First Choice: Early Childhood

Associate Professor Andrea Nolan
Victoria University

Elizabeth Rouse
Australian Catholic University

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Andrea Nolan & Elizabeth Rouse
Victoria University – Australian Catholic University
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Introduction

Background

There is increasing concern in all education sectors across Australia about this country's ability to attract and retain quality educators to meet future workforce demands for all levels of schooling (MCEETYA, 2005; Hartsuyker, 2007). With an aging workforce and increasing turnover from retirements, there is a need not only to attract, but also to retain, a large number of new teachers. With the early childhood education and care sector in the spotlight, new government initiatives such as the commitment to 15 hours of kindergarten for children in the year before formal schooling, and the directive that by the year 2014 all long day care services in Victoria will be required to employ a degree trained early childhood teacher, the workforce situation is critical. Unfortunately anecdotal evidence suggests that a career in the early childhood sector is not the preferred choice of students undertaking courses which lead to dual primary/early childhood teaching qualifications, with these graduates being more likely to take up primary teaching positions. Stakeholder comments to the Early Childhood Strategy Division, Office for Children and Portfolio Coordination, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD), suggest that these students often associate primary teaching with better pay, conditions and career opportunities, along with better professional support in the first years of teaching. In response to this the DEECD is currently developing the *First Choice: Early Childhood* program that will challenge the perceptions of student teachers, raising awareness of the unique rewards and opportunities available in early childhood careers and supporting them to develop in their role as an early childhood educator. The program will be designed to encourage and support high-performing students in dual qualification (early childhood / primary) teaching courses in Victoria to choose early childhood careers.

Purpose

The aim of this research project is to provide recommendations to inform the development of the *First Choice: Early Childhood* program through the identification and documentation of early childhood student teachers' expectations and perceptions of their workforce destination after graduating with a teaching qualification that enables employment in both a primary school and an early childhood education and care setting. The focus is on understanding the reasons impacting on the choices and perceptions of early childhood student teachers as to their employment destination.

Methodology

Two different research teams were engaged to undertake research to provide a strong evidence base for the design of the *First Choice: Early Childhood* program. The Centre for Equity and Innovation in Early Childhood (CEIEC), Melbourne Graduate School of Education, University of Melbourne, was responsible for the Literature Review and a small in-house survey, whilst the Victoria University – Australian Catholic University team broadened the data set on student teacher perceptions by surveying a wide range of students across two further universities. Both projects provided recommendations, independently of each other, for the design of the *First Choice: Early Childhood* program.

The Victoria University – Australian Catholic University contribution to the *First Choice: Early Childhood* project built on another joint research project currently underway in these universities, exploring the motivations of students in courses that lead to careers in early childhood or primary teaching. Relevant preliminary data from this longitudinal study has been used in the preparation of this report, as it was very well-matched to the objectives of the *First Choice: Early Childhood* project.

Student Teacher Perceptions

This part of the research involved student teachers who were currently undertaking a dual early childhood and primary teaching qualification at Victoria University and the Australian Catholic University. These student teachers, in all year levels of the courses, were invited to participate in a survey. The anonymous survey asked each student cohort questions relating to their career aspirations and potential influences on these aspirations, critical decision points and the factors impacting on their decision making. The survey was designed to gain both quantitative and qualitative data. All questions were open-ended requiring short written responses.

Surveys are commonly conducted in the early childhood field and the field of education more generally as a valid and appropriate research approach to gain understanding and insight into the perspectives of the participants involved in the situation (in this case student teachers undertaking a dual early childhood and primary teaching qualification). Surveys aim to obtain information from a selection of the population, presenting findings that are representative of that population. Due to the number of responses the researchers were able to compare data across university cohorts highlighting certain features existing in certain categories.

Analysis of the qualitative data consisted of examining and categorizing the 'evidence' to address the initial aims of the study. Thematic analysis of data to generate categories was also utilised. The research team searched for patterns of sameness and difference along with descriptive analysis using the theoretical propositions. The intention of the researchers was to blend description with analysis of themes.

Sites

Victoria University

Victoria University is a multi-campus, dual-sector higher education institution based in the western region of Melbourne in an area of diverse cultures and socio-economic backgrounds. The University offers more than 700 courses and provides services to more than 47,000 students within the Higher Education sector's Faculties of Arts, Education and Human Development; Business and Law; and Faculty of Health Engineering and Science; and within the TAFE sector.

Since 2004, Victoria University has undertaken a review of its philosophical and educational understandings. The evaluation has directed a re-consideration of the ways in which the university interacts with its various communities and of the purposes of its educational programs. The basis for VU's future, expressed in five 'commitments', is a radical engagement of the University with industry and community through a demanding provision that all courses contain substantial provision for learning in the workplace. An associated and related commitment is that the university will make tangible improvements in its immediate local community in Melbourne's western region.

School of Education

The School of Education, in the Faculty of Arts, Education and Human Development, at Victoria University offers programs in education including primary and secondary teaching, early childhood education, outdoor education and physical education, youth studies, Indigenous studies, literacy, multimedia, Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) and computer-mediated art as well as a range of post-graduate coursework and research programs. Undergraduate courses in the School provide students with flexible career outcomes, with an emphasis on learning in workplaces and community settings. Through educational partnerships with local schools, community organisations and industry, especially in Melbourne's western region, undergraduate and post-graduate students experience valuable workplace learning environments and use this experience as the basis for their learning at the University.

Early Childhood Education

Early childhood courses at Victoria University cater for multiple entry points into degree programs. Students enter after completing Year 12 studies, or with a Diploma of Children's Services, as well as 3 year trained kindergarten teachers being able to undertake their fourth year of study. This area of the School of Education is expanding to cater for more students from diverse pathways. Like all other courses offered by the School of Education, close partnerships with children's services underpin the student experience as well as the research initiatives.

Australian Catholic University

Australian Catholic University is a multi-campus, higher education institution with campuses in all capital cities across the east coast of Australia, as well as in Ballarat in Victoria. The St Patrick's campus based in Fitzroy attracts students from across the wide Melbourne metropolitan area and some regional towns with a wide diversity of cultures and socio-economic backgrounds. The University provides services to more than 20,000 students within the faculties of Arts and Sciences, Education, Health Sciences; Theology and Philosophy and Business.

The School of Education

The School of Education, in the Faculty of Education, at Australian Catholic University offers both pre-service and post-graduate programs in education including primary and secondary teaching, early childhood education, Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) as well as a range of post-graduate coursework and research programs. Undergraduate courses in the School provide students with flexible career outcomes, with an emphasis on learning in workplaces and community settings. With a strong focus on community engagement and social justice the School of Education has developed strong partnerships with schools, community organisations and early childhood education and care programs across wider Melbourne to ensure the undergraduate and post-graduate students experience valuable workplace learning environments and use this experience as the basis for their learning at the University.

Early Childhood Education

The Australian Catholic University offers a Bachelor of Education (Early childhood and Primary) to cater for multiple career aspirations of graduates. Students enter after completing Year 12 studies, or as a mature age entrant. This area of the School of Education is expanding to cater for increased demand. Like all other courses offered by the School of Education close partnerships with children's services programs underpins the student experience, as well as research initiatives. The Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood and Primary) course at the Melbourne campus commenced in 2009, with over 200 students enrolled in either first or second year. The Ballarat campus will commence students in the final (fourth) year of studies in semester 2, 2011.

Participants

Student teachers undertaking a dual early childhood primary teaching at Victoria University and the Australian Catholic University were invited to participate in the broader VU-ACU longitudinal research project. The initial invitation was made by a member of the research team visiting a class where the potential participants were attending and explaining the project, or in the case of the Victoria University final year student teachers, a letter with the survey attached along with an accompanying prepaid envelop was mailed to home addresses. Relevant data from this research project was subsequently used for the *First Choice: Early Childhood* report.

Table 1: Number of student teachers invited to participate

Victoria University	Australian Catholic University
1st Year: 100	1st Year: 112
2nd Year: 94	2nd Year: 95
3rd Year: 60	
4th Year: 15	

Note that the Australian Catholic University is a new course at the Melbourne Campus and as such the 3rd and 4th years of the course were not offered in 2010. Students participating in the course at the Ballarat campus (which has all four years of the course running) were not included in this initial survey as the cohort was deemed too small. Also note that the small number of fourth-year students from Victoria University is due to this being the first cohort through of a new course where initial intake numbers were low.

210 usable surveys were returned. This represented a 44 percent return rate overall, with 476 surveys distributed in total. With the anonymity of distribution it was not possible to follow-up individually for returns, and as the project was due to be completed before classes re-commenced a reminder during class time when the student teachers were on campus was not possible. All students undertaking the dual degree at both universities were targeted in order to get a relatively substantial response for reliability of reporting findings. There was a variance in response rates between the universities as well as in the year levels as the following Tables illustrate.

Table 2: Number of returned surveys by university

University	Frequency	Percent
VU	76	36.2
ACU	134	63.8
Total	**210**	**100.0**

Table 3: Number of returned surveys by year level

Year Level	Frequency	Percent
1st Year	99	47.1
2nd Year	82	39.0
2nd Year accelerated*	17	8.1
3rd Year	11	5.2
4th Year	1	.5
Total	**210**	**100.0**

* The 2nd Year accelerated cohort at Victoria University enters the course at Year 2 with a Diploma of Children's Services or equivalent early childhood qualification.

Most student teachers who participated in the survey were female and had no previous post secondary qualifications (64%), with a larger percentage coming into the Australian Catholic University with no previous qualifications when compared to Victoria University. For those who did hold qualifications these were predominately located in the Children's Services area, as the Victoria University course offers credit for students holding a Diploma of Children's Services. When breaking down the responses into each of the institutions, 35% of respondents from Victoria University had prior qualifications in children's services (Advanced Diploma 2%; Diploma 27% & Certificate III 6%). This is not surprising as Victoria University has an accelerated mode of delivery for those holding a Diploma of Children's Services. In contrast only 9% of respondents from the Australian Catholic University held previous children's services qualifications on entry into the course (Advanced Diploma 1%; Diploma 2.5% & Certificate III 6%) which is also not surprising as Australian Catholic University offers no credit for previous children's services qualifications. Other qualifications identified were from a wide range of vocational educational training qualifications at the diploma and certificate levels (4%).

Table 4: Number of returned surveys by previous qualification

Previous Qualification	Frequency	Percent
Advanced Diploma Children's services	2	1.0
Diploma of Children's Services	23	11.0
Certificate III Children's Services	11	5.2
Other Diploma	16	7.6
Other Certificate	16	7.6
Other Qualification	8	3.8
Nil	134	63.8
Total	**210**	**100.0**

Participants were asked to identify any prior experience of working with children. 74% of participants identified that they had been involved in some capacity, either in a formal or informal way, in a range of preschool aged, school aged or community based programs. These included casual babysitting, coaching children's sport, working in out of school hours, children's services and integration support programs.

Findings

The findings have been organised according to the themes evident in the survey and are represented by both graphs and individual student teacher comments where appropriate. The themes are as follows:

Current projected career destinations

- Course choices

- Current career aspirations at this stage of their course

- Influences impacting on destination decisions

Changes in career aspirations

- Changes occurring in projected career destinations

- Significant influences on changes to career aspirations

- Possible impacting factors on future career choices

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Current projected career destinations

Course Choices

When asked to nominate reasons for choosing the Early Childhood / Primary course, student teachers listed as their rationale a number of responses. The following graph illustrates the range of responses. Whilst a significant number wanted to work with children and were attracted to a dual qualification, less than 5% specifically identified that they wanted to work as an early childhood educator and interestingly just over 10% specified wanting to be a primary teacher. The 'Other' category encompassed aspects such as not wanting to teach in a secondary school environment which excluded choosing courses offering P – 12 training, convenience of university location, first course offered in response to Year 12 results, and lifestyle (working part time and fitting in around family commitments).

Graph 1: Reasons for course choice
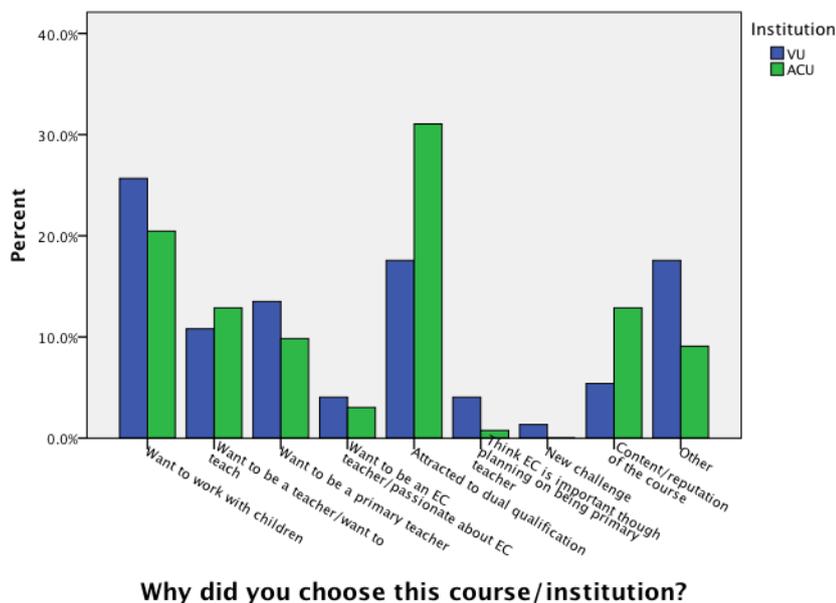
Career aspirations at this stage of their course

As is displayed in the pie graph below the majority of students (over 50%), at the stage they had reached in their course, have indicated a desire to work as a primary school teacher with some specifying the early years as their first choice. This displays a significant increase from what the respondents identified as their initial motivation for choosing to enrol in the course. If the kindergarten, early childhood and child care responses are combined this amounts to approximately one quarter of the participants first choice. Within this combination kindergarten is strongly preferred as the career path. What is also significant is the fact that there are still approximately 20% of student teacher participants who are undecided.

Graph 2: Current career choice
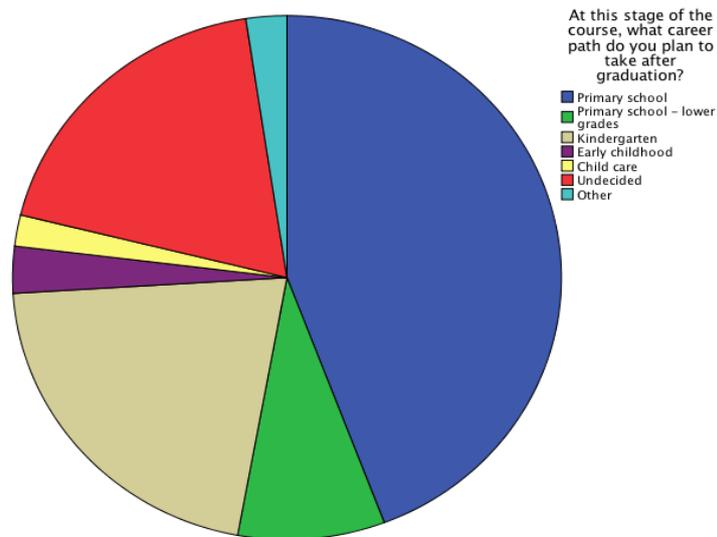
(NB. The distinction between kindergarten, early childhood and child care reflected the responses of the participants. It was clear that the use of these terms related to young children under school age).

In analysing the responses to the survey it became apparent that most of the participants with previous children's services qualifications elected primary school teaching as their preferred career choice. Having prior qualifications in any discipline area was also strongly associated with choosing primary teaching as a career destination at the point of data collection. Victoria University third and fourth year student teacher data, which was examined separately as these students are nearest to entering the workforce, also showed a strong alignment towards this preference.

The following graphs illustrate the match between career destinations and those student teachers who hold previous Children's Services qualifications, those student teachers with no other qualifications on entry, those who hold prior qualifications other than Children's Services qualifications, and Victoria University third and fourth year student teachers. Overall there appears to be some consistency in the percentage of the student teachers within each cohort who are undecided on their career destination.

Graph 3: Current career choice mapped against those students holding a Children's Services qualification on entry (n=36)

Primary Teaching 48%
Kindergarten Teaching 12.5%
Undecided 31.7%
Early Childhood 7.6%
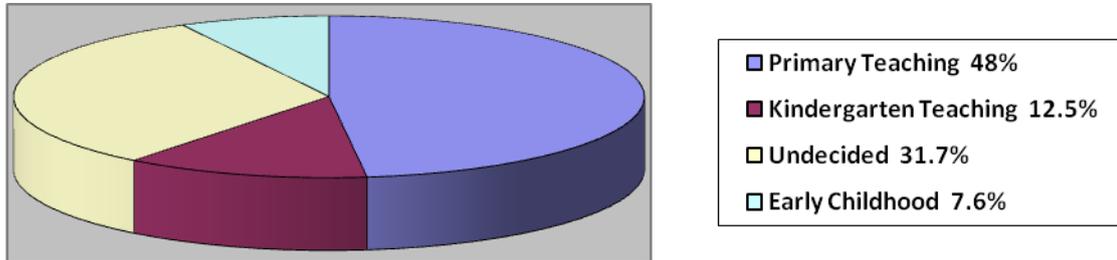
G

raph 4: Current career choice mapped against those students with no qualification on entry (n=134)

Primary Teaching 47%
Kindergarten Teaching 21%
Undecided 27.8%
Early Childhood 1.9%
Childcare 1.9%
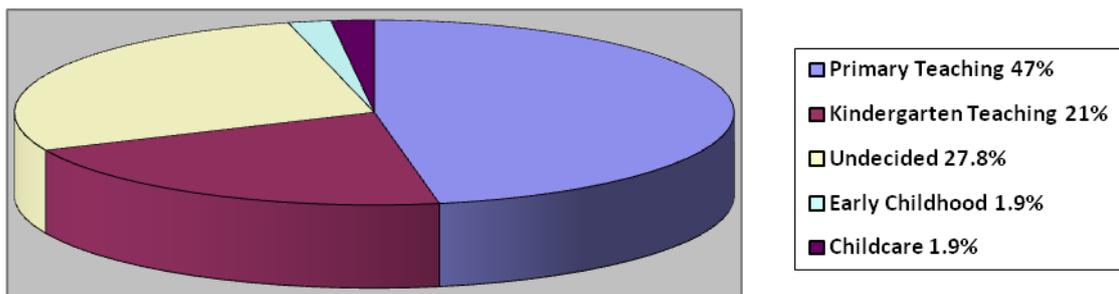
Graph 5: Current career choice mapped against those students with prior qualifications other than Children's Services on entry (n=40)

Primary Teaching 62.5%
Kindergarten Teaching 12.5%
Undecided 25%
Early Childhood 3.1%
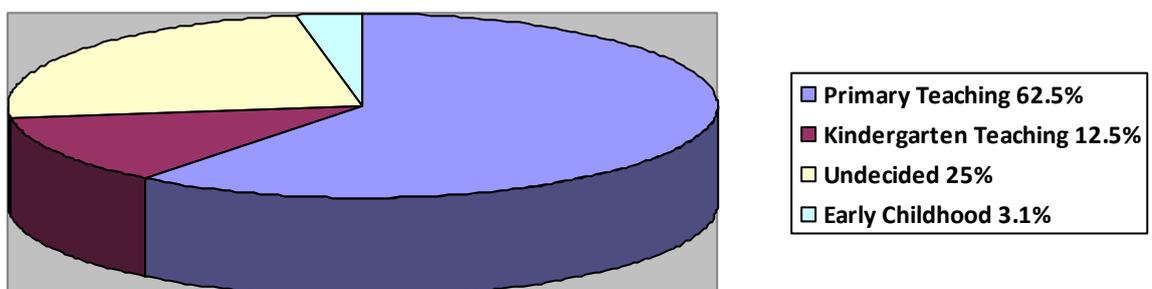
Graph 6: Current career choice mapped against 3rd & 4th year student teachers at Victoria University (n=12)

Legend:
- Primary Teaching 66.6%
- Kindergraten Teaching 8%
- Undecided 25%
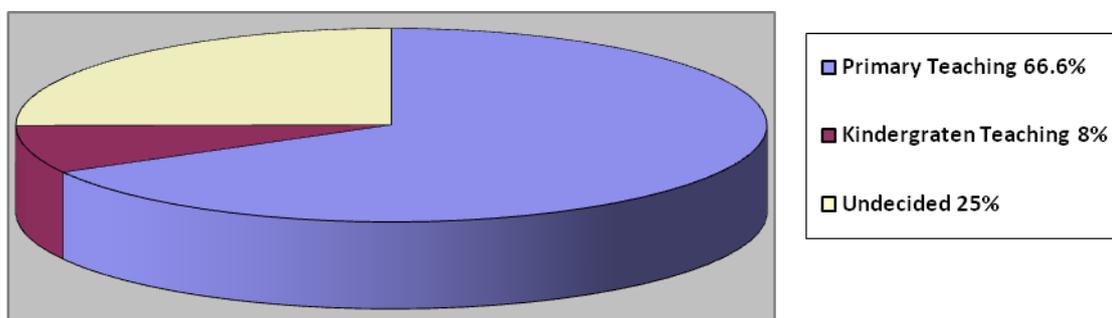
(NB. The distinction between early childhood and the early years of schooling was made very clear in the student teacher responses).

Influences impacting on destination decisions

When considering influences that impact on destination decisions it is useful to separate the data between the two institutions. The data from Victoria University represents a wider spread across all year levels (although the 3rd and 4th years of the course only represent 5.7% of the total responses) whilst the Australian Catholic University responses only comprised of student teachers in the first two years of their course. The implication of this is that student teachers from Victoria University will have experienced a more diverse range of practical placements than those at the Australian Catholic University. For example at Victoria University students in the first two years of the course experience practical placements in both early childhood and primary (to a lesser degree) settings whereas at the Australian Catholic University they undertake only an infant-toddler practical placement in their first year and a preschool practical placement in the second year, with the first year Australian Catholic University student teachers having only just commenced their infant-toddler placement at the time of survey completion. Taking this into consideration, it is interesting to see the strong influence of the practical placement / mentor across both universities.

The following graph highlights the student teacher participants' responses when asked to identify the biggest influence on their career aspirations.

Graph 7: Influences on current career choice
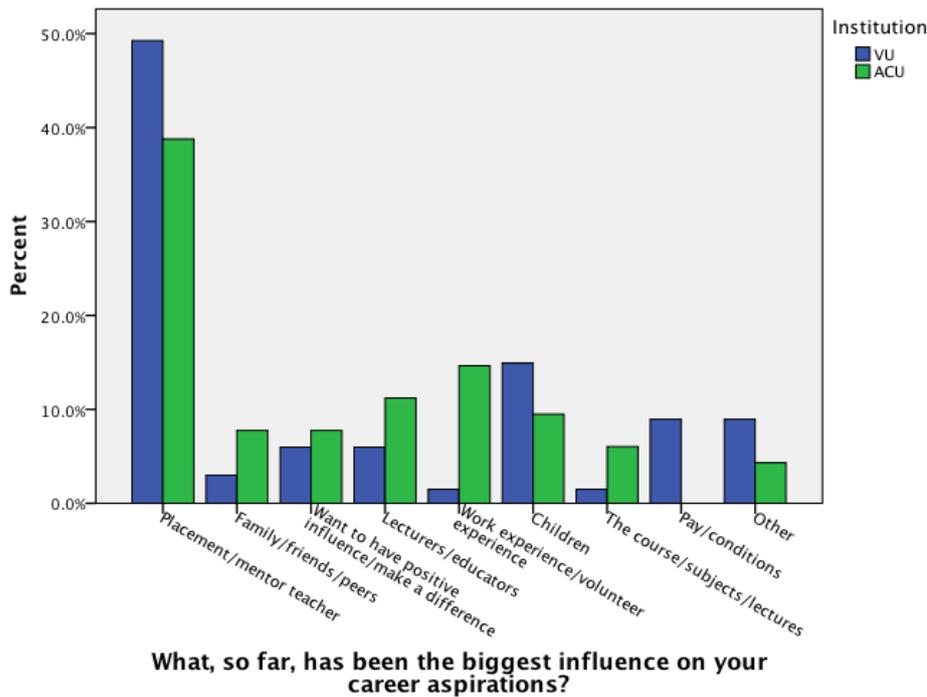
The student teachers mentioned that on practical placements they built their confidence, were able to put theory into practice, had their original career choice confirmed, became more determined to teach due to the experience, increased their general knowledge of teaching and developed a stronger awareness and understanding. One student teacher went as far as to state that she/he '*learnt more on placement than at university*'. Whether these experiences were positive or negative, there seemed to be an impact on career choice as the following examples illustrate:

'*I had a negative experience in the school but this gave me the desire to teach to improve the current standard in schools*'

'*I have not enjoyed the childcare placement but I possibly should work in childcare to improve the quality of care*'

'*The placement has given me an idea of how my workplace will be*'

'*The placement in early childhood showed me that I do not want to work in early childhood*'

'*I really enjoyed working with the 0-2 year olds. I didn't realise how much I would enjoy working with babies*'

'*I am now more aware of available options*'

'*I decided may not be able cope with children in early childhood*'

The role of the mentor or supervising teacher during the practical placement experience appears to be an influential factor. A number of student teachers mentioned how spending time and talking with mentors had influenced their career aspirations and the comments such as '*The teacher was welcoming and inspiring'; 'I was influenced from my talks with mentor teachers';* and *'The placement allowed me to apply my learning, see other professionals working and I was able to talk to them'* are representative of the responses provided.

What is also interesting in this data is the percentage of responses indicating children as a major influence on career aspirations (VU = 15%; ACU = 9.5%). Within these responses a significant number have identified primary teaching as their career choice, although there is still a number who are undecided. The comments provided in response to this question included:

'I can see the way children develop and I want to be an inspiration to them and part of the process'

'I enjoy children so will do well in the teaching profession'

'I have the desire to be a child myself'

'I enjoy seeing children learn and develop'

'I love working with children'

'I realise how much I enjoy children and want to educate them'

'Children inspire me, make me smile. I want to improve children's lives'

'I want to teach children. I want them to look up to me'

Changes in career aspirations

Changes occurring in projected career destinations and the reasons for this
When asked to indicate whether their career aspirations had changed since commencing the course, just over 30% (31.4%) indicated that they had, and that the practical placement was the most significant reason for changing their minds. This supports the previous findings that the practical placement has been the most significant influence on their career destination choices.

Table 5: Change in career path since beginning course

Response	Frequency	Percent
Yes	66	31.4
No	142	67.6
Total	208	99.0
Missing	2	1.0
Total	**210**	**100.0**

In further examining the comments discussing why the practical placement had influenced them changing their minds, it is important to again separate the data out from the two institutions. The data from the student teachers at Victoria University included participants from across four year levels, who had undertaken at least one placement in a primary school. These respondents had all completed a placement in the 'Kinda Kinder' program *(a supported playgroup for children 0- 5 years of age organised and facilitated by both first year and accelerated second year student teachers in partnership with second year students studying the Diploma of Children's Services at Victoria University).* In contrast the student teacher participants from the Australian Catholic University had only undertaken placements in early childhood settings. This is important to note as those respondents from the Australian Catholic University who had indicated that they had changed their mind since starting their course consistently commented that while they had originally chosen to work in a primary school, since starting the course and undertaking the placements, they now feel they would like to work in early childhood. Comments included statements such as '*I didn't want do early childhood but have enjoyed it in course'*; '*I have learnt that my passion is the 3-5 year old age group'; 'the course has inspired my interest in early childhood education'.* These comments are interesting when examined in the context of the large number of respondents from the Australian Catholic University identifying as having no previous qualifications or formal experience in the early childhood sector. At the time of completing the survey, the first year students at the Australian Catholic University had completed only 8 -10 days placement, one day a week, in an infant or toddler room in a long day child care program, while the second year students had completed their infant and toddler placement as well as a pre-school placement, undertaken in either a sessional preschool program or in a long day care setting. Many of these respondents however had commented that they have not as yet undertaken a placement in a primary school and that they may change their minds again when they have had this opportunity to explore the role of the primary school teacher more fully in a primary placement. *'I initially planned to*

teach in primary school, but am now considering Kindergarten. This may change after the primary placement' is indicative of the comments provided.

A number of the student teacher participants at Victoria University commented that the primary placement they had undertaken had influenced them in changing their career aspirations. *'I initially wanted to be a primary school teacher but I had a bad primary school placement so I have changed my mind'.* It should also be noted that some participants from both institutions commented that as a consequence of their early childhood placement they were now definitely choosing to work in the primary school setting. This is evidenced by comments such as *'placements with younger children showed me I prefer primary aged children'* (Australian Catholic University); *'since starting the course, I now know I don't want work in early childhood'* (Australian Catholic University); *'I did not like the Kinda Kinder placement at all* (Victoria University)'; *'I have had experience in both the Kinder Kinda and primary school and I prefer primary school'* (Victoria University).

Other factors that have been an influence in changing the student teachers career aspirations are related to the salary and employment conditions – *'I found out about kindergarten teachers' salary'*; *'Kindergarten teachers earn the same as a qualified child care worker so I will do primary teaching'*; *'I had initially planned to teach kindergarten but have been told about the lack of support they receive so I will work as a primary teacher'.* The following graph outlines the influences resulting in a change to career aspirations by each university.

Graph 8: Influences resulting in change to career aspirations by university

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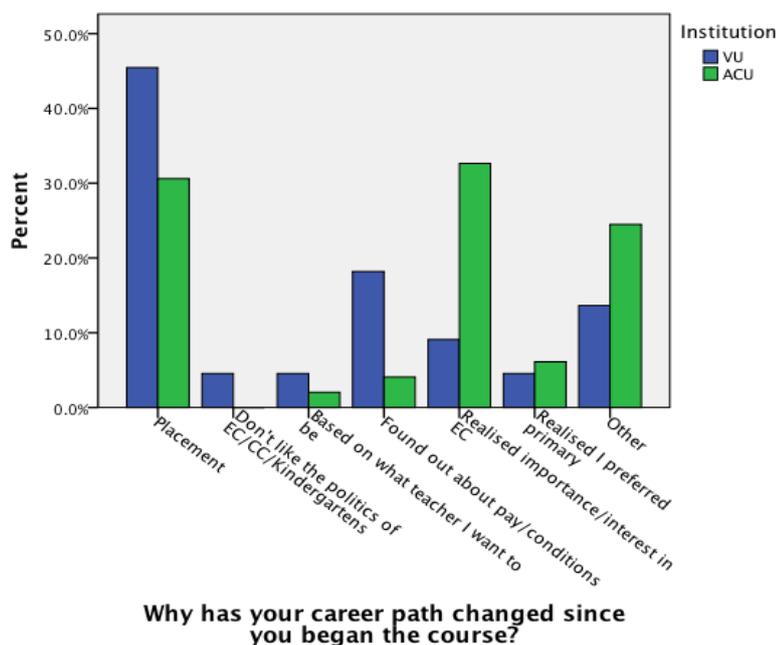
As the courses these student teachers are undertaking give them a dual qualification, their openness to changing their mind about their initial career choices and destination was also investigated.

Table 6: Possibility of change

| University	Frequency	Percent
VU		
Yes	17	22.4
No	30	39.5
Maybe	26	34.2
Total	73	96.1
No response	3	3.9
Total	**76**	**100.0**
ACU		
Yes	45	33.6
No	29	21.6
Maybe	49	36.6
Total	123	91.8
No response	11	8.2
Total	**134**	**100.0**

This table illustrates that whilst there were a number of student teachers who did not feel they would change their mind under any circumstances (VU = 39.5%, ACU = 21.6%), there were many students open to this possibility. When asked if they saw themselves changing their mind about their career choices, 22.4% of the Victoria University student teachers responded with a 'Yes', whilst 33.6% at the Australian Catholic University answered 'Yes'. It is worthy to note that at both universities there was a significant percentage of student teachers who answered 'maybe' to this question (VU = 34.2%, ACU = 36.6%). If these two categories are combined we see that 56.6% of Victoria University student teachers and 70.2% of Australian Catholic University student teachers are open to change. Life style, enjoyment and work-life balance were significant factors noted in the responses. Respondents saw that having the dual qualification gave them greater options. These options have been presented by comments such as *'I expect to work in both kindergarten and primary as I will get bored staying in one setting; I expect I will want to change work settings as my own children grow up'; 'I will have a dual qualification which will give greater flexibility and I will be able to change jobs in future. If I do not enjoy job will be able change',* indicating that if circumstances were optimum they may possibly consider a career in early childhood.

Of those student teachers who believed that they would not change their career choices (VU = 39.5%, ACU = 21.6%), almost half indicated that they had always wanted to be a primary teacher and could not see themselves changing. Pay, conditions and professional recognition were siginficant factors as to

why students teachers would not change their choice (See Graph 9). Comments such as '*I like primary teaching and I won't change my mind*'; '*I prefer to work with older children*'; '*Pay and holidays are better in primary schools than in early childhood so I will not change my mind*' were representative of many of the responses. A small percentage of those who did not see themselves changing their mind did indicate an interest in always wanting to work in early childhood.

Graph 9: Reasons that could impact on a change in career decision

What would make you change your mind and take a career path in the opposite setting to the one you are currently considering?
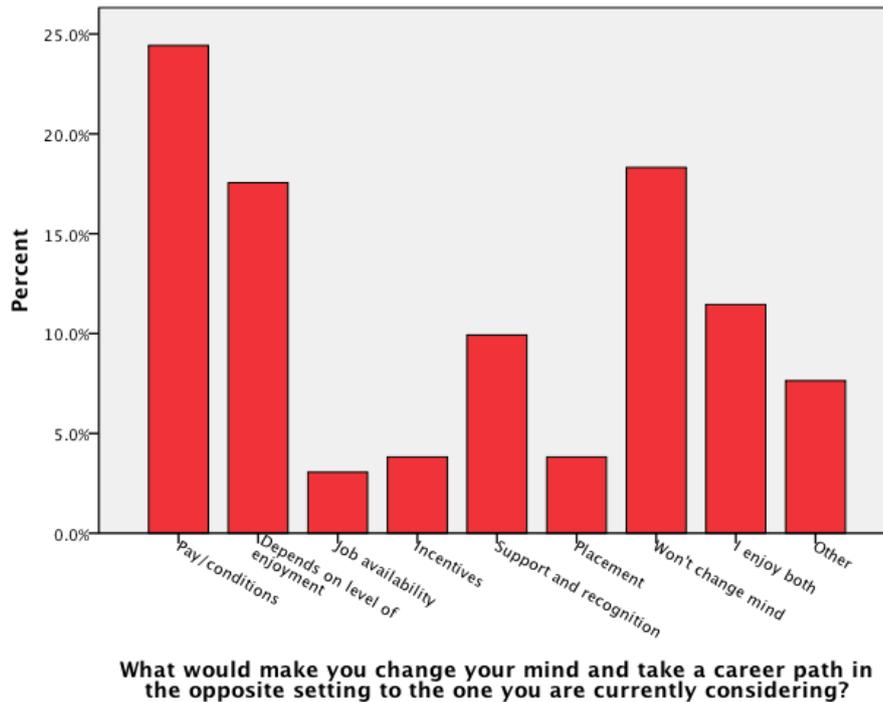
Limitations on the research

The researchers acknowledge the limitations of the study in drawing more general conclusions about the motivations and career intentions of students in courses leading a dual primary/early childhood teaching qualification. Notable limitations are the containment of the sample to two institutions, and the relatively small sample size, especially in the later years of the course. The research nevertheless yields sufficient evidence to provide a good basis for future directions and recommendations for the *First Choice: Early Childhood* program.

Future Directions

When considering the responses as a whole it appears that whilst some students enter the course with a predetermined career destination in mind, there are those who are open to considering change. The influence of placements, along with the perceived pay and conditions of being either an early childhood or primary school teacher appear to have a significant impact. There have been instances where students initially wanting to pursue a career as a primary teacher have changed their mind and now consider teaching in an early childhood context as the preferred option, whilst few in number the apparent impetus of this decision appeared to be impacted through participation in the course itself (which includes the practical placement component). What is also evident is a shift towards primary teaching as a career path as involvement in the course increases.

It is also interesting to note that those students entering the course already holding a Children's Services qualification predominantly indicate primary teaching aspirations. This is a significant issue considering the current policy agenda of up-skilling the early childhood workforce and requires further attention. Whilst only a minimal number of all students have decided to teach in the early childhood sector, a large percentage are undecided which means they are potentially a group to target.

Recommendations

The following recommendations have been developed from an analysis of the data collected for this project and are offered as suggestions to inform action. What these recommendations highlight are a number of considerations that could inform the development of the First Choice: Early Childhood program, such as the purposeful targeting of students throughout their training to capture those who are undecided about their career destination persuading them towards a career in early childhood. This could be approached through building and supporting the practical placements and examining the role of the mentor during these times.

In relation to the First Choice: Early Childhood program design...

Recommendation 1: Cohort

Purposeful targeting of 'undecided' cohort of students

Due to the significant number of student teachers who are 'undecided' about their career path on entry and during the course, it is worth considering this group as a target group to maximise the impact of any program that aims to produce more early childhood teachers as an outcome.

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Recommendation 2: Timing of program
Beginning the program early on in the training

Awareness must be paid to the progressive nature of decision making, for example with each passing year level of the course it does appear that more student teachers decide to move towards a career as a primary school teacher. The recommendation is therefore that any program which is aimed at encouraging student teachers to view a career in early childhood as a viable option must not wait until the final year of a training course when students seem to have a more determined career path in mind.

In relation to the First Choice: Early Childhood program development...

Recommendation 3: Mentoring
Examining the role a mentor plays in supporting student teachers to choose early childhood as a career option

Student teachers appear to be influenced by both their practical placement and the mentor teachers they come in contact with. As well as the quality of the placement site, the level of mentoring and the form that this takes throughout the course should be examined so that student teachers feel supported whilst on placements but also during their time at university. From a report undertaken by Mayer & Nolan (2008) for the Warrawong Advisory Committee of the Foundation of Graduates in Early Childhood Studies, which focused on providing recommendations relating to effective professional learning models for supporting early career early childhood teachers, mentoring was highlighted as one of the most commonly utilised models of support however mentoring was defined and operationalised in a range of ways depending on the program. From the literature examined to inform that report, effective programs often included a mixture of strategies with some type of mentoring included in the program design. The recommendation for the First Choice: Early Childhood program would be to ensure that there is a strong mentoring component tied to the early childhood sector and that this continues throughout the program, especially during the primary placements as a way of maintaining the link to early childhood.

In relation to the First Choice: Early Childhood program monitoring & evaluation...

Recommendation 4: Monitoring
Continue to widen the evidence-base to inform development and evolution / evaluation of the First Choice: Early Childhood program

With the low numbers of respondents in the 3rd and 4th year levels of the current study that informed these recommendations there is a need to widen the sample of these year cohorts to ensure that what is presented is representative of these student teachers. This will act to inform both the evolution of the program as well as the ongoing evaluation of the program.

General recommendations

The research also generated a number of further recommendations relevant to the work of DEECD and other early childhood stakeholders in raising the profile of early childhood teaching within teacher preparation courses.

Recommendation 5: Practical Placements – timing

Positioning the early childhood practical placement experience for students

Acknowledging the influential nature of the practical placement on the student teachers experience and how their decisions regarding career choice become more determined as the course progresses, the timing of the early childhood placements appear to be of vital importance. It would seem crucial to have student teachers undertake early childhood placements in the final years of the course rather than have all early childhood placement experiences during the early stages of the course. A more systematic approach to this issue across universities is warranted to ensure student teachers experience early childhood settings where 'best practice' is enacted.

Recommendation 6: Practical Placements – quality

Reconceptualising the early childhood practical placement experience for students

The content and focus of the early childhood placements need to be specifically focused on the important role an educator plays in the learning of young children. Attention needs to be placed on the professional responsibilities of a teacher working in early childhood contexts to ensure it is presenting as a robust career choice. Tying assessment criteria of placements to wider frameworks, for example the Early Years Learning Framework, the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework, the Code of Ethics etc. will assist student teachers to make links between outcomes for themselves as professionals as well as outcomes for the learning of the children they teach. The focus must be on the student teacher as a 'teacher' and expectations of the placement must mirror (as far as possible) those required on primary teaching placements. Quality placements must be secured.

Recommendation 7: Information

Educate all students to the conditions of employment for the early childhood sector

It was apparent from the data that many student teachers were making judgements regarding future career pathways on limited or incorrect information relating to pay and conditions of employment. Accurate information needs to be provided to students early on in the course and revisited nearer course completion so that students know the pay and conditions accredited to working in the early childhood field thus enabling them to make a decision based on more realistic expectations.

References

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