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Quality in early childhood education and care (ECEC): state of play in the EU Member States based on the European Quality Framework

Executive summary



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Executive summary

Background

Quality Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) is a priority both at EU level and in many EU Member States. An important outcome of this growing interest has been the development of the European Quality Framework (EQF), a comprehensive framework to define high-quality ECEC (Council of the European Union [CEU], 2019)¹. In addition, the European Pillar of Social Rights and the Child Guarantee underline the importance of high-quality ECEC, especially in terms of inclusion, addressing child poverty and promoting equal opportunities for all children and families. As such, **high-quality ECEC** has been on the political agenda in recent years. This is exemplified by the EU Care Strategy and the revised Barcelona Targets², which stress the importance of enrolment and attendance rates of children in ECEC. However, high-quality ECEC constitutes a broader issue than attendance rates. In order for ECEC systems to have a positive impact for all children, families and societies, both **process quality** and **structural quality** are important. Structural quality is defined in the EQF, which proposes a comprehensive framework with five quality areas: accessibility, staff, curricula, monitoring and evaluation, and governance and funding.

The **current NESET report** provides an integrative overview of the state of play and reforms at EU level, in the different EU Member States, on the 5 quality areas. The main focus is on accessibility and workforce³.

Using the 5 areas of the EQF as an analytical framework, the current NESET report aims to answer more specifically the following **research questions**:

- What is the **state of play** at EU level and in the different EU Member States on the 5 EQF areas of quality, with a main focus on accessibility and workforce?
- Which **recent policy reforms** to improve ECEC quality are reported in the EU Member States (since the proposal for an EQF in 2014⁴, the NESET report of 2018⁵, followed by the 2019 Council Recommendation⁶, which marks the Member States' commitment to improve their ECEC systems) on the 5 EQF areas of quality, with a main focus on accessibility and workforce?
- What are crucial remaining **challenges** in the EU Member States on the 5 EQF areas, with a main focus on accessibility and workforce?

To answer these questions a **desk research** using **secondary data analysis** and **document analysis** is conducted:

- Data from important sources were compared (e.g. Structural Indicators⁷ and Key Data on ECEC⁸) to provide a state of play as well as changes over time.

¹ The European Quality Framework for ECEC (EQF), developed by the ECEC Thematic Working Group (2012-2014), under the auspices of the European Commission, defines what characterises quality in ECEC at the EU level. A slightly modified version has been endorsed by the 27 EU Member States in the 2019 Council recommendation on High-Quality ECEC systems (2019/C 189/02).

² Council Recommendation of 8 December 2022 on Early Childhood Education and Care: the Barcelona targets for 2030 2022/C 484/01 (CEU, 2022)

³ The data reviewed on accessibility and workforce are more extensive, due to centrality of these topics

⁴ Proposal for Key Principles of a Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care (European Commission [EC], 2014).

⁵ The current state of national ECEC quality frameworks, or equivalent strategic policy documents, governing ECEC quality in EU Member State (Lazzari, 2018).

⁶ Council Recommendation of 22 May 2019 on High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems (CEU, 2019).

⁷ <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/publications/structural-indicators-monitoring-education-and-training-systems-europe-2023-early>

⁸ <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/publications/key-data-early-childhood-education-and-care-europe-2014-edition>; <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/publications/key-data-early-childhood-education-and-care-europe-2019-edition> Unfortunately, the Key Data on ECEC 2024 was not yet available while analyzing the data.

- Recent country-specific information from several data sources was used to analyse recent policy reforms (e.g. country-specific information on ECEC-systems and reforms in the ECEC system on Education and Training Monitor⁹, Eurydice¹⁰, SEEPRO¹¹, the National Action Plans concerning the Child Guarantee¹²).
- Other sources complementing that data (such as OECD reports, reports from the Working Group ECEC¹³) were analysed.
- Planned reforms mentioned in the national action plans for the Child Guarantee were also analysed.

This secondary analysis led to a **comprehensive analysis** of the available data. However, desk research might not unravel all complexity. Therefore, **online interviews with key experts** complemented the data analysis. This enriched the data and provided a critical and more overarching analysis.

After an introduction part (PART A), the report analyses the state of play and reforms referring to the 5 quality areas of the EQF in the EU Member States (PART B). The report ends with conclusions and recommendations for policy-makers, formulated on the basis of the findings (PART C).

Key findings

Our analysis underlines that, although several EU Member States have put in place policy reforms to improve and recognise the value of ECEC, the sector still appears quite **vulnerable**. Enhancing the quality of ECEC is a complex, ongoing and challenging journey, in which the various pieces of the puzzle should come together. Within the **holistic** model proposed in the EQF, it is not fully possible to improve one aspect of quality without addressing the other areas. For example, working on accessibility also means developing interventions on staff, curricula, evaluation and monitoring and governance. Likewise, each of these areas cannot be addressed without reference to the others. While good examples of reforms and improvements in specific aspects of quality certainly exist in several Member States, coherent, holistic changes at a systemic level appear more challenging to achieve. Such a situation can lead to **fragmented interventions** being carried out in different areas of quality, resulting in a lack of comprehensive structural reform on high-quality ECEC, and even leading to unintended consequences.

Below is a short overview of the general findings of the report in reference to each area.

Accessibility

The present NESET report reveals that most EU Member States address the issue of accessibility. Efforts have been made both to provide **extra places** and to **guarantee places** in ECEC in most EU Member States. However, such quantitative efforts consequently do not always address issues in relation to **quality and equity**.

Despite efforts to increase enrolment rates, there has been a prevalent focus on **children aged 3 and above**, often neglecting younger age groups and those children **at risk of poverty and social exclusion**. It is widely recognised that strategies to increase equity for the latter group (i.e. children at risk of poverty and social exclusion) should start from

⁹ <https://education.ec.europa.eu/about-eea/education-and-training-monitor>

¹⁰ <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-education-systems>

¹¹ https://www.seeepro.eu/Seiten_Englisch/Home_engl.htm

¹² <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1428&langId=en>

¹³ *The Working Group supports Member States as they implement the 2019 Council Recommendation on High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems and its main component, the European Quality Framework for ECEC. It mainly supports peer learning based on the measuring, monitoring and evaluation of quality, and follows up on the work of the ET 2020 working group, which focused on inclusion, staff professionalisation and the management of the COVID-19 pandemic in the ECEC sector. See <https://wikis.ec.europa.eu/display/EAC/ECEC>*

an approach of progressive universalism¹⁴ rather than a targeted one. In many EU countries, the EU Child Guarantee holds the potential to break the cycle of poverty and exclusion. However, Member States' National Action Plans often lack concrete implementation measures such as timelines and targets, which are crucial conditions for such plans to truly become a vehicle for the advancement of more accessible higher-quality ECEC.

Training and working conditions of staff

With regard to the ECEC workforce, persistent **staff shortages** in many EU Member States pose a significant challenge to the quality of ECEC. This has a potential negative impact on children, parents, workforce and society. There is, however, no single, universal solution to this problem. Raising **qualification requirements**, providing effective **continuous professional development** (CPD) opportunities and **good working conditions**, including wages and adult-child ratio, have been stressed in some reforms in the EU Member States. Together, those strategies can contribute towards raising the **attractiveness** of the ECEC professions, and leading to a competent workforce, which has a positive influence on children and families.

In most EU Member States, differences exist in terms of opportunities for pre-service and in-service training for **different types** of staff, whereby assistants and ECEC leaders are often forgotten groups. In ECEC-systems that operate a **split system**, lower initial qualifications and fewer opportunities for CPD are noted for those staff working in **services for the youngest children (0-3 years old)**.

While some countries have taken positive steps to ensure more competent staff, **huge potential** for improvement still remains among various EU Member States. Such improvement is crucial, as well-qualified and well-supported staff who are part of a diverse team are central in providing high-quality interactions with children and families. This stresses the importance of process quality in ECEC. This applies for core practitioners and assistants. At the same time, good leadership is crucial for shaping organisational conditions and strategies to ensure quality (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2021).

The **contents of initial training curricula** also play a central role in raising the quality of ECEC staff and thus the quality of ECEC practice itself. Although progress has been made, further work is needed in revising curricula, with a focus on holistic child-centred approaches.

Curricula

Many EU Member States are putting efforts in developing a new pedagogical framework or **curricula**, or are renewing their curricula. These start from a holistic perspective on the child and reciprocal relationships with parents.

In countries with a split ECEC system, however, there is still a **lack of alignment** between the curricula used in ECEC services for the youngest children, and the curricula used in ECEC services for older children. This also implies for the curricula used in ECEC services as a whole and those used in primary education. Reciprocal curricular alignment is one of the crucial conditions for smoothing the transition from one educational system to the next.

¹⁴ *Progressive universalism in ECEC refers to "overall measures that are designed to benefit all children complemented with supplementary initiatives to provide extra support for certain (vulnerable) sub-groups."* (Frazer & Marlier, 2013).

Monitoring and evaluation

Reforms focusing on monitoring and evaluation have been rolled out in various EU Member States. However, there is a need for more **comprehensive** monitoring and evaluation systems in which self-evaluation, external inspection and macro-level monitoring are seen as interrelated and **continuous** aspects of quality improvement in ECEC. Also, sufficient and effective support should be provided to **all ECEC stakeholders** within the ECEC ecosystem (i.e. from the children to the ministries), in order to value and make use of the monitoring and evaluation system as a tool for quality improvement, rather than as a goal in itself.

Governance and funding

Governance and funding can be seen as the **backbone** of high-quality ECEC: without good governance and sufficient funding, high-quality ECEC systems cannot sustain.

Governance is strongly related to the continuum of different levels of integration seen in ECEC systems, and has a crucial impact on the other quality areas of the EQF. Some governance models require greater coherence between national/central regulations and local regulations, stressing the importance of local tailoring to specific needs.

With regard to **funding**, several countries made important investments in ECEC through increased public expenditure. Among other sources, these include post-pandemic funding provided by the European Resilience and Recovery Facility. Such expenditure should aim to make ECEC a system equivalent to the primary education system – with an economic, social and pedagogical function for all children, families and society.

Recommendations

Due to the strong interrelationship between all of the EQF quality areas, this report formulates overarching recommendations in which the five aspects of quality (access, staff, curriculum, monitoring and evaluation, governance and funding) are addressed in an intertwined way. Below, six macro-recommendations for policy-makers are provided. Under each of these we provide specific guidelines addressing the five EQF areas of quality.

Recommendation 1

Policies (re)shaping the ECEC sector in the EU Member States should be underpinned by a **holistic_rights-based vision** and a **social justice perspective**.

This underlying vision, already strongly promoted by the EQF (CEU, 2019), should be transversal across all reforms. It should be the starting point to nurture the entire policy process at EU level, and in each of the Member States.

This recommendation draws on an awareness that:

- The principles of the **Convention on the Rights of the Child** (1989) should play a central role in shaping ECEC policies, and should be the foundation for the initiatives addressed towards young children and their families.
- Children’s rights are based on a holistic way of conceiving the upbringing of children, in which **learning, playing and caring** are strongly interrelated. The various agencies and stakeholders responsible for services for children and families should collaborate together, guided by a strong, negotiated vision.
- High-quality ECEC plays a crucial role in **tackling social inequalities**.

Specific guidelines:

- When developing policy reforms, unintended consequences can affect the original positive intention of the reform itself. EU Member States should therefore include in their policy reforms an **analysis of unintended consequences**, from a social

justice perspective. They should lay down rules and regulations in advance to prevent and/or mitigate possible negative impacts on children and families. For example, policies regarding the criteria for access to ECEC could create unintended consequences that hinder social inclusion (see the recommendations that follow).

- The shortage of places in ECEC poses concerns regarding the priority **criteria for access to ECEC**. Countries have to make choices and set priorities due to this lack of available places. Some Member States choose to prioritise working parents or dual-earner households. This strategy, however, hinders **inclusive ECEC policies**. It creates a significant barrier, especially for low-income families or families with vulnerable backgrounds. From the perspective of Children’s Rights and social justice, EU Member States should invest in policies that aim for **equity and inclusiveness**, even when there is a shortage of places. Such policies should start from an approach of **progressive universalism**, ensuring that families with vulnerable backgrounds are not excluded.
- EU Member States should invest in revising the contents of the ECEC curricula when necessary. Curricula should emphasise the **holistic** development of children and a **co-educative** relationship with families within the local community. Within this approach, familiarisation processes are crucial to establish a warm, respectful and reciprocal relationship with families and to allow smooth transitions from one system or service to another. In addition, specific attention should be paid to how **ECEC spaces and materials** are organised. The **circular relationship between observation, planning, documenting and evaluating** should also play a central role within the development of curricula. These elements are essential to enhancing the reflective competences of staff, which support children’s participation and voice in pedagogical decision-making and planning processes. Curricula should also focus on the specific **innovative** nature of ECEC, and give space to **experimentation**.
- EU Member States should **align curricula and guidelines** with the contents of initial training, professional development opportunities, and of monitoring and evaluation systems.

Recommendation 2

Policies that shape the ECEC sector in EU Members States should promote and support **collaborative approaches** in order to offer high-quality services to young children and their families.

This recommendation draws on an awareness that:

- Working on quality requires a **‘team approach’**, whereby the focus should be on all of the professionals working within an ECEC centre.
- In order to work towards quality, collaboration is also needed at **all levels of the ECEC system** (from the micro-, through the meso-, to the macro-level).

Specific guidelines:

- **Diversity within teams** is seen as a strength for ECEC. EU Member States should invest in **strategies to attract and retain diverse staff**. This can be achieved through, for example, the creation of well thought-out qualifying pathways; the recognition of prior learning for experienced but untrained professionals; and the provision of additional courses and trainings to support students from a minority ethnic background. All of these should be supported by improved **working conditions and by pedagogical guidance and CPD activities aimed at**

valuing this diversity. Investing in this direction could attract a diverse workforce in terms of experience, socio-economic and ethnic background, and gender.

- Diversity in terms of **initial qualification** can be a richness for children, families, and the team. However, developing too many different qualification paths can entail risks. It can reinforce fragmentation within the sector and ultimately devalue the profession. When creating diverse initial qualification paths, EU Member States should invest strongly in the **quality of the contents of these qualifications**, and in **good CPD and in-service pedagogical guidance for ECEC professionals**, together with the **opportunities for career advancement**.
- Within a diverse team, the role of **assistants** has been undervalued in many EU countries. Sometimes described by researchers as the “invisible workforce” (Urban et al., 2011; Peeters et al., 2016), assistants can be a crucial contact point for families and children, and can support inclusive approaches. In order for assistants to become such a ‘bridging figure’, EU Member States should invest in the **initial training and CPD of assistants**, as these aspects often appear to be overlooked in policy reforms. Furthermore, priority should be given to assigning **time for assistants and core practitioners to reflect together**. This is crucial, as both types of professionals work with the same children and families, and therefore need to share and negotiate their vision and practice.
- ECEC leaders play a key role in providing organisational, pedagogical and emotional support to their teams, which is crucial to high-quality ECEC. EU Member States should invest in the **initial training and CPD of leaders** – another area that appears to be overlooked in policy reforms. Individual training is important, but this alone is not enough. Leaders should have the opportunity to engage in a **network** of peer-learning activities and advocacy initiatives with other leaders.
- Working with young children is an important but often demanding job. Despite this, in many EU Member States the working conditions of ECEC staff are worse than those of professionals working with older children in formal education. EU Member States should urgently address the **working conditions** of ECEC staff. They should invest in good salaries for all professionals working in ECEC, small groups of children, good staff-child ratio, and the availability of child-free hours. Such measures could reduce staff turnover, increase job satisfaction and raise the attractiveness of the profession for diverse staff.
- EU Member States undertaking **new reforms** should invest in strategies that include **sufficient support** (e.g. through manuals, training, mentoring and coaching, ...), in order to help diverse stakeholders to effectively translate the new policy reforms into practice.

Recommendation 3

Policies to shape the ECEC sector in the EU Member States should favour an approach of **progressive universalism**. While aiming for universal and integrated ECEC services for **all children aged 0-6 years**, policy reforms should focus on specific measures for the groups often forgotten, namely:

- Children aged **0-3** years;
- Children and families experiencing **vulnerable** situations (e.g. families with low socio-economic status, refugee families, Roma families, families with children with special needs).

This recommendation draws on an awareness that:

- In most EU Member States, an **“ECEC gap” exists**. This refers to the period between the end of well-paid parental leave, and the age at which children are legally entitled to a place in an ECEC centre. EU Member States should take measures to reduce this gap, or to provide solid alternatives.
- Children from families with vulnerable backgrounds still have less access to quality ECEC compared with their peers. As underlined in the Child Guarantee (EC, 2021), an approach of **progressive universalism** is an effective way to address social inclusion, while aiming for universal access. Instead of focusing on a targeted approach, the ultimate goal of progressive universalism is the inclusion of all children and families, but dedicates specific attention and efforts to reaching the most forgotten groups and those at risk of poverty or social exclusion.
- Member States’ reforms often focus on children **aged 3 and above**. This may: 1) emphasise a focus on school-readiness; 2) neglect the fact that ECEC also plays a crucial social and pedagogical function for younger children (aged 0-3), besides its economic function.

Specific guidelines:

- Investments in ECEC are generally in favour of services aimed at older children. **EU Member States should place equal value on the whole period of ECEC, and accordingly invest in the first phase** of ECEC as well. This stresses that a child’s first years are crucial to his/her well-being, and those of their families.
- Where such a situation does not yet exist, **EU Member States should invest in developing a curriculum to cover the whole ECEC age range (0-6)**, or at least invest in aligning the curricula of the two phases of ECEC. Attention should be given to a **holistic approach** towards education, as opposed to the logic of so-called “schoolification”, which tends to pressure children into being prepared for the next school level. This also means that, while systems should aim for continuity with the primary school curriculum, ECEC guidelines should maintain their own identity in order to better respond to the needs of young children and families.
- **A gap often exists between the level of initial qualification, the CPD and working conditions of professionals working in the first phase of ECEC (0-3) and those who work in the second phase of ECEC (3-6)**. This is the case in split systems, but is also sometimes found in more integrated ones. The reason for this lies in historical perceptions of so-called “caring” for the youngest children, which traditionally has not been valued as highly as the “education” of older children. EU Member States should address this inconsistency by **raising the initial qualification, the CPD and working conditions of childcare workers (0-3), and eventually equalising it with that of preschool teachers (3-6)**.
- EU Member States should invest in **revising the contents of initial training programmes** for future ECEC professionals, by adopting a holistic perspective towards education. This means investing in curricula that focus on the interplay between learning, play and caring; on warm and reciprocal relationships with families and the community; on pedagogy through spaces and materials. Initial training should also increase the competences of future staff in relation to planning, observing, documenting and evaluating. Hence, Member States should invest in the reflective competences, and working in team competences in order for all future staff to become **reflective practitioners, part of professional learning communities**.
- EU Member States should efficiently **address the ECEC gap. Good and well-paid parental leave** (for both mothers and fathers) should be put in place until the

moment the child is legally entitled to an ECEC place. At present, such a situation is more often in place in those countries that operate an integrated ECEC system.

- Disparities persist in the enrolment rates of children under the age of 3 (compared with those of older children), increasing the vulnerabilities of the most at-risk children. EU Member States should invest more in **ensuring equal access for the youngest children**, as part of a holistic approach to their upbringing.
- From a children’s rights perspective, **guaranteeing a child’s right to a place in ECEC** is a crucial goal. However, care should be taken when adopting measures aimed at lowering the age of compulsory ECEC attendance. If they are not accompanied by a holistic approach to care, play and education, such measures may even reinforce social inequalities. EU Member States should therefore invest in guaranteeing the right to a place, taken a holistic perspective into account.
- Children from societally vulnerable families appear to have less access to quality ECEC. EU Member States should invest in policies aimed at involving in particular those children and families at risk of social exclusion – for example, through **outreach initiatives**. Research that values the voice of the children and families, and which listens to, investigates and takes into account their needs, would help in better formulating inclusive policies.
- Also, in light of the ECEC gap and the shortage of places in ECEC, more **informal support services** (such as meeting places for children and families, service hubs, play groups, etc.) could serve as possible alternatives to meet the diverse needs of children and families.

Recommendation 4

Policies that shape the ECEC sector in the EU Member States should be part of an **integrated reform package** that proposes a range of strategies aimed at influencing the EQF quality areas in an **interrelated** way.

This recommendation draws on an awareness that:

- Analysing the current reforms and planned actions mentioned in the National Action Plans shows that not all of the planned actions are thoroughly embedded in a comprehensive reform that addresses the quality of ECEC as a whole. This could lead to **fragmented reforms**, which might ultimately be less effective. Within a holistic approach, working on one EQF area would be accompanied by detecting which of the other areas are connected, searching for unintended consequences, and proposing coherent reforms accordingly.

Specific guidelines:

- Several National Action Plans lack specificity and decisiveness. **EU Member States should invest in more concrete measures** that include specific, concrete and feasible timelines, targets and indicators. Only then can policy intentions be translated into tangible benefits for all children, families and society.
- Several EU Member States have made efforts to increase enrolment rates by providing extra places, guaranteeing a place in ECEC, and/or making ECEC more affordable. However, more effort is needed to support an **efficient, multifaceted approach to accessing ECEC**. Efforts and investments in accessibility, affordability and inclusiveness are not always integrated into a broader vision and plan for access to and equity in high-quality ECEC. In their policy reforms, EU

Member States should address not only **access, affordability** and **usefulness**, but also **comprehensibility, equity and inclusiveness**.

- Due to the shortage of places in ECEC, public subsidies may be directed towards both non-profit and private, for-profit providers. This choice could offer solutions, but it is a risk when there is a lack of regulations on quality or the regulations in place are not clear or strict. EU Member States should invest in **clear and strict regulations on quality** and accountability measures across the whole ECEC sector, applying to different types of providers.
- EU Member States should invest in policies that support ECEC centres in building reciprocal **partnerships with families and local communities** in order to create co-educative practices. These could support work on comprehensibility (in addition to addressing access, affordability and usefulness) in ECEC.
- Similarly, EU Member States should invest in policies that support ECEC centres in building **partnerships with local organisations, working for and with families from different sectors** (e.g. education, health, culture and so on). Working in an integrated way could lead to greater accessibility, comprehensibility and equity for all children and families.

Recommendation 5

Policies that shape the ECEC sector in the EU Members States should prioritise seeking innovative and effective solutions for **staff shortages** in ECEC.

This recommendation draws on an awareness that:

- Many EU Member States are experiencing serious **staff shortages** in ECEC. Staff shortages pose a significant challenge across many European countries, for many reasons: the availability of and access to ECEC, the quality of care and education, inclusive ECEC, child safety and well-being, workforce stability and attractiveness of the job, economic impact, among others.
- Where staff shortages are faced, all of the other **EQF areas** are negatively affected. Without (competent) staff in ECEC, all other reforms and actions cannot take shape. This undermines the quality of ECEC.

Specific guidelines:

Creating extra places for children in ECEC should go hand in hand with making the profession more attractive. Member States should address this by **investing in long-term plans**. Short-term plans which focus on, for example, (temporarily) lowering initial qualification requirements, could have a negative effect on staff shortage in the long term. Instead, focusing on **making the profession more attractive** would address this issue, and at the same time improve the quality of ECEC. EU Member States should therefore invest in better working conditions; high-quality initial training programmes; strong in-service support through CPD activities that focus on a holistic approach to learning, caring and playing; pedagogical guidance and coaching; and the development of professional learning communities.

EU Member States should invest more in curricula as **guidance**, rather than rigid prescriptions. Curricula should take into account the context of the ECEC services and the community they serve. Hence, curricula and pedagogical guidelines should allow sufficient **autonomy** for staff, recognising their professional role and providing the support they need. This could positively influence the professional identity of ECEC staff, which in turn could have a positive impact on job satisfaction and staff retention.

Recommendation 6

Policies that shape the ECEC sector in EU Members States should invest in **capacity building for all stakeholders**, decision-makers and leaders at different levels of the governance system. This should include strengthening the use of fine-grained local, national and EU data to inform and monitor reforms and reinforce collaboration.

This recommendation draws on an awareness that:

- The ECEC systems within EU Member States can be placed on a **continuum between “split” and “integrated” systems**. While individual contexts are highly specific to each country, more integrated systems tend to face fewer challenges in relation to the fragmentation of ECEC services, and thus also of the funding, guidelines and reforms. These more integrated systems also appear to work more efficiently in times of crisis (Van Laere et al., 2021).
- **Fragmented and under-financed ECEC systems** require more additional means and measures to address specific challenges and obstacles. Stable ECEC systems that are coherently organised and financed are stronger and better able to face challenges and crises.

Specific guidelines:

- In the long term, EU Member States should invest in the **integration of the ECEC system**. In all cases, whether systems are split or more integrated, **strong collaboration and communication** is needed among the diverse authorities responsible for ECEC. Where two separate ministries are responsible for the two phases of ECEC, alignment and collaboration are essential.
- This integration should be implemented and also supported among the **diverse sectors** that offer services to children and families. EU Member States should invest in collaborative policies and practices between ECEC and other sectors, such as health, social, cultural, employment, housing and so on, as well as at the level of policy-making.
- EU Member States should invest in reducing the ECEC gap through a coordinated analysis and actions on the part of **all stakeholders and ministries** concerned.
- Some EU Member States have a more centralised governance model, whereas others have a more decentralised one. In both models, EU Member States should invest **in coherence** between the different levels.
- In comparison to other types of education, less than half of ECEC funding comes from a central authority, while other funds are provided by a more local level of authority. Such funding is therefore more sensitive to territorial inequities. EU Member States need to invest in **public structural funding** for effective and high-quality ECEC systems. When making public funding available, attention should be paid to reaching all providers, by creating transparent and accessible proposals and **accountability procedures**.
- Capacity building for all stakeholders in the area of quality ECEC is crucial in order to direct policy reforms and the management of ECEC centres. At both national and local levels, EU Member States should address, **capacity building¹⁵ for all stakeholders**: children, parents, ECEC professionals, leaders, providers, local

¹⁵ Capacity building is defined as “the process of developing and strengthening the skills, instincts, abilities, processes and resources that organisations and communities need to survive, adapt, and thrive in a fast-changing world. An essential ingredient in capacity building is a transformation that is generated and sustained over time from within; transformation of this kind goes beyond performing tasks to changing mindsets and attitudes.” (UN, n.d.)

municipalities, inspectorates, researchers, training centres, support services and governmental authorities.

- Data-driven decision-making is important. Therefore, **fine-grained and comparable data** should be available. This is important at both local and national levels, but also at the level of the EU.

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