment to learning, self-valuing and generally communicating a more positive account of their work and profession. A consistent name for the profession can help improve its professional identity and retain good staff. These factors are essential to help the sector move beyond the current stereotypical and gender-segregated views of childcare work.

Together these partial solutions will help to solve the current challenges of recruitment and workforce development in the sector. Rather than seeing them as separate and distinct stages, employers have to recognise that pay, career opportunities and a good work environment are crucial for any sector/workplace to be considered as a good career choice for new entrants and career-changers, now and in the future.

While these strategic recommendations provide a list of actions for stakeholders based on the ELC sector's expansion, these could be considered by other sectors with similar challenges such as low professional status, undervaluation of work, female overrepresentation, low pay or a gender pay gap. Looking at people's work and careers as systems of complex interdependencies between levels of skills, learning and employment opportunities, workforce diversity, occupational status, pay, reward and professional values (professionalism) is an important lesson to share across other sectors with similar challenges. Designing solutions for complex

recruitment and retention problems needs to take into account these interdependencies and offer a longer-term view for effective workforce planning.

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