Identifying approaches for attracting and training new entrants and the existing workforce in the Early Learning and Childcare sector

Authors: Aleksandra Webb and Ronald McQuaid, Stirling Management School, University of Stirling, UK – August 2018

Context

This country report presents input to EU Strategy suggestions and guidelines for upskilling low-skilled people so they can cover future staff requirements. It is based on REPLAY-VET, a 2-year EU funded ERASMUS+ project led by Prospektiker in Spain with partners across Europe. Europe has a pressing need to tackle future demand to replace workers, caused partly by an ageing workforce and new technologies, and persistent low skill levels among much of the workforce. The project used a network of expert labour market analysts to explore what new policy and practices can assist Europe in tackling replacement demand, by supporting people with low skill levels in various sectors.

In Scotland the focus was on the Early Learning and Childcare sector (ELC). The work has resulted in a series of reports, events and a Toolkit with ‘How To’ guides (http://www.regionallabourmarketmonitoring.net/replayvet_project.htm). This report aims to highlight key problems and suggestion appropriate solutions to major skill, recruitment and employment-related issues of the ELC. Although these issues are from findings in Scotland, key lessons are relevant across much of the EU, and different employment sectors.

Challenge: The ELC is a key strategic sector with particular social and economic importance at the local, regional and national levels. Significant current expansion in the sector requires an estimated 20,000 new employees over the next few years to deliver the increase in provision promised by the Scottish government. The sector requires a variety of diverse roles, including managerial and professional, but mainly lower skilled entry-level childcare and support roles. The suggestions below focus on strategic approaches to identify better ways of attracting and training traditional and non-traditional (e.g. men) types of recruits and up-skill those already employed in the sector.

ELC is delivered across Scotland in multiple contexts: publically run kindergartens and preschools facilities, private nurseries, and in the home environment by childminders and kinship carers (usually grandparents). The project found differences in training and up-skilling between public and private sector workers, with public workers having better opportunities. While ELC workers in the public sector are expected to be fully qualified before they start having a direct responsibilities over children’s learning and care activities, employees in the private sector tend to start young (often as the school leavers aged 16) and gain their qualifications on the job. The learning and studying towards qualifications is often compromised, with young workers struggling to protect their learning time while working full-time. Childminders, who effectively run their own businesses, face similar challenges as
Training during their working hours often means losing income and potentially clients who rely on childminders’ flexibility. Generally, developing a wider range of skill and enhance one’s career opportunities are limited for existing ELC workers. Hence, the sector is commonly perceived as having a low professional status and low-level of skills. This, together with relatively low pay but high responsibilities, means that it is not a desirable career choice for many; and importantly, the sector is overrepresented by women and lacks diversity.

Policy recommendations at regional/sub-regional levels

1. Strategic Action Plan

A strategic action plan to provide a strong training framework and help improve the level of skills in the sector is useful to set an agreed direction for the sector. The demand for new employees, triggered by the policy-driven sector expansion, requires a large numbers of new entrants into the ELC, from other sectors, school leavers, parents returning to the labour force, etc. Thus, the sector needs a significant increase in: training opportunities for new entrants to the sector; ongoing skills development of existing employees; and the wider professionalisation of the sector.

The plan could include promoting: higher training standards, expectations and practices; paid-release for training for staff; improved mentoring throughout all career transitions (e.g. high school-college, or college-labour market and in the workplace); the promotion of a ‘fair work’ ethos in the sector (including pay and conditions); and inclusion of EU funding opportunities for skills. 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 retention problems. The development of such a plan should involving all social actors, e.g. employers, employees, NGOs, public sector and unions and parents.
Offering multiple training opportunities for all workers in the sector throughout their career will attract new types of recruit and support the adaptability and career progression of the existing ELC workforce. There is a need to strengthen the provision of flexible training options (including Further Education, job-based training, apprenticeship schemes and other placements) to enable people to take advantage of developmental opportunities in the sector. Training should be available for public, private and third organisations, for instance through accessible local training networks and learning from practices in other EU member states. It is important to meet the quality expectations, availability and standards for training across all ELC staff and not solely focus on public-sector staff. Improved EU recognised qualifications will permit greater transferability of ELC staff across EU labour markets.

Investment in skills training and an on-going focus on skills development throughout people's career, incorporating multiple flexible pathways, is important to challenge the perceived low-qualification level in the sector and improve the status of workers so they can be seen as “educators”, and not solely carers. The on-going investment in training could transform the workforce and can substantially reduce the currently high turnover of staff across the sector.
The importance of maintaining or increasing levels of public funding for those seeking to work in the expanded sector needs consideration, especially increasing employers’ support and contributions towards training. There should be a concerted effort to remove financial barriers for career changers especially when needing to retrain while looking after their own families, or where the place of work or training is far from home and access might be an issue.

Funding should be easily available for training covering specific skills gaps (such as numeracy skills and the ability to pass on numeracy skills to children; competence in a formal assessment of children, or confidence and creativity). The creative and appropriate use of EU training funds for training across the sector is be important.

A danger of two-tier system, with differences in training opportunities and terms & conditions between worker in public and private settings, should be prevented by increasing the participation in training in the private/freelance sector. Suitable levels of private employers’ contributions to training should be encouraged.
4. Overcoming the perceived low status of ELC sector

As the caring roles encompassed in ELC have traditionally been performed by female workers (who tend to carry out these roles in non-paid, informal environment), the sector has been historically perceived as low-skilled and low-paid, and thus of low-attractiveness especially to new entrants, with similar patterns across EU.

*Decent and fair work conditions and pay, other contractual improvements, flexible work patterns and access to training throughout the career (through multiple flexible pathways) can substantially uplift the status of the ELC sector, and its attractiveness as a career choice. By making this line of work pay-attractive will, firstly, help meeting the recruitment challenge; and secondly, potentially widen up and diversify the workforce by attracting under-represented groups such as males and people currently working in other sectors etc.*

Ensuring the application of EU work and employment policies and a buy-in from employers to support decent work and workplace learning agendas, *the ELC workers’ professional status can be rehabilitated and lifted to “educators”, and not only carers. The further professionalisation of the ELC workforce across the EU countries through an on-going investment in training can substantially reduce the high turnover of staff across the sector.*

5. Removing barriers to accessing skills and careers information

In many EU countries, the sectors most likely to provide opportunities for lower qualified people are often in the caring sectors, due to demographic and policy factors. *Early Learning and Childcare in Scotland is an example of growth due to government policies to expand free childcare provision, with up to an estimated 20,000 additional staff required by 2020 to meet the new demand. Other European countries can have similar expansions.*

A useful approach to undertake nation-wide expansions in response to replacement and new demands is to prepare a coherent *Sector Skills Plan (SSP). In Scotland, SSPs contained relevant labour market information on the sector and used available labour market intelligence. Such strategies are rarely user friendly to job/career centres and low qualified job-seekers themselves* who continue to experience barriers to accessing of relevant information on skills, skills development and career pathways appropriate to them in their home countries. There is even less access to sector/career relevant information for work and training across EU countries. The EU could lead actions towards more coordinated exchange of information amongst the EU national and regional bodies, career and job centres.
Key lessons relevant to European-wide skills and employment policies

Lessons identified from the Regional Report findings in Scotland, that have particular relevance to skills and employment policy-making at the European level, include:

1. Use of sector labour market information and intelligence to guide planned actions.
   - When considering the expansion of the sector, a comprehensive approach is needed to development strategic action plan informed by the sector' labour market information and intelligence. All activities focused on the sector wide workforce development (i.e. recruitment of new entrants, diversifying and up-skilling the existing workforce) should be guided by:
   - analysing of the characteristics of the sector and the employment associated with the sector now and its future (this should involve key actors, such as employers, social partners, trainers, the public sector and users, especially parents from a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds and consider a greater emphasis on removing barriers to pan-EU employment migration);
   - reviewing the skills needs (this should involve active partnerships with multi-stakeholder groups associated with the sector skills);
   - identifying demand priorities for skills to enable the growth and development of the sector and the skills of its workforce (this should involve sector leadership groups); testing the views with the industry stakeholders;
   - assessing supply-side constraints (this should involve the skills agencies, trainers, trades unions etc.);
   - ensuring buy-in from key stakeholders for the strategy and actions;
   - and ensuring wide and transparent dissemination of the strategy.

2. Organise sector-specific diversity-orientated, recruitment campaigns to communicate the benefits and opportunities that the specific sectors, rather than individual employers, offer in terms of long-term work and career opportunities for individuals.

Action is needed to recruit and retain a high quality, diversified and
committed workforce to meet current and projected needs of the sector should be skills-driven. They can include activities such as promotion of the sector’s not necessarily considered as the most attractive career options due to persisting gender imbalances, pay and promotion inequalities, overall low sector attractiveness and other employment and recruitment barriers. Of particular importance is gender equality and attracting significant numbers of men into frontline working in the sector and learning from practices in other EU member states.

Sector-specific and national sector-wide recruitment campaigns should be coherently led. These campaigns should strive to present a realistic opportunities to school leavers and workers in other sectors and non-traditional employees. They need to be designed to communicate the benefits and opportunities that the specific sectors, rather than individual employers, offer in terms of work and career for individuals considering such a vocational choice at present and in the future. Removing potential barriers and effectively promoting the many routes into the profession (Vocational Qualifications, FE/college training, Higher Education, employer-based etc.), and multiple & flexible training options (such as part-time, evening/weekend courses need to be considered. Care must be taken through a systematic approach not to potentially undermine other parts of the sector, e.g. workers in other institutional or organisational contexts.

Take a holistic view when designing best approaches for attracting and training new entrants and the existing workforce in the expanding sectors.

A holistic view is needed when considering best approaches for attracting and training new entrants and the existing workforce in the expanding sectors. For example, attractiveness of the sector to potential new entrants is likely to be assessed through a multiple factors, such as decent and fair terms and conditions, quality training and up-skilling opportunities, the workforce, diversity and career progression routes. By making work pay-attractive will, firstly, help meeting the recruitment challenge in any sector; and secondly, potentially widen up and diversify the workforce in the sector that tend to be under-represented be males and people from disadvantaged backgrounds. Opportunities for EU wide promotion and support of relevant training and diversity-orientated recruitment should be considered.

When pay and work conditions across any sector differ substantially between public and private setting a strong partnership with stakeholders from across the sector should be created. A suitable form of sector-wide
governance should be incorporated, recognising the limitations to co-ordination among public bodies and differing stakeholders’ interests and focuses. The development of the strategic action plan may incorporate multi-level (national, regional and local public and other bodies), multi-stakeholder (discussed above) and multi-dimensional elements (the latter supporting the integration of skills, training/educational demand and supply, and high quality childcare).

The perception of the sector as a context of work, employment and long-term career plays an important role and influence choice made by the new entrants. Particularly for those from disadvantaged backgrounds but looking to invest time and financial resources to train to become, for example, an ELC professional, it is important that such investment will lead to work that is in demand and valued by society and employers.

A current undervaluing and often poor working conditions and pay of carers and other support workers need to be eliminated so unemployed women, particularly lone parents and young to middle age men and women, or women and men with low-qualifications can enter a sector that recognises the value of ELC work, the level of engagement and responsibility needed.

A common EU strategy is needed to focus on ensuring a decent work conditions and pay, and reshape the narrative around sectors which utilise labour of carers. A deliberate and coordinated effort at the pan European level can help uplift the status of workers in caring and similar roles by: firstly, acknowledging the multiple responsibilities and complex skillset required to work in such contexts (in particular, social relatedness and emotional intelligence); and secondly, by helping employers buyers to reconsidering the market value of those jobs.

National skills policies of EU states continue to evolve while new national strategic frameworks for skills development and training give life to appropriate action plans. Each time new policy is being implemented in a EU state, valuable lessons are being gathered and considered especially useful for policy/practice evaluation in this country or region. Not all lessons might always be strictly applicable to particular challenges of other EU states, however key themes or patterns can be drew even if different countries, sectors, target groups are compared.

Learning from failures and successes of other EU countries can be insightful and practical. It is important to be aware of approaches, policies, strategies and practices that are being adopted in other countries across Europe, to identify and share these good practices. However, as many initiatives are
Summary

The ELC is a key strategic sector with particular social and economic importance at the local, regional and national levels. Significant policy-driven expansions in the Scottish ELC sector are currently being implemented with an estimated 20,000 new jobs needed to deliver the increase in provision promised by the government. The sector requires a variety of diverse roles, which include managerial and professional, but also lower skilled at entry-level childcare and support roles. Strategic change approaches focused on overcoming the sector’s challenges and identifying better approaches for attracting and training new recruits in the Early Learning and Childcare sector are therefore timely. They are important to fulfill the objectives of the expansion policy over the next two years and at the same time improve the job opportunities for low qualified people at risk of the labour market exclusion.

This report outlined a number of approaches for attracting and training new recruits and existing workforce in the Early Learning and Childcare sector. At the national and regional levels, by considering coordinated actions under a national strategic plan, the existing barriers to recruitment, training and professionalisation of the sector can be reduced. Flexible forms of training and the commitment to developing a culture of learning supporting people’s continuous development without the financial sacrifices can substantially reduce labour gaps and create sustainable work opportunities for people with currently low qualification levels. Making work pay-attractive and developmental in nature will, firstly, help meeting the recruitment challenge in any sector; and secondly, potentially widen and diversify the workforce in the sector that tend to be under-represented be males and people from non-traditional or disadvantaged backgrounds. Similar challenges are faced by the ELC sector across the EU. Three key lessons to consider by EU policy-makers when developing workforce are:

- greater use of labour market information and the sector’s intelligence to guide all planned actions and a greater emphasis on removing barriers to pan-EU
employment migration;

- organising sector-specific recruitment campaigns to communicate the benefits and opportunities that the specific sectors, rather than individual employers, offer in terms of long-term work and career opportunities for individuals;
- learning from practices in other EU member states and improving opportunities for EU wide promotion and support of relevant training and diversity-orientated recruitment is important when using a holistic view to design best approaches for attracting and training new entrants and the existing workforce in the expanding sectors.

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