

Unis unite on early education ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

The country's eight universities have banded together to campaign against the Government's proposal to exclude early childhood education from a new postgraduate qualification.

While universities are in a bidding war to take on the trial of a proposed level eight postgraduate qualification for next year, they have formed a united opposition to government's intention to exclude extending the opportunity to early childhood graduates.

Academics, deans and pro-vice chancellors have sent a collective submission voicing their concerns to Education Minister Hekia Parata, Tertiary Education Minister Steven Joyce and Secretary of Education Peter Hughes.

The leading campaigner, Otago University education professor Helen May, is concerned that the policy indicates the early childhood sector as the underdog again.

"We're campaigning and deeply concerned that early childhood education is excluded from it and we don't want that as a signal that early childhood education is losing status."

"We have gone to extraordinary lengths to position early childhood education in its rightful place in the sector."

But its exclusion from the "elite" qualification was "another slight or attack on not [taking] early childhood seriously", she said.

Limiting the heights that teachers could reach in early childhood would be a threat to that progress, since the increasing numbers of graduates that had been choosing early childhood could go into primary and secondary so they could qualify further.

"We see no reason at all why early childhood cannot be part of this move forward."

May, who has worked in the early childhood sector since the 1970s, said the "absolutely unanimous view within the universities" on the issue showed how important early childhood had become.

"It's a sector on the move. This is not some ivory tower thing."

The overall proposal was supported to increase the quality of teaching, and universities would be bidding to have the qualification up and running for a trial in 2014.

New Zealand Educational Institute president Judith Nowotarski said the proposal would undermine the quality of early childhood education by lowering the status of early childhood teaching.

Including early childhood teaching in the new qualification was essential for maintaining a unified profession, to support the Government's focus on smooth transitions for children from 0-8 years, and on continued recruitment of high quality candidates, she said.

Government aimed for 80 per cent qualified and registered early childhood teachers (there were currently only 70 per cent registered) and NZEI was aiming for 100 per cent.

Ministry schooling policy manager Ben O'Meara said applications had been sought from tertiary providers for innovative level eight programmes that would be available next year.

The number of qualified registered ECE teachers had increased from 6432 to 15,287 in the past 10 years.

The main focus was on continuing to increase participation to 98 per cent of children.

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