Postgraduate Certificate, Diploma and MA: Professional Studies in Children's Play

University of Gloucestershire, UK

Draft programme outline

Aim
The overall intention of this programme is to provide a postgraduate qualification for practitioners who have a role in supporting children's play in a variety of professional contexts. This programme will equip professionals with a critical knowledge base that will inform and enhance current approaches to thinking about 'provision for play'.

As such, it would have relevance for a range of roles including playwork, landscape design, early years care and education, environmental education and the growing movement to encourage and support children's access to natural spaces.

Rationale
The design of the programme reflects the increasing disciplinary and interdisciplinary attention given to the importance of play in children's lives. It places an understanding of the nature and benefits of play, for its own sake, at the centre of study and considers how this understanding may influence a range of diverse professional roles that impact on the design and management of children's play time/spaces. It is also a response to a number of interrelated concerns, largely within a minority world context but increasingly filtering into the majority world, around the 'state of childhood' including:

- Children's declining independent mobility and reduction in opportunities to carve out their own time/space for moments of playing
- Increasing urbanisation and children's disconnection with nature
- Increasing institutionalisation of childhood and the associated demands from these in terms of education and achievement.
- Increasing concerns over children's general health and their subjective expressions of well-being

Entry requirements
The programme is designed for mature students who have a professional role in directly/indirectly supporting children's play and as such is based on real world, work-based and enquiry-based learning, linking theory to practice through reflection and action. There is a general requirement that students are currently practising in their respective professional field and will have the opportunity to reflect on and apply key learning into their practice contexts. Students will need to evidence that they have a first degree or offer other evidence to show the capacity to study at Masters level.

Structure
The programme is delivered by full or part-time Distance Learning with optional campus based study days. It draws upon our extensive experience of developing pedagogical and technological innovations in Distance Learning at undergraduate and postgraduate levels that incorporate creative and flexible teaching and learning opportunities. Participants may choose to complete a

postgraduate Certificate (2 modules, to include 'Perspectives on Play), postgraduate Diploma (an additional 2 modules to the Certificate) and Masters award (4 modules plus completion of an Independent Project).

Module titles:

1. Perspectives on Play (compulsory)
2. The nature of Play and Nature Spaces for Play
3. Perspectives on Playwork
4. Postgraduate Enquiry
5. Applied and Contemporary Practice
6. Independent Project (double module)

As a professional qualification, there is a clear emphasis on integrating and applying learning to practice throughout the programme. More details of the modules are given below:

Module 1: Perspectives on Play - an interdisciplinary study of the nature and value of play.

This opening module will focus on understandings of 'play' and the ways in which this phenomenon has been defined and valued from minority and majority world perspectives. The intention here is to broaden and deepen understandings to enable practitioners to better articulate and advocate for the importance of children's play, and to consider how this increased understanding impacts on their professional role. As such, the module will pay attention to:

Developing a critical appreciation of the distinctive qualities/characteristics of playing; a critical exploration of traditional disciplinary accounts of the nature and value of play; the rhetorics of play; interdisciplinary studies of play; key adaptive features and benefits of playing; play, health and well-being. This understanding is then applied critically to examine the implications for adults working to create spaces and opportunities for play.

Module learning outcomes:

1. Undertake a critical review of diverse theories of play and situate them in their cultural and academic contexts
2. Synthesise disciplinary accounts of play
3. Demonstrate an enhanced understanding of the relationship between play, health and well-being
4. Consider critically the implications of new understanding for their professional practice

Module 2: The nature of space and nature spaces for play - with a focus on the design of time/space for play and importance of children's contact with natural spaces

This module builds on the foundations established in the opening study of play by developing a critical appreciation of the relationship between play and space. Drawing on contemporary concepts from philosophy, biology, psychology, human geography and the social studies of childhood the module will examine the production of space through the complex and dynamic encounters and interplay between human and non-human materials and symbols.

The module will explore playing as embodied emotion, perception and action systems in a relationship of anticipatory readiness with the environment. It will examine critically the body of evidence that highlights the importance of children having playful contact with natural spaces. Critical consideration will also be given to research which explores the contemporary conditions for children's ability to independently access natural play spaces. From this, the student will identify qualities of space that offer high affordance for children's play and apply this to their professional practice. Indicative content will be:

Conceptualisations of 'space'; theoretical perspectives on production of space; representations of 'nature' and childhood; critical review of research into benefits of contact with natural space; space and place attachment; perspectives on perception, action and emotion; affordances of 'things'; contemporary conditions for children's opportunity to play out; implications for designing attractive play spaces.

Module learning outcomes:

1. Demonstrate an advanced understanding of the concept of space as a product of complex and multiple interrelations
2. Synthesise diverse disciplinary concepts to account for the ways in which children's play produces distinctive time/space
3. Critically evaluate research evidence on the benefits of children's contact with natural space
4. Analyse critically research findings that explore the contemporary influences on children's ability to play outdoors
5. Apply understanding to reflect critically on their professional role in the design and management of play spaces

Module 3: Perspectives on Playwork - exploring the theoretical underpinnings, professional values and principles that inform playwork practice.

This module is designed to be relevant for practising playworkers or those supporting, training or managing playworkers. It builds on the 'Perspectives on Play' module to consider how this might be critically applied to playwork practice, drawing largely (but not exclusively) on the UK historical and theoretical foundations for playwork as a specific approach to working with children at play. The approach in the module encourages critical comparison of the diverse practises of the student group.

Indicative content includes:

- the historical and theoretical foundations of playwork;
- constructions of childhood and play in the legal and policy contexts for playwork: comparative approaches;
- playwork as a community of practice;
- organisational frameworks for playwork practice;
- models of playwork (to include international comparison depending on the student group);
- ethical and professional values and codes of practice;
- the design of attractive play spaces for children;
- playwork intervention styles;
- reflection and evaluation of playwork practice.

Module learning outcomes:

- critically appraise the historical, political and policy contexts for playwork in their own country;
- analyse diverse and contradictory theoretical perspectives and models of playwork;
- justify and critically evaluate playwork practice in light of learning and understanding

Module 4: Postgraduate Enquiry – research methods for the postgraduate student

This module develops a critical understanding of a broad range of research methodologies that play a crucial role in developing professional knowledge or enhancing practice in developing and supporting space and time for children's play. This module is designed to challenge students' fundamental understanding of the nature and purpose of research by examining the underpinning epistemological and ontological underpinnings of a broad range of methodologies. Students will develop a deeper and broader appreciation of the philosophies, paradigms and theories underpinning research in relation to the design and management of play spaces. Particular focus will be given to issues of researching children's spatial experiences and practices, drawing on contemporary conceptual tools and approaches.

Students will review a range of studies, critiquing the research design, ethical issues and methods employed, considering the epistemological underpinnings and the challenges inherent to applied practice. This module will prepare the student for undertaking an independent study into a particular aspect of their professional practice in the design and management of play spaces.

Indicative content will be:

The epistemological and ontological foundations of research; philosophical approaches to the acquisition of knowledge; contemporary ethical issues across the range of subject areas; reviewing and critiquing literature with particular reference to the application to practice; designing effective research questions and proposals; planning, managing and evaluation of research projects; developing competency in methods of data collection and analysis.

Module learning outcomes:

1. Demonstrate an advanced understanding of a range of epistemological and ontological foundations of research across a range of disciplines.
2. Demonstrate a critical awareness of a range of methodologies, including data analysis processes, across numerous related subject areas.
3. Critically analyse research designs with specific reference to the methodological underpinnings of the investigation in question.
4. Demonstrate an advanced understanding of contemporary ethical issues across a range of disciplines.
5. Synthesise information to plan and produce a coherent, rigorous and viable research proposal.
6. Contextualise the choice, design and implementation of methods relative to research philosophies and methodologies.

Module 5: Applied and Contemporary Practice – an opportunity to apply learning to professional practice

This module provides students with the opportunity to undertake a practice based programme of study, which addresses the educational objectives of the course. Students may work individually or in a group with other students. The programme of study will be based in a relevant occupational or applied setting and will incorporate current discipline practice in supporting children's play. Students taking this module may choose to evidence prior course-relevant learning to achieve some of the learning outcomes. For example, practitioners may already have a wealth of relevant experience that they can draw on to achieve the learning outcomes of this module. The chosen area of study will be negotiated with the module tutor but general principles for the module are:

The study programme should be practice based; students may work with other students as part of a team, although assessment will always be individual; practice based environments may be internal or external; students may conduct an investigation with very specific outcomes; students may be given the opportunity to embark on a significant piece of work that could be extended in the Independent Project module; students may wish to reflect critically on prior experience.

Module learning outcomes:

1. Demonstrate enhanced knowledge in their chosen area of study
2. Synthesise relevant theoretical and applied knowledge
3. Demonstrate discipline-specific skills determined by the agreed supervised study
4. Reflect critically on current discipline practice and/or the evidence underpinning current practice
5. Reflect critically on their own applied practice or the practice of others
6. Successfully communicate the outcomes of their work in written form

Masters Module: Independent Project

The Independent Project provides students with an opportunity to conduct a sustained, intensive and independent investigation into an area of study and to present their findings in a formal manner in accordance with academic conventions and the requirements of the subject.