European Commission

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

Analytical report

NESET

Education and Training

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COORDINATOR & MAIN RESEARCHER:

> **Hester HULPIA,** VBJK (Centre for Innovation in the Early Years, Ghent, Belgium

RESEARCH TEAM:

> **Nima SHARMAHD & Lisandre BERGERON-MORIN,** VBJK (Centre for Innovation in the Early Years, Ghent, Belgium)

> **Laura DE PRÉ,** Ghent University (Belgium)

> **Stephanie CRÊTEUR** & **Jekatyerina DUNAJEVA,** PPMI (Lithuania)

COLLABORATORS :

> **Michel VANDENBROECK & Jochen DEVLIEGHERE,** Ghent University (Belgium) (Analyse of data from the Child Guarantee Action plans)

> **Christian MORABITO,** Senior expert on ECCE (Analyse of data from the Child Guarantee Action plans)

PEER REVIEWER:

> **Dragana Avramov,** NESET Scientific Coordinator

> **Arianna LAZZARI,** University of Bologna

LANGUAGE EDITOR:

> **James NIXON,** freelance editor

EUROPEAN COMMISSION

Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture
Directorate B — Youth, Education and Erasmus+
Unit B2 — Schools and multilingualism

E-mail: eac-unite-a4@ec.europa.eu

European Commission
B-1049 Brussels

CONTRACTOR:

PPMi Part of the **Verian Group**

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Hulpia H., Sharmahd, N., Bergeron-Morin L., De Pré L., Crêteur S., Dunajeva J.

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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 Targets[2], 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 workforce[3].

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 2014[4], the NESET report of 2018[5], followed by the 2019 Council Recommendation[6], 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 desk research using **secondary data analysis** and **document analysis** is conducted:

- Data from important sources were compared (e.g. Structural Indicators[7] and Key Data on ECEC[8]) to provide a state of play as well as changes over time.

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[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 carachterises 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 Unfortunatly, 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 Monitor[9], Eurydice[10], SEEPRO[11], the National Action Plans concerning the Child Guarantee[12]).
- Other sources complementing that data (such as OECD reports, reports from the Working Group ECEC[13]) 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

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[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.seepro.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 universalism[14] 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.

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[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 building[15] for all**

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[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.)

stakeholders: children, parents, ECEC professionals, leaders, providers, local 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.

PART A | INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

In the Recommendations on High Quality Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) Systems, the Council of the European Union (CEU) stated: "Learning and education start from birth, and the early years are the most formative in children's lives as they set the foundations for their lifelong development" (CEU, 2019, p. 11). It is indeed widely recognised and scientifically demonstrated that the experiences of a child during their early years lay the foundation for further development in terms of physical, social, emotional, motor and cognitive growth. Research has also documented the ways in which **high-quality ECEC** services can have beneficial effects for children, families and society, now and later in their lives (Eurofound, 2015; European Commission [EC], 2014). The importance of ECEC has been stressed repeatedly in policy documents at the level of EU Member States and at European level. This has led to the development of, for example, the revised Barcelona Targets for 2030, and to the European Quality Framework for ECEC[16].

The underlying aim of the present exploratory NESET report is to gain perspective as to the extent and way(s) in which policy initiatives relating to ECEC in the EU Member States align (or do not align) with EU-level recommendations, as defined in the EQF (CEU, 2019).

This NESET report therefore provides an integrative overview of the **five quality areas** referred to in the EQF (see also Appendix A):

- accessibility;
- staff;
- curriculum;
- monitoring and evaluation; and
- governance and funding.

The report presents the current state of play, as well as important reforms that have occurred in the last years in the EU Member States (between 2014 and 2024), and future plans. The sections of the report on access and staff are more extended than the other sections, as these areas are central to the advancement of the quality of ECEC, and are also very challenging issues to address currently in many EU Member States.

PART A of the present NESET report begins by briefly presenting the historical context with regard to important milestones in the development and implementation of the EQF and the Council Recommendation (CEU, 2019). Then, it describes the aims and the methodology used in the report. PART B analyses the state of play and reforms concerning the five areas of quality in the EU Member States. Based on the report's findings, conclusions and recommendations for policy-makers have been formulated in PART C.

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[16] *The European Quality Framework for ECEC is henceforth referred to in this document as the EQF.*

A.1. A historical view of quality in ECEC

From a historical perspective, the evolution of European policies in the ECEC sector reveals a transformation in perceptions on the functions of ECEC. A noticeable shift has occurred from the perception of ECEC having mainly an economical function, to the integration of a social and pedagogical function. Hence, there has been an increasing focus not only on the '**quantity**' of ECEC (e.g. providing extra places for children in ECEC services), but also on the '**quality**' and '**equity**' of ECEC (e.g. ECEC services should be accessible for all, with high process and structural quality).

In the first wave of European policy documents on ECEC, the proposed indicators mainly focused on **attendance rates,** as they emerged from a labour-market idea to boost the female employment rate. For example, the Barcelona Targets, which the European Council adopted in 2002, include quantitative targets for attendance in childcare and early education services. The aim of this target was to cover 33 % of children under the age of 3, and 90 % of children aged between 3 and primary school-age.

While essential, such indicators relate mainly to the **economic function** of ECEC, but tend to ignore its **social and pedagogical** functions. This criticism was addressed in subsequent European policy strategies. These later documents integrated children's rights, the foundations for lifelong learning, and process and structural quality of ECEC (see Box 1). Indicators on attendance rates have remained central to later versions of the **Barcelona Targets** in 2010 and 2022[17] (the 2022 version even sets higher targets for attendance rates, 45 % for children under 3, and 96 % for those aged from 3 until primary school age – one of the EU-level targets under the EEA Strategic framework). However, the 2022 version also includes a reference to high-quality ECEC (CEU, 2022). This represents a major development in terms of advocating for high-quality and inclusive ECEC as being vital for women's participation in the labour market, but also for children, families and society, both now and later in life.

A.1.1. The European Quality Framework (EQF) as a guiding framework for quality in ECEC

Recent longitudinal studies have provided robust evidence on the **positive impact of ECEC** on the current cognitive, emotional, social, physical and motor development of children, as well as on their later academic and life trajectory. This is particular the case for children in vulnerable situations (Vandenbroeck et al., 2018). However, those positive effects only appear when ECEC is of high quality. For example, better PISA results in various areas of education are only observed for children from lower socio-economic backgrounds when high-quality ECEC is present (León et al., 2023). It is therefore essential to have a common understanding of what high-quality ECEC entails. However, this is not straightforward. Quality is a **relative concept** that can be interpreted in different ways. Some researchers (e.g. Dahlberg et al., 2007) even propose a deconstruction of the concept of quality itself, arguing that quality refers to a "child of its time and place", within a specific context. The authors propose alternative ways towards quality. These include "meaning making", which refers to a democratic process of interpretation based on dialogue and reflection. This view in fact aligns with the Key Principles of a Quality Framework, which state that "defining quality is based on values and beliefs, and it should be a dynamic, continuous and democratic process. A balance needs to be found between defining certain common objectives, applying them to all services, and supporting diversity between individual services" (EC, 2014a, p. 8). Nevertheless, the European Quality Framework (EQF) integrates different points of view and is based on research and practice, arriving at a common understanding and holistic view of high quality ECEC.

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[17] *Council Recommendation of 8 December 2022 on early childhood education and care: the Barcelona targets for 2030 2022/C 484/01 (CEU, 022).*

Development of the EQF began between 2012 and 2014, building on (among other sources) the Conclusions of the European Council (2011) on ECEC. In 2014, the ECEC thematic Working Group[18] produced a Proposal for key principles of a quality framework for ECEC (EC 2014a). Under the name "European Quality Framework" (EQF), these principles were formally integrated in the 2019 Council Recommendation on High-Quality ECEC systems (CEU, 2019). The EQF is an **open and flexible framework,** developed with the cooperation of experts and stakeholders. It "creates a language of quality that promotes reflection and can be adapted to different national, regional and local contexts. The framework proposal carries the potential to be policy-driven, but at the same time in line with a comprehensive view of the quality of ECEC established by researchers" (Milotay, 2016, p. 124).

The EQF describes quality in terms of **five areas** (see Figure 1): access; training and working conditions of staff; curricula; monitoring and evaluation; governance and funding. Each area of quality comprises two statements[19].

Figure 1 The European Quality Framework for ECEC (EQF)
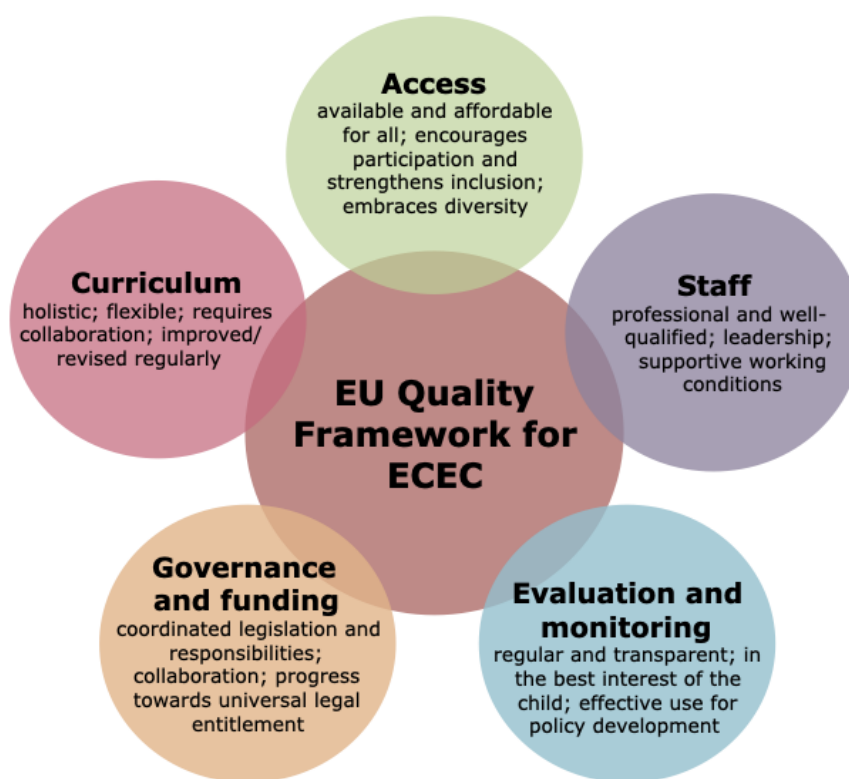
Source: CEU, 2019

Although the EQF presents a broad perspective on quality in ECEC, it is important to note that it mainly refers to the **structural quality of ECEC** (see Box 1). This is an essential foundation for achieving **process quality**. The latter refers, among other things, to offering all children rich, meaningful, high-quality interactions and high-quality

[18] *This working group supports the 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 measuring, monitoring and evaluation of quality, and follows up on the ET 2020 working group, which focused on inclusion, the professionalisation of staff and the management of the COVID-19 pandemic in the ECEC sector. https://wikis.ec.europa.eu/display/EAC/ECEC*
[19] *The description of the 10 statements and related indicators are described in greater depth in Appendix A.*

environments to support their development (see OECD, 2021 for more detailed information on this core aspect of quality).

In 2017, the European Commission commissioned a NESET ad hoc report to "provide an overview of the status of ECEC national quality frameworks - or equivalent strategic policy documents - that govern ECEC quality at national, regional or local level in the EU Member States" (Lazzari, 2018). This **NESET 2018 report** also aimed to gain a better understanding of how the EQF could be used to inspire, shape and monitor national policies, in order to outline the potential of the EQF, as well as the challenges facing it, to support future policy priorities[20]. The findings of the NESET 2018 study showed that:

- the EQF had been partially or fully translated into eight languages;

- the EQF had influenced the development or updating of some national pedagogical frameworks[21];

- it also outlined that, in general, even in those countries in which other quality frameworks[22] had been developed and used, these tended to align with the principles of the EQF. This confirms the EQF's consensual characteristics.

Box 1. Structural and process quality in ECEC

Structural quality looks at how the ECEC system is designed and organised, like:
- rules associated with the accreditation and approval of individual ECEC settings;
- requirements about the number of professionally trained staff;
- the design of the curriculum;
- regulations associated with the financing of ECEC provision;
- the ratio of staff to children in any setting;
- arrangements to ensure all children are treated fairly and in accordance with their individual needs;
- the physical requirements, which need to be in place to meet the health and safety requirements of providing care and education for young children.

Process quality looks at practice within an ECEC setting, like:
- the role of play within the curriculum;
- relationships between ECEC providers and children's families;
- relationships and interactions between staff and children, and among children;
- the extent to which care and education are provided in an integrated way;
- the involvement of parents in the work of the ECEC setting and the day-to-day pedagogic practice of staff within an ECEC context.

(EC, 2014a, p. 8)

Overall, the NESET 2018 report confirmed the flexibility of the EQF, which makes it adaptable to different contexts. The NESET 2018 report pictured different possible uses of the EQF to work towards high-quality ECEC. It concluded that the EQF had played an important role in triggering reforms or sustaining existing reforms, by guiding the

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[20] *The NESET 2018 report proposed a contextualised description of various policy discussions, documents or reforms, but also of bottom-up initiatives that were influenced or supported by the EQF.*

[21] *See Appendix D for a brief overview of national quality frameworks in various EU Member States.*

[22] *Eurydice definition in the 2019 Key data on ECEC report (Eurydice & European Education Culture Executive Agency [EACEA], 2019): "Quality framework: an official policy document issued by top-level authorities to ensure a common understanding of quality across several or all of the important areas of ECEC (staff, pedagogical content, accessibility, governance and funding) and to support the improvement of quality through appropriate policies at national, regional, local or setting level. A quality framework may contain guidelines, goals or standards on quality; it also defines the main principles underpinning the monitoring and evaluation system in assuring and further developing the quality of ECEC."*

processes of both policy consultation and advocacy. The NESET 2018 report also mentioned that ECEC reforms in various Member States had not necessarily been proposed or implemented with comprehensive ECEC quality frameworks in mind. Rather, there were broad arrays of initiatives and measures that had been put in place as part of a more or less formalised strategy to improve the quality of ECEC systems.

In 2018, a group of experts suggested **indicators** to enable Member States to monitor progress in each of the five areas of the EQF (EC, 2018). Since then, the integration of the EQF within the Council Recommendation of 2019 marked the commitment of EU Member States to work towards its implementation, and has influenced further policy documents on ECEC.

A.1.2. Importance of quality in ECEC in the Council Recommendation on the Child Guarantee and the Barcelona targets

In addition to the EQF, the importance of high-quality ECEC is also stressed in other strategic policy documents at EU level.

A first example are the **Barcelona targets,** which were set by the European Council in 2002. The aim was to increase female participation in the labour market through the enhanced provision of high-quality ECEC. In 2022, the European Council delivered a proposed revision to the Barcelona targets[23], aimed at enhancing the social and cognitive development of children. The new Barcelona targets also contain specific recommendations to help Member States achieve the new targets. These include:

- the affordability, accessibility and quality of ECEC — which influence parents' decisions to make use of such services;
- that the time commitment for ECEC activities should be sufficient to allow parents to meaningfully engage with paid work;
- the inclusion of children from disadvantaged backgrounds, children with disabilities or with special needs;
- high structural quality, such as adequate staff-child ratios and group size; support for the professionalisation of ECEC staff (such as increasing the required level of initial training and ensuring continuous professional development); a quality curriculum.
- equitable territorial distribution;
- out-of-school care;
- awareness of rights;
- staff working conditions and skills, such as attractive wages, building career pathways;
- governance and data collection; and
- implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

The points above clearly indicate that the revised Barcelona targets pay much greater attention to quality, and are in line with the EQF, stressing all five quality areas.

The second point of interest in EU strategic policy documents is the right for children to affordable and accessible ECEC of high quality, mentioned as part of the **European Pillar of Social Rights** (EC, 2017; Motiejūnaitė, 2021). From this document emerged the Council Recommendation on the **Child Guarantee** (CEU, 2021). This aims to prevent and combat social exclusion by providing access to a set of key services for children at risk of poverty. The focus is on respecting the children's rights by combating child poverty and promoting

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[23] https://www.eumonitor.eu/9353000/1/j4nvk6yhcbpeywk_j9vvik7m1c3gyxp/vlz27fb07kyx

equal opportunities. Overall: **breaking the negative cycle of child poverty**. The European Child Guarantee complements the second theme of the Strategy on the Rights of the Child, and puts into action Principle 11 of the European Pillars of Social Rights on "Childcare and support to children". The European Child Guarantee is therefore a key deliverable of the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan, which sets out concrete initiatives to turn the European Pillar of Social Rights into reality[24]. The Council Recommendation encouraged the Member States of the European Union to provide vulnerable groups of children, among others, with effective and affordable access to high-quality early childhood education and care, education, school-based activities, and healthy school meals. Each Member State was invited to submit a National Action Plan by 15 March 2022, establishing the needed measures to implement the Recommendation, covering the period up to 2030.

A.1.3. Development of National Quality Frameworks for ECEC

Due to differences in the context and nature of ECEC systems in individual EU Member States, each Member States should translate 'quality' into an own National Quality Framework. The development of national or regional Quality Frameworks for High-Quality ECEC systems, as recommended by the Council on 22 May 2019 (Council of the European Union, 2019), emphasises the need for **localised, context-specific standards** that address the unique needs and conditions of each region or country. These frameworks should ensure consistency in quality, while allowing flexibility to adapt to diverse educational, cultural and socio-economic contexts. By promoting inclusivity and responsiveness, these frameworks are designed to enhance the quality of ECEC services across different jurisdictions within the European Union.

Appendix D and Figure 2 below provide overviews of developments towards these National Quality Frameworks. The table in Appendix D provides a comprehensive overview of quality frameworks across 32 countries (the EU Member States and members of EFTA). Analysis shows that these frameworks **vary significantly in terms of development, legal structures, and specific areas of focus**. The adoption of the EQF has led to varying degrees of implementation among the EU Member States. While many countries have introduced national standards or frameworks that align with EU recommendations, **there are differences in how closely these frameworks align with the five key areas outlined by the EU** (namely: access, workforce quality, curriculum, evaluation and monitoring, and governance and funding).

Since the previous NESET report in 2018, progress has been made in establishing and enhancing National Quality Frameworks for ECEC across the EU. In 2018, fewer countries had fully established National Quality Frameworks (i.e., the French Community of Belgium, Denmark, Finland and Norway). Since 2018, there has been a notable expansion and enhancement of National Quality Frameworks across EU. Many countries in which Natonal Quality Frameworks were previously in the development stages, such as Austria, Bulgaria, Cyprus, the Czech Republic and Estonia, have made considerable strides toward establishing their frameworks. Bulgaria, for example, has advanced its National Framework for the Quality of Early Childhood Education and Care established in 2022, although this is still undergoing further development. In contrast, countries such as France and Hungary have shown limited progress in establishing unified national frameworks.

Between 2018 and 2024, these reforms appear to have a shift in priorities. The reforms underlined in the 2018 NESET report were predominantly linked to curriculum development[25]. The reforms implemented since 2018 have shown a realignment in their focus. The number of reforms that relate to access and staffing has increased, with these

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[24] *The EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child and the European Child Guarantee - European Commission (europa.eu).*
[25] *Specifically, nine policy developments focused on the curriculum; six each on governance and staffing; eight on access; and five on M&E.*

becoming the crucial areas of focus for recent reforms. This shift underlines a heightened interest in expanding the availability of ECEC services and enhancing the quality of the workforce. In contrast to these positive trends, progress in the areas of governance and monitoring and evaluation remains slower[26].

Figure 2. National standards and regulations (in line with the EQF for ECEC) across Member States
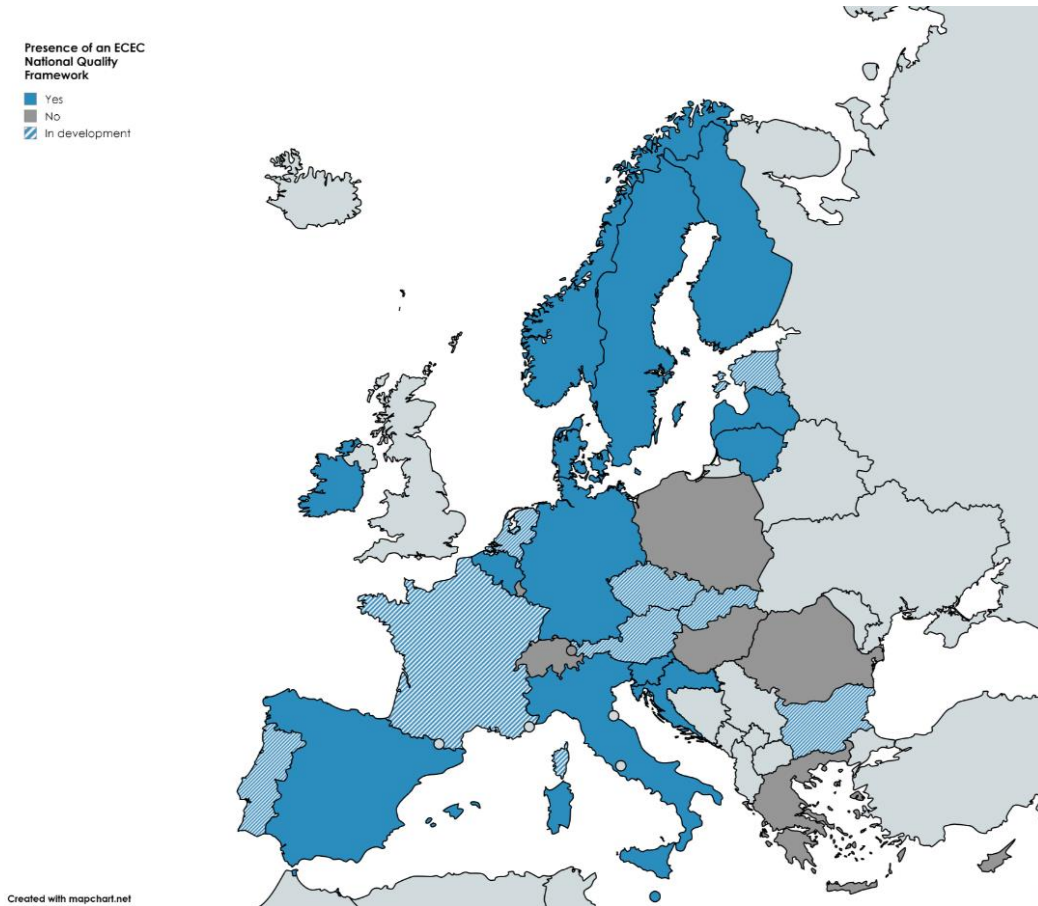
Note. Source: desk research.

In summary, there is a growing awareness of the **importance of high-quality ECEC** as defined within EQF, which clearly emerges from the EU policy developments mentioned above. However, key questions remain with regard to the impact and implementation of such policies at the level of EU Member States.

This leads to the core questions for the present NESET report:

Ten years after the publication of the Proposal of a European Quality Framework on ECEC and five years after the adoption of the Council Recommendation on high-quality ECEC systems, have these policy trends been translated into national (or regional) policies in the EU Member States? What is the state of play in the EU Member States with regard to the implementation of the EQF? And how are the Member States transforming and improving their ECEC systems to achieve higher-quality ECEC, with special reference to accessibility and the workforce?

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[26] *With 18 regulations in governance and 20 in M&E.*

A.2. Aims of the report

The present NESET report has been commissioned by the Directorate General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (DG EAC) as an analytical report through the Network of Experts on Social Aspects of Education and Training (NESET). The report has been commissioned to provide an in-depth analysis of the five quality statements of the EQF (see Figure 1). While the report analyses all five quality areas, a specific focus is reserved for **accessibility** and **workforce**. This choice was made at the request of DG EAC, as both of these are important core aspects of quality, and are currently under pressure in many EU Member States. Of course, given the **holistic** nature of the EQF, these aspects are interrelated with other three quality areas (i.e. curriculum, monitoring and evaluation, and governance and funding). Often changes or reforms in one quality area have implications that need to be taken into account in other quality areas.

The **main goals** of the present NESET report are twofold:

- to **provide an overview** of the current state of play with regard to the five quality areas of the EQF[27] (with a specific focus on access and workforce), since the publication of the proposal for a European Quality Framework (EC, 2014a) and the adoption of the Council Recommendation on High-Quality ECEC systems (CEU, 2019);

- to **describe** changes and progress made by the EU Member States in striving to achieve high-quality ECEC.

The above goals give rise to reflections regarding the 'impact' of the EQF and the Council Recommendation, and with regard to how each of these can be used to improve quality in ECEC at local level in the various Member States.

The present NESET report provides concrete examples from various data sources. It also offers **critical analysis** from key experts. Hence, this report can inspire EU Member States and help them in their capacity-building efforts during their journey towards high-quality ECEC.

A.3. Methodology

A.3.1. Desk research

The present NESET report is primarily based on **desk research** and the **analysis of secondary data sources**. To collect and analyse relevant documentation, we first examined "overarching" secondary data, including important European policy documents and reports linked to the EQF. Based on these secondary data, a state of play is presented with regard to the five EQF areas **at European level**. Data were triangulated from different sources, to provide an integrative, summarised overview that allows further analysis. Where necessary, we refer to the original reports/documents for more in-depth information.

Where data are comparable and accessible[28], the report aims to provide reflections on the changes and progress that have occurred over recent years (between 2014 and 2024). Important past and future reforms in the five EQF areas in the **27 EU Member States** are analysed. The key data sources used for this were mainly Eurydice country information, SEEPRO reports, and strategic documents such as the National Action Plans on a Child

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[27] *The main emphasis of the analyses in the present NESET-report is on accessibility and workforce.*

[28] *The data sources used are limited to English-language sources. In addition, it is beyond the scope of the present report to provide a complete literature review including scientific data and specific detailed national and/or regional policy documents in relation to all of the five EQF-areas.*

Guarantee (see Box 2). Other important data sources that were analysed are listed in Appendix B1.

Box 2. Main key data sources

Eurydice country information is a comprehensive resource provided by the Eurydice network (an initiative of the European Commission). This resource offers detailed descriptions and analyses of national education systems and policies across Europe. It includes the organisation, governance and funding of national education systems, as well as descriptions of educational stages, teacher and student demographics, and recent reforms.

SEEPRO (Systematic Information on Early Childhood Education and Care Professionalism) reports focus on the level of ECEC, providing systematic and comparative information on the professional education, training and working conditions of ECEC staff across Europe. The SEEPRO 2024 reports cover aspects such as qualification requirements, professional development opportunities, roles and responsibilities, and the employment conditions of ECEC staff in 33 ECEC systems across Europe.

The **National Action Plans on a Child Guarantee** specifically target free access to high-quality ECEC services for children in vulnerable situations, particularly those considered at risk of poverty and social exclusion. In Appendix C, we provide a brief overview of the National Action Plans analysed, together with the actions described. This includes:
▪ the availability and use of data in the National Action Plans;
▪ an analysis of barriers to accessibility;
▪ mapping existing policies;
▪ planned activities with regard to accessibility, including both universal and specific measures and with clear targets.

Taken together, these sources of information are considered by the authors to be essential for analysis, offering both a diverse set of data and information about ECEC.

A.3.2. Interviews with key experts

The findings of the desk research were discussed with key experts in the field of ECEC quality (see Appendix B2). These discussions provided inputs into an in-depth and critical analysis of the available data. In addition, they provided inputs into the report's conclusions and general recommendations. The key experts offered a general overview of the quality of ECEC from a research or policy/practice perspective, at EU level. The input of these key experts was therefore not country-specific. Instead, they provided a "helicopter" view of the available data, identifying possible blind spots.

A.3.3. Limitations

Although the methodology used has yielded in-depth data on the five EQF quality areas in the 27 EU Member States, certain critical considerations should be borne in mind when reading this report.

Available data at EU level

First, it is important to note that the field of ECEC is **constantly changing**. The data on the Eurydice country pages are continuously updated. For example, Eurydice Key Data on ECEC 2024 is currently under construction.

As our methodology is mainly limited to the **analysis of secondary data** provided by the Member States, it is important to consider that the analysis should not be read as an account of what Member States actually do. Rather it should be read as what Member

States have communicated – for example, in their National Action Plans – in response to the Council Recommendation on the Child Guarantee. **Self-reported data** and plans demand critical reading.

Another limitation of the present study comes from the use of Eurostat data rather than administrative data from each Member State. It was beyond the scope of this NESET report to dive into specific data from each country in order to reveal more localised differences within each country. As such, the Eurostat data used fails to reflect **local, territorial or regional differences** within each Member State, which can have an important impact on the quality of ECEC services (EC, 2023). As one key expert stated: "Changes happen locally"[29]. The analysis and conclusions provided in this report could therefore be further contextualised in the future, e.g. using the help of local experts, through additional data collection in national languages and via more local discussions.

Furthermore, it is important to note that the **comparison of data** between different sources or even between different years is not always straightforward. Often, various issues or topics were referred to differently in different reports. Meanwhile, certain data – while referring to the same indicators – were not always comparable throughout the data sources for different years (for example, when comparing the Key Data on ECEC reports for 2014 and 2019).

Lastly, the issue of **'comparability' between countries** should be mentioned. It is impossible to make comparisons between countries that employ different systems[30]. Each EU Member State has a **different context**, different history, different cultural beliefs and values, different social and political structures, as well as different systems of governance and funding for ECEC. Furthermore, the examples provided in this report are not intended to be exhaustive, but illustrative. As Pamela Oberhuemer[31] underlines: cross-national comparisons are a "science of difference" rather than a "science of solutions".

Considering the diversity of EU countries: different degrees of integration

One major difference between countries is the **degree of integration of the ECEC systems**. In the Key Data on ECEC report 2014 (Eurydice et al., 2014), the diverse organisations of ECEC systems in Europe was described in terms of "split systems" or "integrated systems".

- In a **split system**, ECEC is divided in two sectors, with children transitioning from one sector to the other at around 3 years old[32]. The organisation of the two sectors is generally separate, falling under the responsibility of two different authorities or ministries, and in different settings, with differing staff requirements, working conditions and curriculum policies.

- In an **integrated system**, ECEC services for children between 0 and 6 years old are organised as a whole, under a single authority or ministry.

The reality across Europe is, however, **less dichotomous.** To describe the integration of ECEC systems with greater nuance, other algorithms have therefore been explored.

Figure 3 (see below) provides a visual representation of the continuum of integration, derived from information in the Key Data on ECEC report 2019 (Eurydice & EACEA, 2019). This representation uses a five-level scale: split, somewhat split, midway, somewhat integrated, integrated (see the legend to Figure 3). This classification takes into account four criteria:

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[29] *Online meeting with Mathias Urban, 27 May 2024.*
[30] *See* Tobin (2022) for *a more interesting discussion on comparative studies in ECEC.*
[31] *Online meeting with Pamela Oberhuemer 6 May 2024.*
[32] *This transition can occur later, e.g. at 4 years old in Greece and in the Netherlands; or sooner, e.g. as early as 2.5 years old in the French and Flemish communities of Belgium. It can be referred as 'childcare predominant' vs 'preschool predominant'.*

- organisation of centre-based settings (unitary or separate);
- organisation of authorities (single or dual);
- continuity in education guidelines; and
- difference in staff qualifications.

However, no updated version based on more recent data is available. But changes occurred since 2019, and some countries (e.g. Italy and Romania) may have moved from one level to another. Also, the position of certain countries on the continuum has been questioned, and there is debate as to how to refine it and best represent the complex reality of each country. Should other indicators be added? What should be the weight of each indicator in the algorithm?

Figure 4 shows an alternative classification, proposed by Oberhuemer and Schreyer (2024), using data from the SEEPRO reports 2024. These authors classified countries into three categories: unitary ECEC systems, partly integrated ECEC systems, and split systems. These categories relate to:

- the number of lead ministries at national/regional level;
- legal and curricular frameworks; and
- the types of core professionals.

Figure 3. Degree of ECEC system integration, based on data and algorithm from Eurydice Key Data on ECEC 2019
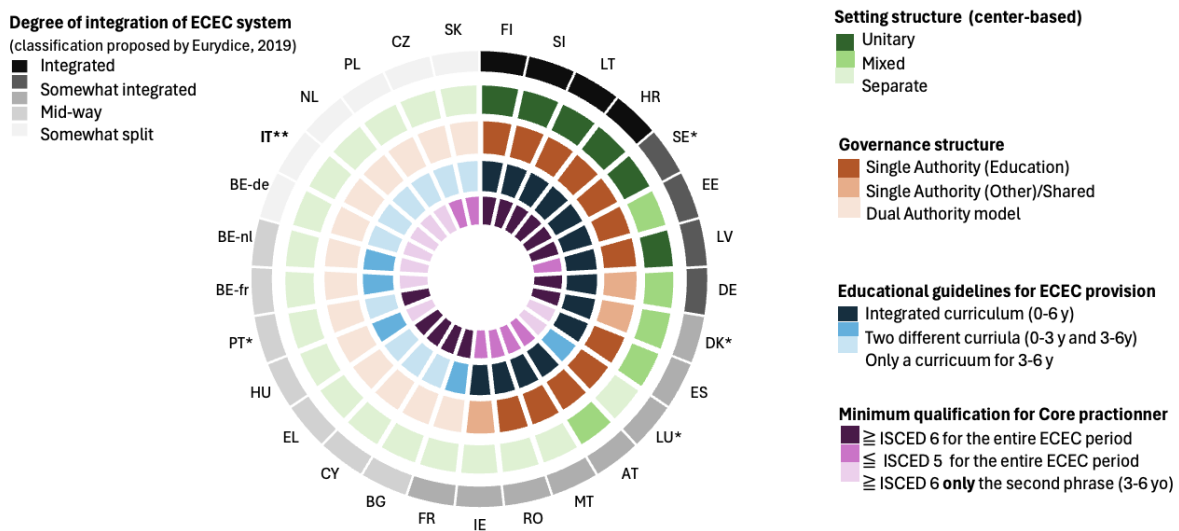
Note: the data and algorithm used come from the Eurydice Key Data on ECEC in Europe report 2019 (Eurydice & EACEA, 2019). The algorithm used to propose this classification relies on a dichotomous analysis of each criterium.

*Adjustments made from the original data: in Luxembourg (LU), two different curricula are reported, one for each ECEC phase (SEEPRO, 2023); Portugal (PT) also possesses integrated centres that combine the two phases (SEEPRO, 2018); in 2018, Denmark (DK) and Sweden (SE) already applied a minimum requirement of ISCED 6 for the whole ECEC period (SEEPRO, 2018).

**Important changes since 2019: since 2019, Italy has made important changes to the organisation of its ECEC system that do not appear in this figure, which was based on data from 2019. Similarly, changes have occurred in other countries (such as in Romania and Estonia) that have not yet been documented in Key Data on ECEC (Eurydice & EACEA, 2019).

Figure 4. Degree of ECEC system integration from data and algorithm from SEEPRO-3 reports 2024

Degree of integration of ECEC system
(classification proposed by Oberhuemer & Schreyer, 2024)

■ Integrated
■ Partly-integrated
□ Split

Governance structure
■ One lead ministry for whole ECEC period
□ Different lead ministries

Legal ECEC framework
■ One legal framework for whole ECEC periode
■ Different/no overaching legal framework

Curricular framework
■ One curricular framework forr whole ECEC period
□ Different/no curricular frameworks

Type of core ECEC professionals
■ One type of core professional ≧ ISCED 6
■ Two different types but ≧ ISCED 6
□ Differents types of core professionals

Note. Algorithm for the categorisation proposed by Oberhuemer & Schreyer (2024), with data from the SEEPRO country reports of 2024 (SEEPRO, 2024).

Both Figure 3 and 4 show that in 2019, around half of European countries have a split or somewhat split ECEC system. In approximately one-quarter of Member States, the whole age range for ECEC is integrated in a single, unitary type of provision and/or under one political guidance. Other countries are considered midway/semi-integrated, but show very different patterns of integration. For example:

- In **Luxembourg**, the entire ECEC sector has been moved under a single authority, with the aim of achieving more coherency between the two curricula. However, the country still has separate settings for the two parts of the ECEC sector.

- In **Spain**, important steps have been taken towards the integration of the ECEC services since 2019. Although ECEC teachers (ISCED 6) can work in both parts of the ECEC sector, they are the only ones considered qualified to be core professionals for children aged 3-6 years old. The minimum requirement for younger children is ISCED 5.

Determining the best way to describe the degree of ECEC integration in EU countries could be achieved through consultation and consensus between various experts, but this lies outside the scope of this report. For the purposes of this report, we refer mainly to the continuum proposed in 2019 by Eurydice (see Figure 3) to aid readers' understanding of the relationship with other indicators and EQF dimensions, referring to more recent data where necessary.

While reading the present NESET report, **it is important to keep in mind the extent to which the governance of ECEC systems is integrated**, as this factor influences each of the aspects of structural quality in the EQF.

PART B | OVERVIEW OF EU MEMBER STATES' ACHIEVEMENTS AND REFORMS IN THE FIVE AREAS OF THE EUROPEAN QUALITY FRAMEWORK FOR ECEC

In this part of the report, we analyse how the five quality areas prioritised by the EQF[33] have been taken into account in policy reforms by the various EU Member States. Those areas are:

- accessibility;
- training and working conditions of staff;
- curricula;
- monitoring and evaluation; and
- governance and funding.

As highlighted in the previous part of the report, the first two areas (access, and the training and working conditions of staff) are described using more extensive data. Overall, the aim of the report is to provide an analytical perspective, building on existing studies, regulations and publicly available data in English.

We begin each section with an overview of the general state of play at European level, illustrating our points with examples from specific countries. In particular, we pay attention to changes and important reforms regarding the quality of ECEC in various EU Member States, based on secondary data covering the last decade (2014-2024). Lastly, we conclude by summarising our main findings, as well as pointing out important trends and important challenges.

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[33] *See Appendix A for a more complete description of each quality area of the EQF and related statements and indicators.*

B.1. Accessibility

> *"Access to quality early childhood education and care services for all children contributes to their healthy development and educational success, helps in reducing social inequalities and narrows the competence gap between children with different socio-economic backgrounds. Equitable access is also essential to ensure that parents, especially women, have flexibility to (re)integrate in the labour market." (CEU, 2019, p. 8).* Member States are therefore called upon to *"improve access to high-quality ECEC systems in line with the statement set out in the EQF", and to "work towards ensuring that ECEC services are accessible, affordable and inclusive" (CEU, 2019).*

Research has demonstrated that access to ECEC is crucial for fostering children's cognitive, social and emotional development during their first years. High-quality ECEC services contribute to reducing educational inequalities and promoting social inclusion by providing all children, regardless of their background, a strong foundation for lifelong learning. In addition, accessible ECEC is conducive to numerous other societal advantages, such as supporting working parents – particularly mothers – thereby enhancing gender equality in the workforce.

Accessibility is often measured by **enrolment rates[34]**. However, it is important to keep in mind that this is just one indicator of accessibility. Although it provides important information, it is not informative as to the quality of the ECEC places available, nor the nature of those places (e.g. whether they are offered by the public or private sector, or by not-for-profit or for-profit providers, and how many hours of ECEC are provided). Neither does it indicate where the places are provided (in urban or rural areas, or in more deprived or more affluent areas). For example, in its recent report, Eurofound (2023) presents data on enrolment that considers all children attending ECEC for at least one hour per week, making it difficult to accurately assess the full extent of engagement and the quality of the ECEC received. The concept of "high-quality ECEC" was included in the Barcelona Targets 2022, but no specific target was set for it. It is also important to bear in mind that the accessibility of ECEC involves not only the **quantity** of available places, but also the **quality** and **equity** of those places.

This chapter first describes the state of play with regard to access to ECEC. This is followed by a specific focus on access for children at risk of poverty and social exclusion. We then describe recent strategies and reforms undertaken by EU Member States towards achieving better access in ECEC, such as providing extra ECEC places, guaranteeing the right to a place in ECEC, and increasing the affordability of ECEC provisions for families. We also describe reforms proposed in the National Action Plans on a Child Guarantee, highlighting the importance of access to ECEC services for children at risk of poverty and social exclusion.

B.1.1. State of play

B.1.1.1. Increasing enrolment rates overall

In various policy documents at EU level, there has been a comprehensive effort to encourage EU Member States to implement strategies to increase rates of enrolment in ECEC:

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[34] *It is important to note that data on participation should be interpreted with caution. In this report, we refer to the enrolment rate rather than the participation rate, as participation is a broader concept also related to "real" attendance and engagement, which is hard to measure.*

- In 2009, the Education and Training 2020 Strategy set a target of achieving 93 % of children aged from 4 to primary education age participating in ECEC by 2020.

- In 2021, the Strategic Framework for the European Education Area (EEA) and the revised Barcelona Targets set a new target of achieving the participation in ECEC of 96 % of children from the age of 3 to primary education, an increase from the previous target of 90 %, set in 2002.

- In 2022, the revised Barcelona Targets established a goal of 45 % enrolment of children under 3 in ECEC by 2030, also an increase from the previous target of 33 %, set in 2002.

- In 2022, the Council Recommendation on the Child Guarantee invited Member States to identify, support and offer free and effective access to ECEC for children at risk of disadvantages, including homeless children, children with disabilities or mental health issues, migrant or minority children (especially Roma), children in alternative care, and those in precarious family situations.

On average, **36 %** of children under 3 years old are enrolled in formal ECEC in the EU, up from 27 % in 2013, with nine Member States achieving the 45 % target by 2022 (Figure 5). This is an important increase from the 27 % reported in 2013. For children over 3, six countries have already met the 2030 target of 96 % enrolment, although the EU average only rose from 92 % to **93 %** between 2013 and 2021 (Figure 6).

Figure 5. Percentage of children under 3 years in ECEC in 2013 and 2022
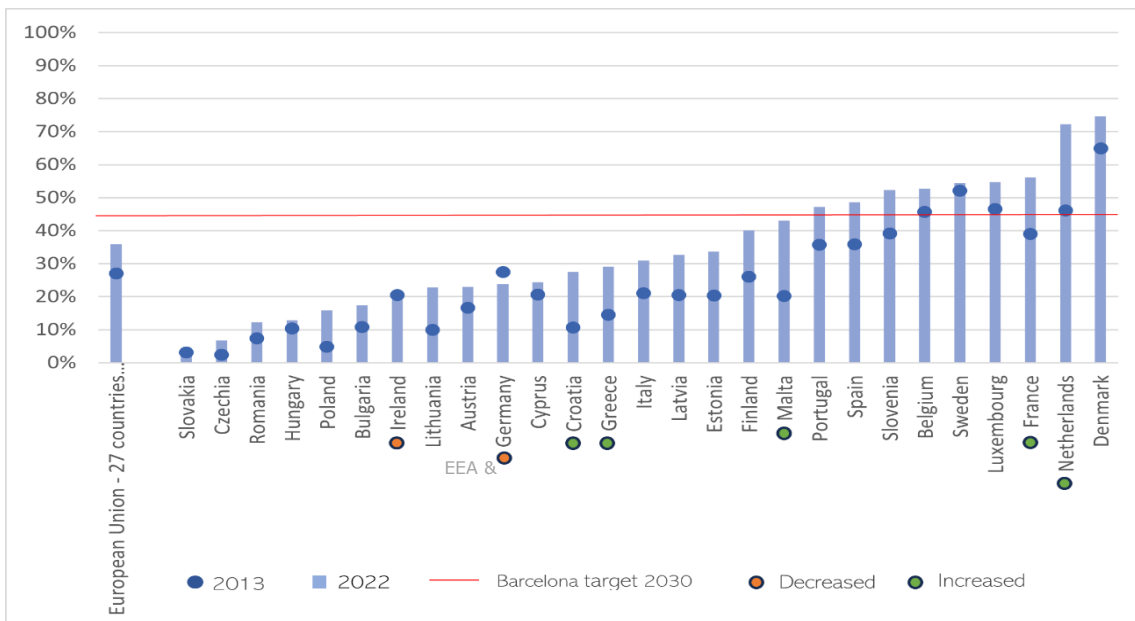
Source: data from Eurostat[35] (see also Eurofound, 2024).

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[35] https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tepsr_sp210/default/table?lang=en

Figure 6. Percentage of children between 3 years and primary school age in formal childcare in 2013 and 2021
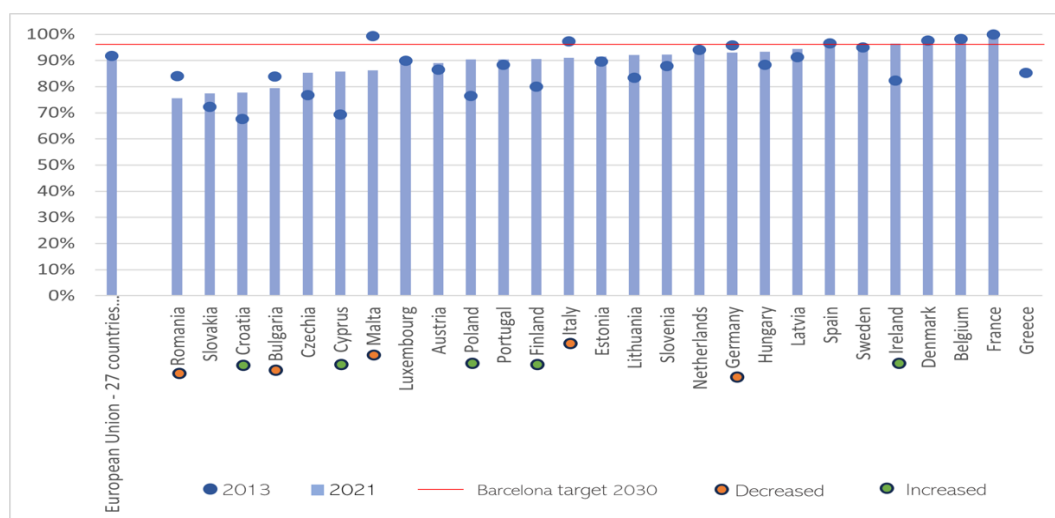
Source: data from Eurostat (2022). No data for Greece in 2021 available in Eurostat.

Despite the overall increase or stability in enrolment rates, two important challenges remain:

- enrolment rates for children at risk of poverty and social exclusion are lower; and
- there are shortages of ECEC places, with territorial differences at regional/local level.

Both of these challenges merit further discussion.

B.1.1.2. Lower enrolment rates among children at risk of poverty or social exclusion

In the EU, **one child out of four** (24.7 %) is considered at risk of poverty (EC, 2023a). While there is consensus as to the benefits of quality ECEC for societally disadvantaged children and their families, in most EU Member States, such children are still less often enrolled in high-quality ECEC than their more privileged counterparts (Vandenbroeck & Lazzari, 2014; Park et al., 2018; Frazer et al., 2020; EC, 2021c).

The overall trend is favourable: in 2022, 36.4 % of children under 3 at risk of poverty or social exclusion in the EU used ECEC for at least one hour per week (Eurofound, 2023), which is higher than their enrolment rate in 2015 (28.8 %). Even so, in almost all EU countries the share of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion who are in formal childcare is consistently **disproportionately lower** than that of children who are not at risk (EC, 2022; Eurofound, 2023; EC, 202c1). Specifically, the rate is around 15 % points lower for children under 3 years old, and 11 % points lower for children over 3 years old (EC, 2020). Differences between children at risk of poverty or social exclusion and children not at risk are not only observed in enrolment rates in general, but also in the number of hours that they attend ECEC (Eurostat 2023).

Disparities between Member States have also tended to decrease over time (Eurofound, 2023), but they are **still present**. Such disparities are largely the result of structural constraints such as administrative, financial or physical barriers (Pavolini & Van Lancker, 2018; Pietropoli & Triventi, 2023), which may differ from one region to another (Fjällström et al., 2023).

Analysing the Child Guarantee National Action Plans reveals a difference between the Member States in the use of data on the percentage of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion as a foundation for understanding and coping with access to ECEC (Eurochild, 2022).

- In some National Action Plans, data on **different target groups** were rich and comprehensive. This was the case in Bulgaria, Denmark, Estonia, Greece, Croatia, Ireland, Luxembourg, Portugal and Slovakia, where data are provided on single-parent families, children with migrant parents, children with special needs and specific groups such as Roma. Some countries (Bulgaria, Greece, Croatia, Ireland, Slovakia) provide specific data on the number of Roma children. Some countries (Bulgaria, Croatia, Italy, Slovakia) also specify regional differences.

- In contrast, some countries provide quite **limited or no data** on vulnerable children. This is the case in Finland, France, Estonia, France, Croatia, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Malta and Portugal. Some countries, such as Slovakia, only offer general enrolment figures.

In summary, while there have been improvements in overall enrolment rates, vulnerable groups are still lagging behind in terms of access to ECEC services – especially with regard to children under 3 years of age. It is important that countries recognise the importance of gathering data and analysing access to ECEC for vulnerable groups in their Child Guarantee National Action Plans. Furthermore, data often tend to be **incomplete** or **not comprehensive.** Another remaining challenge in the National Action Plans is the lack of clear targets for enrolment rates for specific sub-groups of children in vulnerable situations.

B.1.1.3. A shortage of places in ECEC

In general, **demand for ECEC places exceeds supply** in most EU Member States. This results in a notable shortage, particularly among younger children.

Only a few EU countries – specifically, Denmark, Estonia, Malta, the Netherlands, Finland and Sweden – successfully meet the demand for ECEC places for children under 3. Denmark, Finland and Sweden achieved this as early as 2014. Estonia, Malta and the Netherlands have improved their supply since then (Eurydice & EACEA, 2019).

In Austria, Croatia, Czechia, Cyprus, Germany and Lithuania, demand and supply are more evenly balanced during the **later years of ECEC**, from the age of 3 onwards. Bulgaria and Portugal provide enough ECEC places during the last two years of ECEC.

As mentioned in Key Data on ECEC (Eurydice & EACEA, 2019), demand for ECEC for very young children can be low due to cultural norms, family values and local parental leave policies. Demand may also be affected by public perceptions regarding the quality of ECEC (i.e. families who perceive public ECEC provision to be of low quality may opt for other childcare arrangements, and may therefore not even request a place). Furthermore, unforeseen circumstances may influence the availability of places (e.g. the closure of ECEC services, or the impact of the arrival of Ukrainian refugees on ECEC services in the EU).

In many EU Member States, there are also **territorial differences** in the availability of ECEC places, which are not always apparent in national-level data (Eurydice & EACEA, 2019). For example, there is an unmet demand in certain **areas, regions or states** across the entire period of ECEC in Austria (Baptista et al., 2023), Belgium (French Community), Italy, Romania and Slovakia. Differences also emerge between **rural** areas and **urban areas**, as is the case in Czechia, Greece (Baptista et al., 2023), Latvia (OECD, 2016) and Lithuania (EC, 2023b). This can be explained by differences in, for example, employment rates, which lead to higher demand for places (such as in northern versus southern Italy); sparsely populated areas; or internal migration from rural areas to urban areas, such as in Latvia (OECD, 2016). **Regional differences** can significantly impact the quality and

availability of ECEC services, with urban areas often having greater resources and more options compared with rural and remote areas.

These disparities vary widely, highlighting the importance of **tailored policies** that address the unique needs and challenges of each region to ensure equitable access to high-quality ECEC services for all children. In a similar vein, analysis of variations in the demand and supply of ECEC places also requires results to be interpreted at a local or regional level.

B.1.2. Strategies to increase access to ECEC

This subsection of the report delves into strategies aimed at increasing access to ECEC across the EU Member States, addressing regional disparities and working towards accessible, equitable and inclusive ECEC services for all children and families.

Such reforms and strategies on accessibility should arise from data-driven analyses of the existing barriers, leading to concrete action plans with clear targets, timelines and budgets. The depth of the implementation of these aspects differs between Member States, as an analysis of the Child Guarantee National Action Plans shows (See Box 3 and Appendix C).

Box 3. Access in the National Action Plans for a Child Guarantee

As is detailed further in the Table in Appendix C, analysis of the National Action Plans for a Child Guarantee reveasl that several countries (Bulgaria, Greece, Portugal, Italy) are conducting comprehensive analyses of existing barriers, offering valuable insights. The barriers identified tend to be as follows: shortages of places and unequal geographical distribution; cost; lack of flexibility; lack of professional expertise; priorities set by management or by policy; and disparities in quality (Frazer et al., 2020; Vandenbroeck & Lazzari, 2014).

In general, the Member States involved in Phase III of the piloting of the Child Guarantee, with "Deep Dive" guidance from e.g. UNICEF (i.e. Bulgaria, Croatia and Italy), as well as those that have incorporated significant ECEC investments into their National Recovery and Resilience Facility Plans (e.g. Italy, Portugal and Spain) tend to provide more concrete figures and analyses of the barriers. These countries have developed well-defined and meticulously calculated plans, aided by strict mechanisms for reporting to the European Commission.

In their National Action Plans, other EU Member States (e.g. Denmark, Finland, France, Poland and the Netherlands) offered only a brief overview of the use of ECEC among vulnerable populations, without proposing concrete strategies to address the issues concerned. Such countries would benefit from using a more data-driven policy to concretise future actions.

In Appendix C, we also identify which Member States include in their Action Plans clear ambitions with concrete targets, timelines and budgets. In general, all Member States share the ambition in their National Action Plans to improve access to ECEC by extending services and specifically targeting families in vulnerable situations. While there is clear intent to increase the number of available places and boost enrolment in ECEC, some Action Plans lack concrete timelines and specific targets for children at risk of poverty or social exclusion. While there are measures that focus on younger children and emphasise equity, territorial specifications are often insufficiently addressed.

Few Action Plans propose changes to legal entitlement policies, with the notable exception of Ireland.

Overall, while the commitment to expanding ECEC is evident, the absence of detailed and concrete implementation plans, including clear budgets, goals and responsibilities, might hinder the effective realisation of more accessible, equitable and inclusive high-quality ECEC.

In recent years, various strategies have been implemented to increase equitable access to ECEC in general, and specifically for children at risk of poverty and social exclusion. These strategies can be grouped into the following categories: 1) providing extra places; 2) extending the right to a place in ECEC; and 3) improving the affordability of ECEC. These strategies are analysed below.

B.1.2.1. Providing extra places

Several EU Member States are currently developing reforms to **expand their ECEC capacity**, driven partly by funding from the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) established in response to the COVID-19 pandemic crisis (EC, 2024).

Table 1. Examples of reforms aimed at providing extra places

EU Member State	Number of additional ECEC places (planned or realised)	Additional information on the amount spent or foreseen
Reforms without specific information on where/for whom the ECEC places are provided		
Austria	50,000 extra places by 2030.	EUR 4.5 billion
Estonia	3,200 new places between 2014 and 2020.	EUR 47 million
France	200,000 additional childcare places are aimed for by 2030. The aim was to create 30,000 extra places between 2018 and 2022, but only 40 % of these were created.	
Germany	90,000 new places by 2020.	EUR 1 billion
Hungary	Increased the number of places from 32,000 to more than 59,000 between 2010 and 2022. ECEC is now available in three times more areas, and there are almost four times more ECEC services than in 2010.	
Slovakia	9,100 new places by 2026.	EUR 142 million
Reforms with specific measures determining where ECEC places should be provided		
Belgium (French community)	2,100 new childcare places in Brussels by 2026. 876 places already planned in terms of infrastructure. 1,224 additional places will be provided over the next years, with priority given to specific areas.	
Poland	By 2023, 90,000 places had been created in ECEC. 52 % of local authorities had ECEC centres, with the aim of increasing this to 73 %. Places for younger children (1 to 3 y.o.) have been prioritised with the new Toddler+ 2023 programme. The number of places for toddlers grew from 84,000 (2015) to 230,000 (2023).	
Reforms with specific regulations on extra ECEC places for specific groups		
Bulgaria	40,000 new places by the end of 2024. By 2022, 8,322 extra places had been provided in Sofia. 20,000 extra places would be provided by the end of 2024.	
Spain	More than 21,000 new places in ECEC provision for children aged 0-2. Increase of places for children aged 0 to 3 years with 6.8 % by 2023.	EUR 200 million in 2021.

Sources : EC, 2023b, 2024 ; Eurydice et al., 2016; Eurydice et EACEA, 2023; SEEPRO, 2024

Examples of reforms aimed at increasing the number of ECEC places are listed in Table 1 above. These are clustered into three categories of countries:

- those that mention extra places without specifying location or method of creation;

- those with plans to provide extra places in specific regions; and

- countries that target specific groups of children, such as those in the final years of ECEC, such as Bulgaria, or the youngest children in Spain.

Table 1 highlights the efforts undertaken and financial support provided by several EU Member States to expand their ECEC capacity. In addition, some EU Member States are implementing targeted measures to increase the number of ECEC places for societally disadvantaged groups, non-native language speakers and other vulnerable populations. Certain reforms also incorporate fiscal equalisation mechanisms to prioritise new ECEC places in regions with higher proportions of families with low socio-economic status, as seen in Poland. However, analysing raw data on the number of new places without contextualised analysis poses challenges for comparative analyses. Evaluating policies aimed at creating additional ECEC places is especially **complex** due to a lack of data and indicators regarding the quality of these places and the absence of systematic policy evaluation. Mid-term reports from the Resilience and Recovery Facility (RRF) underline the pivotal role of funding injections in creating new places. However, these reports emphasise the necessity of integrating this strategy into a **comprehensive plan** that addresses territorial disparities, targets specific groups, and prioritises the sustainability of quality services. This is crucial for increasing enrolment of children from vulnerable subgroups or children with special needs, where additional funding must be accompanied by a shared vision of inclusion, equity and the social function of ECEC (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2017).

Specifically, four common pitfalls frequently go unaddressed:

- a lack of **specific measures** aimed at children at risk of poverty or social exclusion (more on this is discussed later in this section);

- a lack of consideration for **quality**, as a major increase in the number of ECEC places (the quantity) could be made at the expense of quality (EC, 2023b);

- **staff shortages** (see the upcoming section B.2 on staff);

- the emergence of **priority rules** as an answer to a shortage of places; these are often not aimed at facilitating access for children in vulnerable situations.

Concerning the last of the points above, some EU Member States have decided to give **priority to working parents or dual-earner households**. In 11 Child Guarantee National Action Plans, such priority rules are mentioned as a barrier to accessibility for children from families in vulnerable socio-economic situation, "as they are more likely to live in households where one or both parents are not in employment or are in non-standard labour market position" (Baptista et al., 2023, p. 22). For example, in **Hungary**, children from low-income families are prioritised only if at least one parent already works (Baptista et al., 2023). Another example comes from the **Flemish Community (Belgium)** where, prior to April 2024, most of the subsidised ECEC services (for children aged 0-3) had to provide at least 20 % of their places to children in vulnerable situations. From April 2024, this rule was abandoned in favour of a new priority for children with both parents either working or following a course for at least 80 % of the time (Agentschap Opgroeien, 2023).

It has also been mentioned that a shortage of places leads to **compensating regulations and funding mechanisms** (EC, 2024). For example, in some EU Member States, public subsidies are directed towards private for-profit or private non-profit providers when there are not enough places available in public ECEC. Hence, in some EU Member States, private self-financing ECEC settings begin to play a considerable role in meeting demand. While this might offer opportunities, if not strictly regulated this situation could hinder access for children in more vulnerable situations, among others for children with special needs (Romijn et al., 2023).

In conclusion, many EU Member States are still struggling in various ways to embrace a complete view of accessibility as it is encompassed in the EQF. While efforts have been made to expand access to ECEC, our analysis shows that systems still prohibit certain vulnerable groups in some countries. Another step that EU Member States could take to allow better access is to legally guarantee the right to a place in ECEC (see below). Meanwhile, it is essential that the expansion of ECEC places addresses the needs of all children and families, particularly the most vulnerable groups, while ensuring that the provision of these additional ECEC places is accompanied by the maintenance of high quality standards, including high process quality, and that they are inclusive for all children.

B.1.2.2. Guaranteeing the right to a place in ECEC

One strategy to address accessibility is to **legally guarantee a place** in ECEC to children. This can be done for the whole period of ECEC, or at least for some years within the period between 0 and 6 years old. Such a guarantee implies that each child should have the right to ECEC, thereby contributing to reducing the **'ECEC gap'**. This ECEC gap refers to the period between the end of 'well-paid'[36] parental leave and the age of legal entitlement to a place in ECEC, as shown in Figure 6. In other words, it refers to "the amount of time a child is not covered either by parental leave or by a guaranteed place in ECEC. Hence, it is a period when families with young children have to make decisions about whether to stay at home, to turn to informal care, and how to pay for expensive, private ECEC" (Eurydice & EACEA, 2023, p. 6).

Box 4. Policies on parental leave

The ECEC-gap is influenced by different **parental leave policies** in the EU Member States**,** shown in Figure 6. In over one-quarter of EU Member States the period of parental leave with sufficient financial compensation (i.e. "well-paid") is less than five months. The differences shown in the figure highlight the different historical and cultural contexts and differing approaches and challenges in balancing work and family responsibilities across Europe (Blum et al. 2023; Eurydice & EACEA, 2019; Koslowski et al., 2022). More specifically, some countries focus on care at home by parents (Eurydice & EACEA, 2019). These countries create incentives to encourage parents to look after their own children for a longer period. In other countries, meanwhile, gender equality in the labour market is prioritised. The latter group of countries adopts a more institutional approach to ECEC. In each of both cases, "ensuring **synergy and continuity** between these policies is very important." (Eurydice & EACEA, 2019).

Evaluating parental leave policies from a **gender perspective** is also crucial to understanding their impact on mothers and fathers and the development of ECEC services, as well as on the career pathways of women. The latest report from the International Network on Leave Policies and Research (Blum et al., 2023) details recent changes in maternity, paternity and parental leave. The authors note that few new measures have been introduced, with most changes being slight recalibrations of existing policies. In addition, limited information is available about strategies to improve the alignment and continuity between periods of parental leave and ECEC services.

Overall, we conclude that recent reforms of parental leave have had a limited impact on addressing or reducing the ECEC gap in many EU Member States.

Usually, the guarantee of a place in ECEC is introduced **gradually**, with the age at which a child is guaranteed a place being lowered step by step (Eurydice EACEA, 2023). Some EU Member States had already introduced or extended this guarantee to ECEC provisions between 2004 and 2014[37], and this trend has continued throughout recent years.

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[36] *In their more recent report, the International Network on Leave Policies and Research agreed that "there is disagreement over what might constitute 'well-paid' leave". In its report, the network opted for the definition of 'well-paid' used European Commission in monitoring Member States' progress in meeting Employment Guidelines, which is 66 % of earnings or more (or a flat-rate of more than EUR 1,000 per month) (Blum et al., 2023).*
[37] *Bulgaria (2010), Czechia (2005), Germany (2013), Estonia (2009), Ireland (2010), Greece (2006), Cyprus (2004), Malta (2014), Austria (2010), Poland (2011) and Romania (2014) (Eurydice, 2014).*

Figure 6 reveals that there are differences in the **age** at which children are guaranteed a place in ECEC. Only seven EU Member States guarantee a place in ECEC for each child from an early age (from approximately 6 to 18 months), often immediately after the end of parental leave (or even with an overlap). As such, six of these (Denmark, Germany, Estonia, Slovenia, Finland and Sweden) have no ECEC gap. Latvia is an exception, due to other parental leave policies (see Box 3). It is interesting to note that all of these countries have an integrated ECEC system. Further analysis is needed to interpret this in greater depth. However, one possible explanation might be that since integrated ECEC systems tend to value the importance of the early years and the rights of young children and their families, the ECEC gap is seen as a policy priority to be addressed.

Around one-third of the EU Member States provide a guaranteed place **only in the last years of ECEC**. Between 2019 and 2023, changes occurred at this level in Slovakia and Romania, who also guarantee a place for this final year of ECEC. As mentioned in the Key Data on ECEC in Europe (Eurydice & EACEA, 2019), such attendance is often compulsory, and hence explicitly directed at school readiness and the preparation for school.

In countries in which the ECEC gap exists, ECEC provision tends to be **fragmented**, limiting parents' options to either accepting lower-paid parental leave (often taken by mothers) or relying on informal or private childcare solutions (Eurydice & EACEA, 2023). In Belgium, Spain, France and Portugal, the ECEC-gap lasts between 2 and 3 years, with these countries offer relatively short parental leave (4-6 months) but guarantee ECEC places from around the age of 3 or earlier. During this gap, subsidised ECEC is available but often fails to meet demand, as seen in Belgium (Eurydice & EACEA, 2019). In other countries, the ECEC gap lasts more than three years, due to short parental leave in combination with limited frameworks for legal entitlement, thereby exacerbating the challenges faced by parents in balancing work and family responsibilities.

Figure 6. Age from which a place in ECEC is guaranteed, in relation to parental leave and the ECEC gap (2019 and 2023)
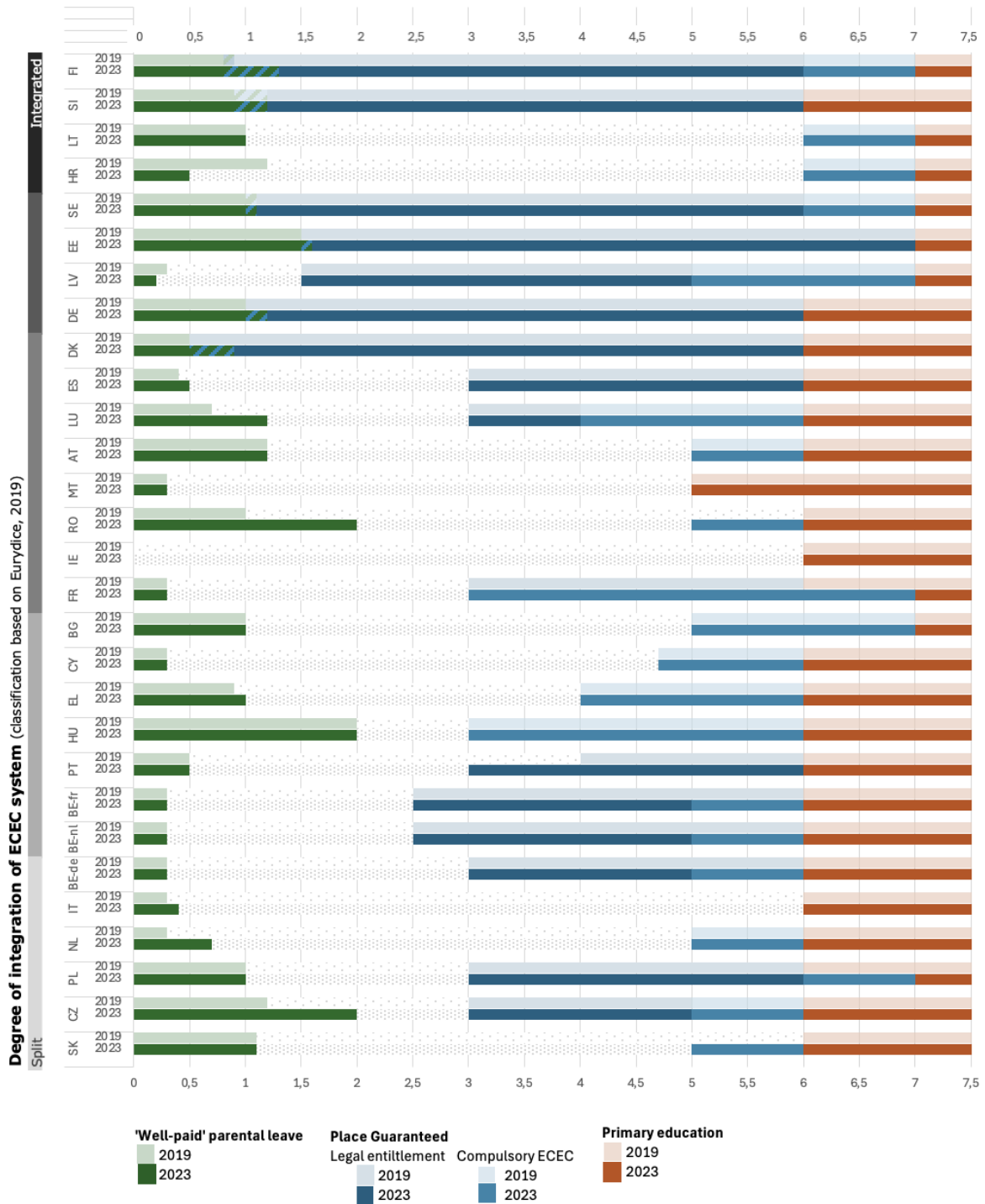
Source: based on data from Key Data 2019 (Eurydice & EACEA, 2019), Structural Indicators 2023 (Eurydice & EACEA, 2023), and Education and Training Monitor 2023 (EC, 2023b).

Box 5. Legal guarantee of a place in ECEC: two approaches with fundamental differences

The legal guarantee of a place in ECEC has been approached from two different perspectives: (1) by offering a legal entitlement to a place in ECEC; and (2) making attendance in ECEC compulsory. Each perspective requires public authorities to commit to guaranteeing a place in ECEC. However, each approach starts from a different paradigm, and there are fundamental differences between them (Eurydice & EACEA, 2023; EC, 2022).

▪ **A legal entitlement policy** is based on the right of a child to have a place in ECEC. Hence, public authorities must guarantee a place for any child whose parents request it. Often, the age range covered is defined, as is the number of guaranteed publicly subsidised hours per week. A child may use fewer hours of ECEC than the guarantee entitles them to. The legal entitlement to ECEC varies widely in terms of hours, from more hours than a full working week (more than 40 hours) to just 10 hours per week. This approach starts from a child's rights perspective, defining the quality of ECEC within a holistic "educare" approach in which learning, play and caring are intertwined.

▪ **A compulsory attendance policy** requires that children must attend ECEC. This requires public authorities to legally guarantee sufficient ECEC places for all children within the age range covered. It also mandates that children must attend for a specified minimum number of hours, which can affect funding. The compulsory weekly hours, usually for older children, correspond to a shorter 'school time'-inspired programme, varying from 20 to 26 hours, which may be supplemented by additional, non-guaranteed hours. Compulsory attendance in the last years of ECEC prior to the start of primary education often comes with the explicit aim of preparing children for school. It is also mostly driven by the aim to provide equal opportunities for all children, but also by an economic perspective, in line with the argument that the sooner children (especially those from societally disadvantaged families) attend ECEC, the greater the extent to which the social gap is addressed and equal possibilities for learning are created.

Challenges of compulsory ECEC

Compulsory ECEC is a **complex** and **controversial** issue (see also EC, 2021a). **Compulsory ECEC** can create equal possibilities and opportunities for children and families who might otherwise experience barriers to ECEC. However, this is only true when the relevant social inequalities are not perpetuated in context of the ECEC and school system itself. At present, this is not always the case in EU countries (Van Laere & Vandenbroeck, 2014). This can be confirmed by the fact that countries with high attendance rates in ECEC do not necessarily provide more equal opportunities. In other words, lowering the compulsory school age in an ECEC-system that is not of high quality may even **reinforce social inequalities**. Within the concept of 'high quality', many requirements should be met, such as those defined in the EQF. Among others, it appears to be important to work with small groups of children, adopting a holistic approach towards caring and learning, supporting daily dialogue and a reciprocal relationship with families (Siraj-Blatchford, 2006). The last point here is crucial – especially when the aim is to reach out to and involve families with vulnerable backgrounds. Making ECEC compulsory without engaging in reciprocal dialogues with families regarding their vision for their children and ECEC, and without creating a trusting relationship, might even hinder the aim of inclusivity.

It is therefore important that the perceived barriers to ECEC services are identified in dialogue with the families. Furthermore, lowering the compulsory age of school often goes together with a **pressure to "prepare" children for primary school**. This issue of school readiness and "preparation for school" is a complex one that has led to considerable debate in recent years. The risk of a so-called "schoolification" approach relates to a single focus on cognitive development, whereby young children are pressured into being prepared for the next level of schooling. From this perspective, the intertwining of learning and caring is weaker, with a hierarchical approach existing between the two, in which learning overrules caring. This split challenges inclusive approaches, not only when referring to daily practice with children, but also when it comes to relationships with parents, whose questions and worries very often relate to these caring aspects, which may be neglected under a **schoolification** approach. Thus, the questions of parents may remain neglected: "Will my child be seen?"; "Will my child be part of the group?"; "Will my child eat in school?"; "Will my child be able to sleep?"; "What about my child's home language?" (Van Laere et al., 2012). Research indicates how implicit ideas and practices of readying children for (pre)schools paradoxically contribute to the marginalisation of children considered disadvantaged (Lehrer et al., 2017).

Due to a lack of dialogue between ECEC centres (childcare and pre-primary) and primary schools, the transitional experiences of children and families may be neglected, and there may be little sense of **problem ownership** with regard to the problematic experiences of children and families during these institutional splits. Research on the transition to (pre-) school reveals that readiness does not reside solely with the child, but rather reflects the environments in which children find themselves (EC, 2014b). This means that ECEC services and schools should be "**child-ready**" This relates to assigning importance to the negotiated values of children, families and professionals, to valuing children's agency, to overcoming a top-down model of the curriculum and favouring a co-constructed vision.

The above observations also align with the findings of the 2018 NESET report (Lazzari, 2018), in which it is stated that (p. 24): "Significant efforts undertaken by Member States to increase the accessibility of ECEC provision in terms of availability, affordability and usefulness – especially for families from disadvantaged groups – should be recognised. However, the data show that issues related to comprehensibility and desirability tend to be overlooked, and remain largely unexplored in the ECEC policy debate". The area of **comprehensibility** is exactly the one related to creating a reciprocal relationship with families and fostering a dialogue between professionals' and families' visions on education and care.

In the light of this, measures that aim to address accessibility by lowering the age of compulsory schooling should be examined carefully. They should be investigated in relation to their connection with other measures, the vision for children's rights, and practices relating to the quality of services for families and children.

In some countries, the **policy of legal entitlement** applies to the whole ECEC period (e.g. Germany); in others, it focuses only on the last years of ECEC (e.g. Portugal).

Certain countries make ECEC attendance **compulsory** only for specific sub-groups of children at risk of poverty (such as in Lithuania), while others (such as Portugal), invest in legal entitlement for all children under a vision of universal access, incorporating specific measures to enhance accessibility for vulnerable populations.

In some countries, **both of these perspectives co-exist**. For example, a few countries provide both a legal entitlement and compulsory ECEC, depending on the age of the child (e.g. Belgium, Czechia, Latvia, Luxembourg, Poland, Finland and Sweden, as shown in Figure 6). In these countries, all children are entitled to a place in ECEC from the age of 3 or a little earlier, but ECEC becomes compulsory for all during the last one to two years prior to the start of primary education, as part of preparation for primary education (Eurydice & EACEA, 2019).

An analysis of SEEPRO data by Oberhuemer & Schreyer (2024) shows that over the years (in 1997, 2010, 2018 and 2024) there has been a general trend towards lowering the age of compulsory enrolment in ECEC, as has happened in Slovakia and Romania. Meanwhile, Greece and Latvia have extended this period to two years since 2019, and Finland has undertaken a pilot project to follow this path since 2022.

As mentioned in the previous section, while efforts have been made towards guaranteeing the right to a place in ECEC, there remains **an insufficient number of high-quality ECEC places** to implement this entitlement. This is also linked to a shortage of qualified staff (EC, 2021; see also section B.2). For example:

- In **Portugal**, since the lowering of the legal entitlement from the age of 4 to the age of 3 in 2018, as well as more recent reforms on free access in 2022, demand has still not been met in some large cities (Eurydice & EACEA, 2019, 2023).

- In **France**, the aim of providing 200,000 extra places for children aged 0-3 is conditional on the recruitment of around 10,000 qualified staff members (Eurydice & EACEA, 2023).

- In **Germany**, despite legal entitlement from the age of 1, in practice the unmet demand for ECEC for children under the age of 3 was 12 % in 2017 (33 % enrolment rates vs. 45 % demand for enrolment). The unmet demand for ECEC

places for children aged 3 years and over in 2017 was just 3 % (94 % enrolment rate vs. 97 % demand for places) (Eurydice & EACEA, 2019).

Such shortages of high-quality places widen the **existing ECEC gap**. It may also result in long waiting lists, thereby limiting the equity of ECEC, as children with vulnerable backgrounds in particular are disadvantaged by this (see above). The introduction of a legal entitlement may also lead to a rapid expansion in ECEC places, leading to more children per group, redirecting buildings towards not adjusted ECEC buidings, and so on, which could result in a lower quality (EC, 2020). Shortages of ECEC places can also lead to an increase in private providers (for-profit or not-for-profit) attempting to quickly meet the growing demand. Such a situation demands a different governance structure with clear regulations. If a suitable governance structure and regulations are not in place, this could affect the equity and quality of the ECEC system (see Section B.5 on Governance and funding).

In conclusion, while there is a clear trend towards expanding the right to ECEC for more and for younger children, many countries face numerous challenges in realising this objective. Constraints include significant regional disparities in access and availability, the need for substantial financial investments, the need for a sufficient number of qualified staff, and the complexities of ensuring high-quality standards across diverse settings. In addition, varying socio-economic conditions, logistical barriers and the necessity for comprehensive policy frameworks further complicate efforts to provide equitable, inclusive high-quality ECEC services. The ongoing efforts and reforms demonstrate a commitment to addressing these issues, but the multifaceted nature means that progress is uneven and ongoing.

B.1.2.3. Increasing the affordability of ECEC

Affordability is a crucial factor in ensuring the accessibility of ECEC for all children, and particularly vulnerable children (Eurydice, 2023). Analysing the various EU Member States shows that significant differences exist in the cost of ECEC services, depending on a child's age. In most countries, ECEC for children under 3 years old incurs fees, whereas it becomes free in later years or in final years of ECEC (exceptions are for example in Denmark, certain regions of Germany, Estonia and Slovenia, Eurydice, 2023; Eurydice et al., 2019). In addition, the cost of ECEC services is closely linked to funding policies (see the later section on B.5 Governance and funding). Overall, ECEC services that rely on **market-driven** mechanisms tend to be more expensive for families. For instance, in Ireland and the Netherlands, average monthly fees are among the highest in the EU, with fees in Ireland reaching up to EUR 771 per month (Eurydice et al., 2019; EC, 2020).

An overview of recent reforms reveals efforts towards **more affordable ECEC**. Such efforts may take the form of either free and universal services from the earliest age to reduce costs for all children, or of reinforcing mechanisms to reduce fees for targeted families (EC, 2020). Given the diverse situations in different countries, the strategies and approaches employed vary significantly. One specific example comes from **Ireland,** where in an attempt to address high fees, a new funding model for early learning and childcare was adopted in 2022. This model featured a strategy to "freeze" fees. The new Irish funding model aims to promote ECEC as a public good, prioritising its quality and affordability.

Some countries prioritise the **oldest children**. For example, in **Bulgaria**, ECEC services for children from the age of 3 years have been free of charge since April 2022 (Eurydice & EACEA, 2023).

Other countries aim to provide free ECEC throughout the **whole age range** (0-3 and 3-6). This is the case in **Spain**: the second cycle of ECEC (3 years and over) was already free of charge, and since 2022 ECEC has been free for the first cycle (children aged 0-3), prioritising the access of children at risk of poverty and social exclusion (Eurydice & EACEA, 2023). **Latvia** also continues to guarantee free public ECEC from an early age –specifically,

1.5 years old – or compensates parents with another funding mechanism when public places are not available. If a place is not available at an ECEC institution run by the local government and the child instead attends a preschool educational programme at a private institution, the local government must cover some of the costs of the private service provider.

Some countries focus on affordability for **families from vulnerable backgrounds**. This is the case in the French Community of **Belgium**, where a new price scale for ECEC settings for younger children was approved in 2023. This provides reduced fees for families with average and low incomes (Eurydice & EACEA, 2023). Since 2020, **Portugal** has provided free public kindergartens, offering priority to those free places for the lowest-income groups (Eurochild, 2022). Other countries, meanwhile, focus on **all parents**. This is the case in **Finland,** which implemented fee reductions for all families and enhanced income-dependent fee mechanisms, enabling more families to free ECEC services (since 2023).

Some countries have introduced reforms **gradually**. In **Cyprus**, free ECEC will be implemented gradually, starting from the age of 4 (from 2024 onwards). **Portugal** also made an even more drastic switch towards affordable ECEC for all children in 2022. Its free-of-charge ECEC for children from 0 to 2 years old has been implemented gradually, starting with those children born after September 2021. During the transition period, income-related contributions still exist for families with higher incomes. Portugal also ensures that 30 % of all free places are allocated to children from low-income families (Baptista et al., 2023).

Another option is to **provide a certain amount of free hours** in ECEC. For example, in **Luxembourg,** the reform of 2017 allowed children aged 1 to 4 to benefit from 20 hours of free childcare in the non-formal education sector. From the age of 3, the formal education sector offers a free programme of 26 weekly hours (Eurydice & EACEA, 2023).

Lastly, some countries aim to conquer **specific barriers**. For example, in **Lithuania**, new financial measures were added in 2021 to help families with education-related expenses such as transport, meals and materials, in order to facilitate children's participation during the final year of ECEC (SEEPRO, 2024). Removing specific barriers can be a crucial leverage towards more inclusive and accessible ECEC, removing not only financial barriers, but also administrative barriers (EC, 2023c).

In summary, analysis of the affordability of ECEC across the EU Member States reveals a **complex landscape.** While many countries have regulations in place to ensure free access for all or for low-income families, the high cost of ECEC remains a significant burden for many households with young children. This financial strain includes not only direct fees, but also hidden expenses and barriers such as clothing, equipment and transportation. Furthermore, the **limited availability** of publicly funded places often results in waiting lists or necessitates that parents pay for care privately, further exacerbating the challenge of accessible and inclusive ECEC. The strategies implemented to address these issues vary widely, with no clear trends emerging from the approaches to funding listed above. However, successful strategies should be grounded in comprehensive contextual analyses and integrated into broader accessibility plans, starting from a progressive universal approach: open for all, but with specific efforts being made to support children living in vulnerable situations. These insights underline the need for nuanced and contextually informed approaches to address the affordability of ECEC services across the EU.

B.1.3. Conclusions on accessibility

In conclusion, the accessibility of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) remains a crucial pillar in ensuring equitable opportunities for high-quality ECEC for all children and families across Europe.

Based on the data reviewed for this report, we find that in recent years, **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**. This ambition has been sustained by, among other means, the injection of funds from the Recovery and Resilience Facility, and is featured in the Child Guarantee National Action Plans. However, analysing the data available at European level reveals that **efforts and investments** in accessibility and affordability are not always integrated into a broader vision and plan for access to and equity in high-quality ECEC. Lazzari (2018) had already highlighted a similar concern: while policy reforms may address availability, affordability and usefulness, greater focus is needed on comprehensibility. This aspect is crucial for social inclusion, but often remains underexplored in current ECEC policy debates. Furthermore, the mid-term report from the Resilience and Recovery Facility noted that while the EQF was mentioned frequently, this was often done retrospectively, rather than being used to foster a comprehensive planning framework or strategy for increasing the accessibility of high-quality ECEC (EC 2023).

The data show that reforms by EU Member States often focus **on children aged 3 and above, stressing the importance of ECEC for the "older children" and focusing on the years immediately before primary school age.** In many countries, this might overemphasise the focus on **school readiness**, thereby neglecting the social and pedagogical role of ECEC for all children, especially from a younger age. Consequently, disparities persist in the enrolment of children below the age of three. The complexity of ECEC-attendance in the 0-3 age group relates to factors such as **parental leave policies** and informal or home-based provision, reflecting diverse cultural contexts and different ECEC-systems across European countries. It is notable that a persistent disparity exists in status between the early and later phases of ECEC, which shapes policies and funding allocations. As highlighted in the mid-term evaluation of the Resilience and Recovery Facility (EC, 2023), achieving a deeper **understanding of the relationship between governance, funding and accessibility** is imperative for a more equitable and accessible ECEC system. An intention to guarantee the right to a place in high-quality ECEC for all children and for the entire ECEC period is rarely mentioned in recent reforms and National Action Plans. While guaranteeing the right to a place is a crucial goal when approaching the issue from a **children's rights perspective,** measures that aim to lower compulsory ECEC attendance should be considered with care and caution. The latter issue is both controversial and complex. If not accompanied by transversal work on all dimensions of quality in a holistic way, such a move could actually reinforce social inequalities rather than addressing them. Measures on compulsory attendance are often still closely linked with initiatives to enhance the school readiness of older children. However, this approach has been criticised in favour of a vision on **continuity and warm transitions** that considers the **readiness of schools** (instead of ready children and families) to accommodate the diverse needs of children. Addressing this issue by preparing schools (instead of preparing only the children and families) involves working on the reciprocal relationship with families. This, in turn, means working on "comprehensibility", which often appears to be neglected in policy reforms. Hence, reducing the **ECEC gap** requires coordinated analysis and actions from all concerned stakeholders and ministries.

In the realm of advancing **equitable access** to ECEC services, the Child Guarantee, anchored in the EU Social Pillar, holds considerable promise across many EU Member States. Nevertheless, the present analysis finds that the National Action Plans often lack specificity, necessitating the implementation of more concrete measures to translate policy objectives into tangible benefits for children and families. Current data underlines the imperative to bolster focused strategies tailored towards vulnerable groups, employing an

approach of **progressive universalism** that upholds ECEC service quality for all children and families (EC, 2021a). The diversity of strategies employed by the EU Member States in reforms underlines the need for clearer guidelines regarding the optimal range of strategies and mechanisms to promote access to ECEC for vulnerable children and families. Without clear guidelines, instances of temporary measures arising from shortages of places could inadvertently restrict access for vulnerable populations. Moreover, such strategies should be informed by local and fine-grained data analysis. Detailed, localised, and contextualised data could enable the formulation of **targeted outreach strategies** or interventions to mitigate the specific barriers encountered by vulnerable populations, as well as fostering flexible and diverse service provision to cater to their needs. Furthermore, it is crucial that ECEC services should work in an **integrated way** and collaborate with other services in the ECEC sector and beyond (e.g. education, health, culture, and so on) (see also the NESET report on integrated working by Vandekerckhove et al. 2019 and the Toolkit for Inclusive ECEC by the EC, 2021a). The COVID-19 pandemic and recent waves of migration have further emphasised the critical importance of these efforts (Van Laere et al., 2021). It might be that some parents prefer other forms of family support, or prefer more informal services, such as meeting places or play hubs (Romani early years network, n.d.) where children and parents can meet and play, strengthening social cohesion. In light of the shortage of places in ECEC and the diverse needs of children and parents, these more informal support services might serve as possible alternatives.

With regard to improving **equitable access to ECEC services**, the Child Guarantee, rooted in the EU Social Pillar, holds promise in many EU Member States. However, the Child Guarantee National Action Plans analysed for this report often remain vague, and there is a need for more concrete measures to translate policy intentions into **tangible outcomes** for children and families. Current data highlights the need to enhance a concrete focus on strategies that are specific to this target group, from an approach of progressive universalism. The strategies present in the reforms are diverse, and demonstrate the need for better guidelines regarding what would be the best range of strategies and mechanisms to favour access to ECEC for the children in the most vulnerable situation. In the absence of clearer guidelines we observe, for example, that a shortage of places can bring about temporary measures that actually limit access to ECEC for more vulnerable populations. Such strategies should also emerge from an analysis of local data, with good examples of this coming from the National Action Plans. Such data allow specific outreach strategies to be planned, as well as strategies to reduce specific barriers for a targeted population or to reflect on flexible and diverse service provision to meet their needs. The COVID-19 pandemic and, more recently, sudden waves of migration have highlighted the importance of this yet further (Van Laere et al., 2021; EC, 2022).

It is clear, work on accessibility is strongly related to the other quality aspects mentioned in the EQF and Council Recommendation for high-quality ECEC systems:

- First, providing extra places demands more qualified **staff**. Currently, however, many Member States already face immense staff shortages, which hinders the expansion of high-quality ECEC places.

- Second, accessibility is related to the **curriculum**. Providing available places for ECEC, especially for the youngest children, demands a holistic and child-centred curriculum with a focus on learning, play and care, as ECEC consists of more than just minding children.

- Third, accessibility is related to the topic of **monitoring and evaluation**. Data on accessibility should be **fine-grained** taking into account differences between

regions, urban and rural areas, the age ranges of children, vulnerable backgrounds, and so on.

▪ Fourth, accessibility is related to **governance and funding**. Providing access to places for all children requires sufficient funding and governance structures.

The current ECEC landscape in many EU Member States is characterised by **a shortage of places**, especially for younger children. These shortages present issues with regard to priority criteria for access to ECEC. Some countries have chosen to prioritise working parents or dual-earner households. This strategy, however, hinders policies aimed at inclusivity. It creates a significant barrier for low-income families or families with vulnerable backgrounds. In addition, due to a shortage of places, public subsidies might go to private for-profit or non-profit providers, which can be a risk when regulations on quality are not clear and strict. Clear regulations are needed, for example, with regard to the locations where new ECEC centres should be created, but also with regard to the fees that parents should pay (or not pay).

It is evident that reforms relating to accessibility require a **holistic** approach, encompassing considerations not only of quantity (more places in ECEC), but also of quality, equity and affordability. It is especially crucial to ensure the **right to high-quality ECEC** for children at risk of poverty and social exclusion – including children who live in vulnerable socio-economic situations and children with special needs. The EQF provides guidelines not only concerning the importance of accessibility, but also its operationalisation, beyond only enrolment rates. The EQF emphasises the importance of addressing those barriers that might prevent families and children from participating in high-quality ECEC. It highlights the need for equitable territorial distribution and flexible provision to meet the needs of families. Furthermore, it underscores the **social role of ECEC**, stating that services should foster participation, enhance social inclusion, and embrace diversity.

In summary, while notable advances have been made in improving the accessibility of ECEC services throughout Europe, challenges persist which underline the ongoing need for concerted efforts to guarantee universal access to inclusive and high-quality ECEC. These challenges are intricately intertwined with other facets of the EQF – particularly those pertaining to staff and governance and funding. For further progress to be achieved, it is imperative that policy indicators accurately reflect these multifaceted concerns in order to effectively guide and inform future policies and reforms.

B.2. Training and working conditions of staff

"Staff is the most significant factor for children's well-being, learning and developmental outcomes. Therefore, staff working conditions and professional development are seen as essential components of quality" (CEU, 2019, p. 9). Member States are therefore called upon to *"support the professionalisation of ECEC staff, including leaders" (CEU, 2019).*

Meaningful and rich, high-quality interactions between children and adults have a great impact on children's well-being and outcomes (OECD, 2021). This is why **qualified staff** are crucial to the quality of ECEC (Early et al., 2007; Fukkink & Lont, 2007; Manning & al., 2019; Bonetti & Blanden, 2020).

This chapter of the report focuses on ECEC staff in the various EU Member States. First, it discusses the challenge of staff shortages – an issue that many European Member States are facing. Next, it analyses the minimum qualifications and initial training required. This is followed by an analysis of continuous professional development (CPD) and working conditions (such as adult-child ratios, wages/salaries). The analysis presented also focuses on strategies to support the professionalisation of the workforce in ECEC.[38] For each aspect, this chapter describes the current state of play and the strategies and reforms adopted by the countries to address the issue.

Box 6. Roles and responsibilities in ECEC

> In this chapter, we make a distinction between the various staff roles in ECEC; namely, core practitioners, assistants and leaders (EC, 2021b). Below, we provide a definition of each of these main roles:
>
> - **Core practitioner:** an individual with pedagogical training who leads practice for a group of children at group or class or playroom level, and works directly with children and their families. Core practitioners may be referred to as pedagogues; educators; pedagogical staff; pre-school, pre-primary, kindergarten or early childhood teachers.
> - **Assistants:** where this role exists, assistants work alongside the core practitioner(s) with a group of children or class, on a daily basis. Assistants carry out various supporting tasks: they help during eating, sleeping, toilet moments, support during certain activities, support with certain children, and so on. ECEC assistants are a heterogeneous group, in terms of their roles, their titles and in their qualifications. Often, they hold a shorter-term initial qualification and have fewer opportunities for CPD compared with core practitioners[39].
> - **Head of centre-based ECEC setting/ECEC leader:** a role with the main responsibility within the administrative, managerial and/or pedagogical tasks at the ECEC centre. In some situations, the leadership role may be distributed between a number of staff who have job titles such as assistant head, senior teacher, deputy leader, etc.

B.2.1. Staff shortages

When describing aspects of the quality of ECEC in general – and in particular, that of the ECEC workforce – the topics of staff retention and staff shortage are often addressed. The European ECEC WG policy brief on staff shortage (EC, 2023a) notes that most European countries face significant staff shortages in the ECEC sector. This challenge has a negative

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[38] *Several documents were analysed, including Structural Indicators (Eurydice & EACEA, 2016, 2023); Key Data on ECEC (Eurydice & al., 2014; Eurydice & EACEA, 2019); SEEPRO country reports (SEEPRO, 2018, 2024); How to recruit, train and motivate well-qualified staff (EC, 2021b); the Working Group Policy brief on staff shortage (Working Group on ECEC [WG ECEC, 2023a); as well as national information from the Eurydice website (Eurydice, n.d.).*

[39] *See also the NESET report 'Professionalisation of childcare assistants in ECEC: Pathways towards Qualification' (Peeters et al., 2016)*

impact on the quality of ECEC. More precisely, staff shortages not only reduce the availability and accessibility of ECEC places, but also undermine the quality of care and education, inhibit the prevalence of inclusive practices, and directly undermine the stability of the workforce and the appeal of the profession, thus perpetuating a detrimental cycle (EC 2023a).

B.2.1.1. State of play

According to OECD (2019), vacancies in ECEC professions represent 1.6 % of all online job vacancies (data from 18 OECD countries). The need for qualified ECEC professionals is enormous, and is expected to increase by 2029 (EC, 2021b).

Box 7. Examples of staff shortages

The following examples illustrate the severity of the problem of staff shortages (EC, 2023b; Oberhuemer & Scheryder, 2024; SEEPRO, 2024; WG ECEC, 2023a):

- In 2022, a shortage of approximately 6,000 ECEC professionals was reported in **Finland**. This is expected to grow to 9,000 unfilled qualified staff positions in 2030, if no measures are implemented (*Helsinki Times*, 2024). Around two-thirds of those unfilled positions are in urban regions (EC, 2023b), and represent around 40 % of all qualified staff needed (Nordic Council of Ministries, 2024). Staff shortages in Finland can be related to an increase in the enrolment rates of children in ECEC, but also to the country's aim to increasing the proportion of qualified staff in each team.
- **France** currently faces a shortage of 10,000 ECEC professionals. In addition, it is anticipated that around 120,000 home-based childminders will retire by 2030, with no certainty that they will be replaced by other services (EC, 2023c).
- In **Germany**, 800,000 new places in ECEC have been created since 2013 to meet the legal entitlement to a place from the age of 1. This has led to a shortage of qualified ECEC-workers, which is estimated to reach 72,500 by 2025 (SEEPRO, 2024).
- In **Ireland**, 56 % of ECEC services report that they have experienced recruitment challenges during the past year, with a high staff turnover rate of 25 % (SEEPRO, 2024).
- In **Belgium** (Flemish Community, ages 0-3), 96 % of local authorities that organise ECEC services have experienced problems in filling vacancies, necessitating that they periodically close some ECEC services or operate with reduced opening hours (SEEPRO, 2024).
- In **Slovakia**, there were 1,170 vacancies in ECEC in 2021, representing 6.3 % of the corresponding ECEC workforce population. This proportion has increased consistently over recent years. (EC, 2023b)

Austria, Czechia, Denmark, Latvia, Luxemburg, Portugal and Sweden also report similar ECEC staff shortages. Oberheumer and Shreyer (2024) mention that **Cyprus**, **Hungary** and **Spain** are the only EU Member States that report no shortages. In **Bulgaria,** there are also no staff shortages. A possible explanation for this could be increased salaries, among other measures (SEEPRO, 2024), or a drop in birth rates.

Table 2 lists the causes of staff shortage, as proposed by the EU Working Group on ECEC.

One major concern to highlight is the high proportion of **older members in the ECEC workforce** (OECD, 2017). In Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, the Netherlands, Portugal and Slovakia, 35 % or more of core practitioners in ECEC were at least 50 years old. In Italy, approximately 41 % of staff in state preschools in 2018 were older than 54. Finland also has an ageing workforce in ECEC (EC, 2021b)[40].

Furthermore, it is commonly known that there is a **gender imbalance** in the ECEC workforce: the vast majority are women, despite European ambitions to move towards a 20 % male workforce (Peeters, 2007). For example, in Latvia, Hungary, Czechia, Estonia, Lithuania, Slovakia and Portugal, fewer than 1 % ECEC staff are men. Even in countries

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[40] *This was also mentioned in the OECD study (OECD, 2017).*

where a larger number of men work as a pre-primary teachers (e.g. the Netherlands, France and Norway), they are still outnumbered by women (EC, 2021b). Staff shortages are thus also a gender issue, as half of the possible workforce population are underrepresented.

Another challenge faced in ECEC is high **staff turnover**, which contributes to staff shortages. In general, **low wages** and **lack of benefits**, low recognition, lack of societal appreciation, low social and professional status, a lack of strategies for career advancement, deteriorating adult-child ratios and increased entry requirements are all factors that can have a negative impact on the attractiveness of the ECEC profession (EC, 2021b; Oberhuemer & Schreyer, 2024). For example, in Germany, a high percentage of graduates of childhood pedagogy seeks employment outside the ECEC sector, due to dissatisfaction with working conditions and pay (SEEPRO, 2024).

Table 2. Causes of staff shortages

+ 'Positive' causes	- 'Negative' causes.
▪ Increased number of children ▪ Better staff-child ratio ▪ Universal right to ECEC ▪ Increased offer/participation	▪ Low salaries/limited financial benefits (insurance, pension, etc.) ▪ Limited career opportunities ▪ Poor working conditions, health-related challenges ▪ Limited training and opportunities for continuing professional development ▪ Unattractive or unregulated profession, (perceived) lack of status ▪ Hiring of untrained staff, leading to poorer quality of provision or extra workload ▪ High staff turnover ▪ Ageing of staff

Source: Policy brief on staff shortages in ECEC (EC, 2023a, p. 8).

B.2.1.2. Strategies to address staff shortages in ECEC

To cope with staff shortages and improve the **attractiveness** of the profession (Oberhuemer & Schreyer, 2023; Eurydice, 2023; SEEPRO, 2024), 14 EU Member States have developed plans to attract staff. Two countries do not possess such plans, while 11 countries provided no data[41].

In addition to strategies such as increasing levels of qualification, offering opportunities for CPD (and child-free time to attend these), opportunities for growth within the sector and increasing salaries, other examples of strategies to attract and retain staff in ECEC are mentioned in SEEPRO study (SEEPRO, 2024) and Eurydice (Eurydice & EACEA, 2023):

- In **Czechia**, new qualification pathways have been opened, as well as lateral opportunities for entry (Eurydice & EACEA, 2023).

- **France** has launched initiatives such as "*Les métiers n'ont pas de sexe*" ("Jobs have no gender"), aimed at addressing the gender imbalance and making the ECEC-

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[41] *Countries/territories that mention in their 2024 SEEPRO reports that they have strategies to attract staff: AT, BE-fr, BE-nl, BE-de, HR, CZ, DK, FI, FR, DE, IE, LT, LU, NL, SL and SE.*
Countries that indicate in their 2024 SEEPRO reports that they do not have strategies to attract staff: BG, CY.
Countries that do not mention strategies to attract staff in their 2024 SEEPRO reports: EE, GR, HU, IT, LV, MT, PL, PT, RO, SK, ES.

sector more attractive and diverse. Financial support is also provided to students of initial ECEC training (Eurydice & EACEA, 2023).

- In **Germany**, the Federal Ministry for Family affairs has launched a staffing campaign to recruit new staff and retain existing staff through three priorities: paid, practice-integrated training; practicum guidance; and a promotion bonus (SEEPRO, 2024).

- In **Latvia**, in addition to increasing the minimum hourly rate for ECEC staff, work is being carried out to harmonise workloads, as well as to recognise and reward the valuable contributions of these professionals (Eurydice & EACEA, 2023).

- In **Lithuania**, other strategies are being implemented to solve the issue of staffing: increasing number of scholarships for students at university, funding travel costs for travelling to work, and flexible work schedules (SEEPRO, 2024).

- **Slovenia** has introduced internship programmes to attract more staff (SEEPRO, 2024).

B.2.2. Heterogeneity in initial qualifications for ECEC staff

Staff who are well prepared through high-quality initial education programmes are better able to sustain enriching and stimulating interactions with children (OECD, 2021b). Despite this, fewer than half of European ECEC systems require that at least one of the members of an ECEC team is educated at ISCED[42] level 6 or higher (i.e. a Bachelor's level or higher). Moreover, analysing the data on minimum qualifications reveals large differences between the qualifications and team compositions of ECEC staff in different EU Member States, and between the early (0-3) and later (3-6) phases of ECEC. In the section of the report that follows, we discuss in greater detail the initial qualifications for the various roles within ECEC, and how these have evolved in recent years.

B.2.2.1. State of play on initial qualifications

Core practitioners

Figure 8 shows the difference in minimum qualification levels for core practitioners in each of the two phases of ECEC for each EU Member State. It can be seen that in a split or partially split system, a higher level of qualification is generally considered a prerequisite for the second phase of ECEC (i.e. ECEC for children over 3 years). The level of qualification is **lower** in ECEC for children under the age of 3. For example, in **Italy** (integrated system, but split in terms of qualifications) and **France** (split system), the minimal qualification level is set at Bachelor's level (ISCED 6) for children under 3, and Master's level (ISCED 7) for children aged 3 and over.

In other countries, the **same level** of qualification is required to work across the entire ECEC sector (0-6): the minimum is set at Bachelor's level (ISCED 6) throughout both phases of ECEC in Bulgaria, Denmark, Germany, Estonia, Greece, Croatia, Lithuania, Slovenia, Finland and Sweden. In Portugal, it has been set at Master's level (ISCED 7) for

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[42] *The International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED), designed to classify education and training programmes, is the international reference classification for organising education programmes and related qualifications by levels and fields. The European Qualifications Framework (EQF level) is a reference framework for qualifications that focuses on learning outcomes. While there is no official equivalence table between ISCED and EQF-levels, a loose correspondence exists: a qualification at a higher EQF level is likely to correspond to a programme provided at a higher ISCED level. For example, ISCED 3, which corresponds to upper-secondary education, is equivalent to an EQF level of 2, 3 or 4; ISCED 6, indicating a Bachelor's or equivalent, corresponds to an EQF level of 5 or 6. (Eurostat, OECD, 2022). In this report, we refer to ISCED in order to classify staff qualifications.*

the entire ECEC period since 2007 (Eurydice, 2023). In seven European countries (Austria, Czechia, Ireland, Latvia, Malta, Romania and Slovakia), the minimum qualification level required for core practitioners throughout the entire ECEC period is below Bachelor's level (Eurydice & EACEA, 2023).

Figure 7. Minimum qualification levels required in ECEC to become a core practitioner in a centre-based ECEC setting for 2018/2019 and 2022/2023, and for older and younger children

Degree of integration of ECEC system (classification based on Eurydice, 2019)
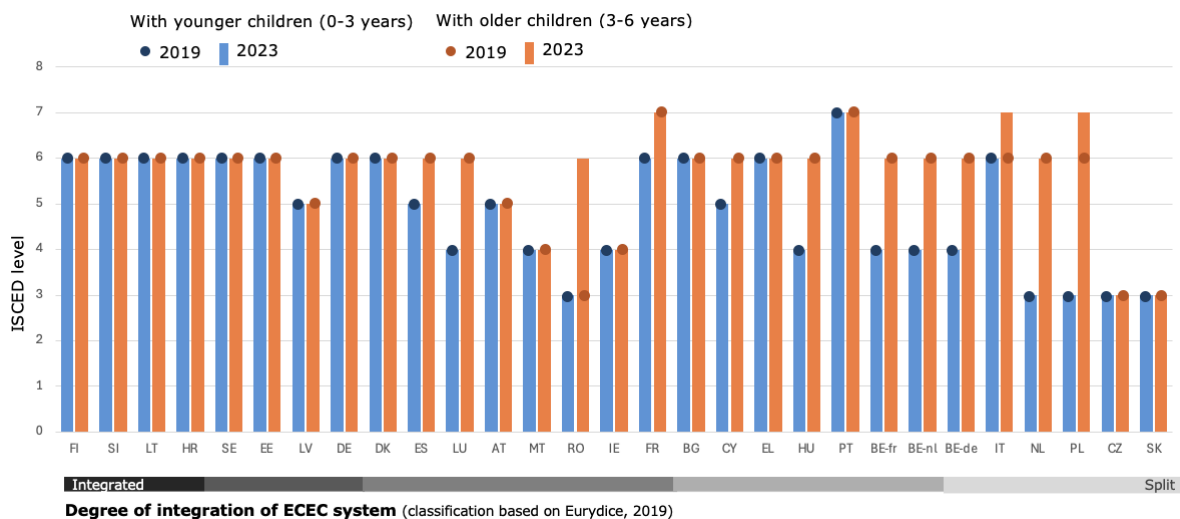
Source: based on the Key Data on ECEC in Europe report 2019 (Eurydice & EACEA, 2019); Structural Indicators 2023 (Eurydice & EACEA, 2023); and SEEPRO (SEEPRO, 2018, 2024).

With few exceptions, remarkably **little progress** has been made over time among the EU Member States in raising the minimum qualification level for core practitioners, as illustrated in Figure 8. In **Romania**, most of the staff working with children aged 3 and over already held a Bachelor's degree (ISCED 6) at the time this became the minimum qualification for this age group. The same situation occurred in **Denmark** and **Sweden**, where staff qualifications were not regulated prior to 2019, although a large proportion of practitioners held a Bachelor's degree in pedagogy (Eurydice & EACEA, 2019; SEEPRO, 2024; Eurydice & EACEA, 2023). **Italy and Poland** have made interesting progress in this field by raising the initial qualification level to a Bachelor's degree (ISCED 6) for professionals working in the 0-3 sector (Italy), and from a Bachelor's (ISCED 6) to a Master's (ISCED 7) level for core practitioners working with older children.

While the minimum qualification level is a useful indicator to track changes and differences in initial training, this does not provide information regarding the content, length or the types of learning activities included in this initial training. For example, some ISCED level 4 or 5 training programmes offer three to four years of specific qualifications focusing on early childhood education, resulting in a high level of competence. Other qualifications at the same ISCED-level may be shorter or more general in nature.

In addition, the indicator of minimum qualification level does not account for **team composition**. Some countries employ homogeneous teams, in which all professionals should have the same qualification level. Other countries employ mixed teams consisting of core professionals, qualified or less qualified assistants, as well as other health or social professionals. To illustrate these differences, two examples can be cited:

- **Finland**'s aim is to have 60 % of the staff holding a qualification of level ISCED 6 or higher, of which the half (30 %) should hold a teacher qualification. In 2023, 20% of the ECEC staff had a teacher qualification and 39 % of the staff altogether had a tertiary level of education (SEEPRO, 2024).

- In **France**, the minimum requirement for core practitioners working with children aged 0-3 years is trained at ISCED 6, but only 40 % of all staff are required to have a recognised qualification level. This includes assistants, for whom the requirements are lower.

There is growing evidence that a well-managed and well-supported, mixed team with varying qualifications and diverse staff can positively impact professionalisation (Van Huizen et al., 2024; Peeters et al., 2016). More specifically, this positive impact can lead to improved service quality and better well-being and outcomes for children and families, especially for those at risk of poverty and social exclusion. In addition, fostering a collaborative and inclusive work environment in which professionals with different expertise and initial trainings can share knowledge and best practices and reflect together, is crucial for ongoing improvement.

Assistants

In many countries (i.e. more than half of EU Member States), assistants form part of the ECEC workforce.

However, assistants are often overlooked when discussing ECEC staff. For example, in the CoRe study (Urban et al., 2011), assistants were defined as "**invisible workers**", meaning that their presence is usually not taken into account in policy documents, and that they have far fewer opportunities for qualification and professional development compared with core practitioners (Peeters et al., 2016). Over the last 10 years, progress on the qualifications of assistants has been either static or limited – a situation that was also apparent in previous reforms (discussed further below). However, the 2016 NESET report on assistants (Peeters et al., 2016) underlines that while there are no statistics on the socio-economic or ethnic-cultural background of assistants, national experts involved in the study indicated that a higher share of assistants had a minority ethnic background or lower socio-economic status compared with core practitioners. When assistants are well supported – for example, through CPD – this is considered enriching in relation to interactions with diverse families and children. If well supported, assistants can diversify the workforce, which has a positive effect for children and families. As Figure 9 shows, some EU Member States have no assistants across the whole ECEC period (in 2019, these countries were **Bulgaria, Czechia, Cyprus, Malta, Ireland, Lithuania, Poland** and **Romania**). Since 2019, auxiliary staff have begun supporting the work of ECEC with logistical tasks in **Italy**, and no longer carry out educational or caring tasks. In such cases, there is no longer a role for pedagogical assistants (SEEPRO, 2024).

In other ECEC systems, assistants are available only during the first or during the second phase of ECEC. In **Greece** and **Malta**, assistants support core practitioners in ECEC settings for children under the age of 3. In **Belgium** and **Slovakia**, assistants only work in settings for older children (i.e. for children over 3 years old).

In general, assistants have lower qualification levels compared with core practitioners. Usually, upper-secondary qualification (ISCED 3) is required to be employed as an assistant in ECEC centres. This means having an upper-secondary educational qualification in ECEC, or having completed a general upper-secondary education and a one-year vocational course for ECEC (Eurydice & EACEA, 2023). Some countries require assistants to have completed a post-secondary, non-tertiary education (ISCED 4). In other EU Member States, assistants are not required to have any initial qualification relating to their profession at all (Eurydice & EACEA, 2019). Few changes have been introduced in the last years. One example is a new school type in **Austria** called a "school for pedagogical assistant professions" (ISCED level 3), which has been operating since September 2018 (Eurydice & EACEA, 2023).

Figure 8. Minimum qualification levels required in ECEC to become an assistant in a centre-based ECEC setting for 2018/2019, and for older and younger children
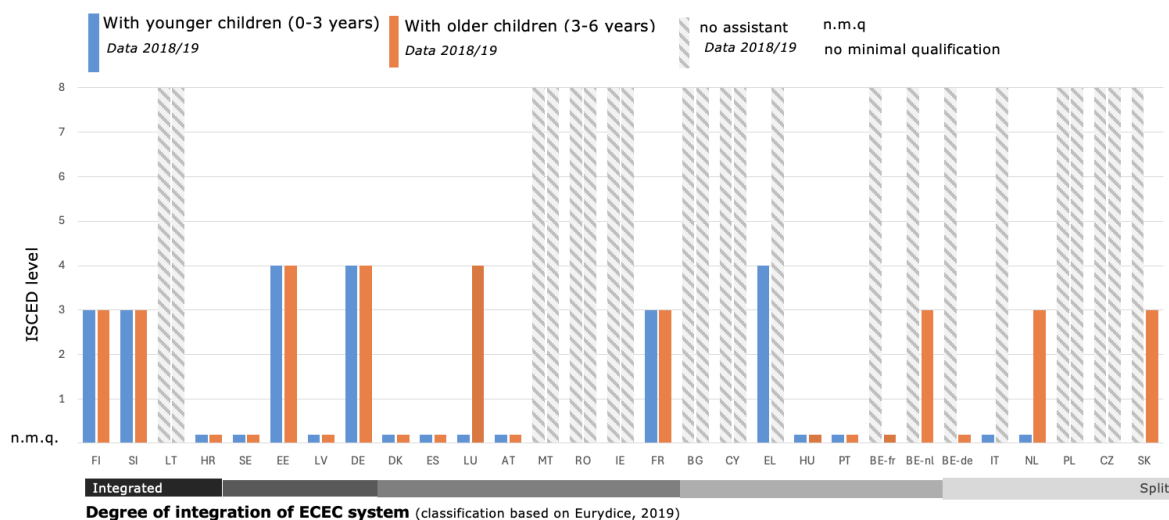
Source: Key Data on ECEC in Europe 2019 (Eurydice & EACEA, 2019). Note: more recent data could not be compared and analysed due to differences in the indicators.

ECEC leaders

In general, leadership is perceived as a crucial precondition for high-quality ECEC – recognised not only in the Council Recommendations (CEU, 2019), but also by the OECD working paper on leadership for quality in ECEC (OECD, 2019). In the OECD Starting Strong VI report (OECD, 2021) it is noted that "ECEC leaders play an important role in shaping organisational conditions and strategies for ensuring quality" (p. 16).

The expectations and requirements for becoming an ECEC centre leader vary across Europe (EC 2021b). In general, however, the requirements for ECEC leaders are **higher** than those for core practitioners and assistants.

Overall, differences can be seen in the requirements for leaders of ECEC services for younger children (0-3) and centres for older children (aged above 3)[43]. In most EU Member States, the Key Data on ECEC 2019 report shows that ECEC leaders must be qualified at Bachelor's level or higher (ISCED 6 or above). This is the case in three-fifths of ECEC systems in settings for younger children (below 3), and in four-fifths of ECEC systems for older children (aged over 3). In one-third of EU Member States, leaders of ECEC centres for older children (aged over 3) are required to have **additional specific training and previous professional experience** in ECEC or in the field of education. In several ECEC systems, the minimum qualification for leaders is Master's level (ISCED 7), but not necessarily in the field of pedagogy or education.

In some countries, there are differences in the qualification requirements for ECEC leaders that relate to the size of the particular ECEC setting. This is the case in **Flanders** (Belgium, with regard to children aged 0-3), where the centre leader must have at least the same level of qualification as core practitioners for services catering for up to 18 children (ISCED 4), but at least a Bachelor's degree (ISCED 6) for services catering for at least 19 children (SEEPRO, 2024).

From the SEEPRO report (2024), we learn that:

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[43] *Oberhuemer & Schreyer (2024) mention that centre leaders in unitary ECEC systems require ISCED 6 or 7, whereas in split systems this may vary from ISCED 3-4 to 7.*

- In **split systems**, requirements for leaders tend to be less regulated in the ECEC sector compared with the education sector. Minimum qualifications for leaders tend to be lower in the childcare sector than in the education sector (the exceptions to this being Cyprus, Greece and Portugal).

- In some countries qualifications, selection procedures and duties are defined by law (e.g. in Serbia), whereas in others, the role of leaders is not defined uniformly nor in detail (e.g. in Germany).

- In the pre-primary education sector (3-6), CPD opportunities for ECEC Leaders often fall under the regulations for school heads, meaning that they are not specific to ECEC and might reinforce "schoolification" effects.

Some examples of **competence requirements** for ECEC leaders (SEEPRO 2024) are listed below:

- In **Estonia**, the pedagogical, managerial and leadership competences of a centre leader are defined in the Professional Standard for Teachers, which outline high-performing leaders' actions and knowledge, guiding their development and careers. This tool assists in planning the development and careers of leaders, and serves as a foundation for state institutions and universities to develop programmes and advanced training courses (SEEPRO, 2024).

- In **Croatia**, no accredited education programmes have been developed specifically for ECEC leaders. However, there is a clear set of expected competencies, outlined by the Croatian Qualifications Framework Act. These include planning and programming the work of the educational institution, and human resource management. In addition, all leaders require five years of work experience in ECEC (SEEPRO, 2024).

- In **Bulgaria**, ECEC leaders of kindergartens (ECEC 3-6) must hold a Bachelor's (ISCED 6) or Master's (ISCED 7) degree in education. In addition, five years of professional teaching experience are required. Centre leaders must also undertake extra courses that address management and leadership issues. The aim of this is to enhance their capabilities in managing educational activities and overseeing the entire operations of the kindergarten (SEEPRO, 2024).

- In the **French Community (Belgium),** a new law mandates that the centre leaders of ECEC services for the youngest children (0-3), who do not work directly with children, must have at least a Bachelor's degree (ISCED 6) and possess relevant experience or an additional recognised qualification by ONE (*Office de la naissance et de l'enfance*, the governmental agency) within their first two years in the role. A specialised multidisciplinary certificate has been established for this purpose (SEEPRO, 2024).

- In **Italy**, ECEC leaders must have a relevant tertiary-level qualification (a five-year university degree) and are recruited from among experienced teachers (SEEPRO, 2024).

Similar competences are required in **Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia** and **Spain,** with an accent on continuous professional development (see the section that follows). Some changes have been observed in **Bulgaria, Estonia, Finland, Luxembourg, Malta, Romania and Spain**, where qualification norms have become higher over recent last years. These countries now require centre leaders in centres for children over the age of 3 to have a Master's degree in place of the previous Bachelor's degree (SEEPRO, 2024). In **Bulgaria** and **Romania,** a Master's degree is now required for the whole ECEC period.

In most EU Member States, a certain number of **years of work experience** is required to become an ECEC leader. This can range from one year (e.g. in Malta and Lithuania) to

eight years (e.g. in Serbia) to 12 years of previous experience (e.g. in Greece) (SEEPRO, 2024).

In other countries, the minimum qualifications for leaders are **not defined at national level,** due to the decentralised structure of the ECEC system (e.g. in Austria, Germany and Italy; SEEPRO, 2024); or are **not defined in detail** (e.g. in France and Portugal; SEEPRO, 2024); or there are **no specific requirements** (e.g. in Greece, Ireland and the Netherlands).

> By analysing the available data, we can conclude that while some progress has been made in defining required **minimum qualifications for ECEC leaders**, such steps remain limited. In several countries, there is still a lack of clear descriptions of the competencies expected for ECEC leaders, leading to potential ambiguity or inconsistency in their roles. Despite the recognised importance of their function in guiding teams towards high-quality ECEC, concrete measures regarding their initial training (and the specific content of this training) still needs to be reinforced. Clear guidelines and standards for ECEC leadership training are essential to ensure that leaders are well equipped to support and elevate their ECEC service effectively.

B.2.2.2. Strategies to address heterogeneity in initial qualifications

Raising minimum qualification requirements

In recent years, several EU countries have introduced reforms with regard to staff qualifications and raising the minimum qualifications of the ECEC staff. For example, Ireland, Italy, Malta and Finland have raised (or are in the process of raising) the minimum qualification requirements for their ECEC staff (Motiejūnaitė, 2021). The following **reforms on minimum qualifications** are described in the Structural Indicators (Eurydice et al., 2016; Eurydice & EACEA, 2023) and in the SEEPRO country reports (SEEPRO, 2024).

- In the **Flemish Community (Belgium, children aged 0-3)** an educational reform has been carried out in secondary education. From the school year 2022/2023 onwards, students from technical secondary education are allowed to work directly in childcare after graduation. These workers will be qualified at ISCED level 4. Students from vocational secondary education will still have to complete a seventh year in order to be allowed to work in childcare (for children aged 0-3). The substantive implications of this structural reform are currently unclear.

- In **Bulgaria**, a pre-primary professional can work in groups with older children, but from January 2023 on also in childcare within kindergartens. Prior to this, a nurse and a "babysitter" were employed in groups for children under the age of 3 (Eurydice & EACEA, 2023).

- In **Denmark,** the quality requirements for staff have been increased. A fund to support this was distributed to the municipalities in 2023. Municipalities are given the discretion to consider how this funding is used to improve the qualifications of staff. This increase in minimum qualification requirements required a financial injection of more than EUR 14 million in 2023, and more than EUR 26 million in 2024 (EC, 2023b).

- **Finland** has raised the qualifications of assistants and core practitioners since 2018. From 2030, two-thirds of core practitioners in centre-based ECEC must hold a Bachelor's degree (up from the current minimum of one-third), and at least 50 % of these must have degrees in education (Motiejūnaitė, 2021; Eurydice & EACEA, 2023). Thus, the level of qualification at team level is expected to increase by 2030. For leaders, the aim is to go from ISCED 6 to ISCED 7 by 2030.

- In 2021, there was a fundamental policy initiative in **Estonia**: the Estonian Education Strategy 2021-2035. The aim of this is for all ECEC professionals to have

at least a Bachelor's degree, and ECEC leaders to have a Master's degree (SEEPRO, 2024).

▪ In **Ireland**, a minimum qualification for ECEC workers was introduced in 2016, corresponding to two years of vocational training (ISCED 4) (Motiejūnaitė, 2021). The overall aim of the new "The Workforce Plan for Early Learning and Care and School-Aged Childcare (2022-2028)" is to have 50 % of workers possessing Bachelor's degrees by 2028. At present, there is no mandatory qualification requirement for the role of centre leader beyond the regulated qualification required of all staff working directly with children, which corresponds to ISCED level 5. However, the Workforce Development Plan states that a minimum qualification requirement of ISCED Level 6 will be introduced for managers in early learning and care (ELC). An aspirational target has been set for 2028 that all managers of ELC services should hold a qualification at level 7 or above. The role of manager encompasses human resources, financial planning, quality improvement and collaboration with various community partners and external agencies (SEEPRO, 2024).

▪ In **Italy,** the School Reform Law (2015) requires that all core practitioners working in settings for children aged 0-3 years should have a Bachelor's degree (SEEPRO, 2024). This means that the minimum qualification requirement for early childhood educators (0–3 years) has been raised to a three-year Bachelor's degree (ISCED 6) in educational science. This requirement has been in force since 2019/2020 (Motiejūnaitė, 2021; Eurydice & EACEA, 2019, 2023).

▪ In **Malta**, minimum qualification requirements for ECEC staff were raised in 2015/16 and in 2017/2018. For staff working in kindergartens, the required level was raised to a Bachelor's degree, with four years of study or two years of study for holders of the MCAST Higher Diploma in Advanced Studies in Early Years (Eurydice et al., 2016). From 2021 onwards, programmes at ISCED 4 level are no longer accepted, only ISCED 5 (SEEPRO, 2024).

The analysed data also reveals an opposing trend with regard to initial qualification requirements. Due to staff shortages and higher rates of enrolment among children, some countries have (temporarily) **lowered the qualification requirements** for staff.

▪ The **Flemish Government in Belgium** recently decided to recruit "flexi-jobs" in childcare (0-3). Flexi-jobs cater for people who wish to be employed for a limited time and for a limited amount of labour. No conditions were specified in the amendment with regard to the qualifications of staff. Later, it was decided that unqualified staff could constitute 25 % of staff in Flanders (Agentschap Opgroeien, 2024).

▪ The Amendment to the Act on Education Staff in **Czechia** provides the possibility to employ a person without a pedagogical qualification for up to three years.

▪ In **France**, the requirements, previously set at ISCED 7, have been lowered for staff working with older children (aged 3-6 years) for the period 2023-2026, due to recruitment difficulties (Eurydice & EACEA, 2023).

▪ **The Netherlands** has temporarily lowered qualification requirements to combat staff shortages (SEEPRO, 2024).

While temporarily lowering the qualification requirements for ECEC staff may appear a viable solution on the short term, it could have a negative impact on children and families. In addition, it might lower the desirability and attractiveness of the profession in the long term. Such measures are also not in line with the quality statements made in the EQF, which "aims for a pedagogical staff that is composed of highly qualified professionals holding a full professional qualification specialised in ECEC". As noted in the report 'How to

recruit, train and motivate well-qualified staff' (EC, 2021b), "Increased expectations associated with a higher entry-level qualification can at first seem to be a barrier. However, there are longer-term benefits associated with higher quality provision, higher professional status and more opportunities for career development, which are efficient incentives for staff to join and stay in the ECEC workforce".

In general, we expect a rise in the minimal competence requirements for core professionals. This is only partly reflected in the data presented above, which can to some extent be explained by the presence of quotas/ratios for qualified staff on the workfloor. For example, if **Ireland** achieves its target of 50 % Bachelor's degrees on the workfloor by 2028, this minimum requirement will not apply to all core practitioners. This differs from the measures taken in **Italy**, which now require ISCED level 6 for all practitioners working with children aged 0-3. More comprehensive data and further analysis on **team composition** would therefore help to gain a better overview and to specify objectives.

The available data mainly focuses on initial qualification requirements for individual staff. However, the overall level of qualification at **team** level should also be taken into account. When they are well supported, teams comprising staff with diverse backgrounds and experiences demonstrate the potential to provide better quality provision for children and families (Peeters et al., 2016). Bearing this in mind, having only highly qualified core professionals on the workfloor might limit access to the profession for more diverse groups as potential staff, as well as limiting the career growth of all team members. However, the potential benefits of **diverse and inclusive teams** can only be realised if they are well supported, and if their diversity is valued[44]. Furthermore, although raising minimum qualification requirements might represent a step towards valuing the profession and raising staff competences, it is also crucial to work on the **content of these initial qualifications**.

In conclusion, while some EU Member States have taken steps to **raise minimum qualification requirements**, many opportunities for growth still remain. This is, however, a challenging and complex issue, and one with which several EU Member States are struggling. One complexity is the intertwined nature of qualification requirements and staff shortages. Raising the minimum qualification requirements in times of staff shortage represents a challenging measure in the short term. In the long term, however, higher qualifications (and especially those that are better in terms of content), together with quality in-service training, support and good working conditions, could increase the **attractiveness** and desirability of the job. Ultimately, therefore, such measures could attract more and better-qualified staff into the profession, and address both the issue of staff shortage and of ECEC quality. At the same time, the need for a **diverse workforce** (also in terms of initial qualifications) needs to be taken into account, together with the inseparable need to provide pedagogical support for these mixed teams in terms of reflection on practice and CPD activities.

Reforms to the curricula for initial training

In parallel with raising the qualification levels of ECEC practitioners, a few countries aim to reform the initial training programme:

- In the **Flemish Community of Belgium (for children aged 0-3),** there is a plan to develop a new programme granting an ISCED level 5 qualification, with various ECEC actors working on the curriculum. The programme is scheduled to begin in the next years (SEEPRO, 2024).

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[44] *See, for example, the project report from Ilias in Belgium on inclusive leadership: https://vbjk.be/storage/files/00aa05ca-f9e7-4c96-994c-babe583f71b9/report-inspiration-framework-ilias-inclusive-leadership-in-encouraging-collaboration.pdf*

- In the **French Community of Belgium,** there is an ongoing reform of the entire educational system (Pact for a Teaching of Excellence - *Pacte pour un enseignement d'excellence*). Among other reforms is a forthcoming Master's degree in teacher education (ISCED level 7) for pre-primary teachers (ECEC for children over 3 years of age). This will be collaboratively supported by both university colleges and universities. In the childcare sector (for children under the age of 3), reforms are also underway. These include a new common job profile for all practitioners with a secondary vocational qualification in working with children. A new initial training profile is currently being defined. There is also a new professional Bachelor's study programme dedicated to early childhood education (SEEPRO, 2024).

- The **Swedish** National Agency for Education has been tasked with developing the content of a national professional programme. This will lay out a national structure for competence development, a national qualification system, and the reform of the initial training. The legislation is due to come into force from 1 January 2025. (Eurydice & EACEA, 2023).

As already mentioned, when reforming initial training, it is crucial that its **contents** and **methods** be reconsidered. These should embrace a **holistic** view of children, stressing **co-education with families and local communities**. Initial training should also be characterised by a combination of **theory and practice**, and should pay sufficient attention to **pedagogical documentation and reflection** (Peeters et al., 2016). In particular, research stresses the importance of supporting staff in their reflection on daily practice as a main motor towards concrete change in practice (Peeters et al., 2015; Urban et al., 2011). Raising qualification levels without adequately working on the content of such qualifications will not improve the quality of ECEC practices.

B.2.3. Continuous professional development (CPD)

Not only does the EQF (CEU, 2019) stress initial qualification requirements, it also emphasises the importance of continuous professional development (CPD). Both are crucial in ensuring that staff are **competent** and they **complement** each other (OECD, 2018). CPD allows ECEC professionals to update and upgrade their knowledge and skills throughout their careers. Research (Eurofound, 2015) has revealed that CPD also has a positive impact on children and families, as long as:

- it involves an intensive CPD programme, rather than one-time training;

- practitioners are actively involved in the transformative process of improving educational practices within ECEC settings;

- it focuses on practitioners learning through practice, in dialogue with colleagues and parents;

- a coach is available during non-contact hours;

- it is embedded within a coherent pedagogical framework or curriculum that builds upon research and addresses the needs of migrant and refugee families;

- a long-term vision and policy on CPD are present;

- child-free hours are available for training and for continuous reflection on practice.[45]

Continuous reflection on practice with staff is a crucial element of effective CPD and ECEC quality, and the development of **professional learning communities (PLCs)** is a key component when considering CPD initiatives. To improve PLCs, researchers recommend that Member States invest in:

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[45] *See the NESET report on multilingualism for a more in-depth overview of those components of CPD (Bergeron-Morin et al., 2023).*

- child-free hours for all staff to reflect (together);

- support from a pedagogical coach, in order to implement the practice of reflection;

- the development of reflection tools for teams and individuals;

- connecting the practice of PLCs with research;

- supporting the competences of PLC leaders;

- encouraging the implementation of a diverse workforce supported learning from each other (Sharmahd et al., 2017).

Although there is a lack of in-depth data on these criteria (e.g. no information on the intensity, type or content of CPD, or the involvement of a pedagogical coach), the data described below offers a general overview of CPD in various Member States.

Box 8. Mandatory vs entitled CPD

In general, two types of CPD can be distinguished (Eurydice & EACEA, 2019; 2023):

- **Mandatory CPD** is characterised by a specified minimum amount of CPD (in terms of hours, days, credits, etc.) that staff are required to undertake during a certain period (usually during a school year or a few years). Mandatory CPD usually means that support is offered to staff to participate in these activities. For example, CPD is provided during working time, or the costs of courses and travel are reimbursed.

- **Entitled CPD** is characterised by a certain amount of time that is granted to staff during or outside working hours. Here, CPD is seen as a professional duty, but it is optional rather than compulsory.

In the section that follows, we analyse CPD practices with reference to different roles within ECEC (i.e. core practitioners, assistants and leaders), given that opportunities and requirements for professional development differ by role.

B.2.3.1. State of play on CPD

Core practitioners

As Table 3 shows, CPD is mandatory for core practitioners working with younger children (aged 0-3) in only one-third of ECEC systems (in **Belgium**, **Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Hungary, Portugal, Slovenia and the Netherlands**). In around half of the ECEC systems, CPD is required for core practitioners working with older children (in **Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Hungary, Finland, France, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Poland, Romania and Slovakia**). In some countries, CPD is not regulated at national level, but at a more local level (in **Austria**, **Germany**, **Denmark**, **Spain and**, **Sweden**). Often, CPD activities are between three and five days per year, although several EU Member States recommend more than this.

Table 3. Status of continuous professional development for core practitioners in centre-based ECEC settings in 2018/2019 and 2022/2023.

	Under age 3		Aged 3 and over	
	2018/2019	2022/2023	2018/2019	2022/2023
Finland				
Slovenia				
Lithuania				
Croatia				
Sweden				
Estonia				
Latvia				
Germany				
Denmark				
Spain				
Luxembourg				
Austria				
Malta				
Romania				
Ireland				

	Under age 3		Aged 3 and over	
	2018/2019	2022/2023	2018/2019	2022/2023
France				
Bulgaria				
Cyprus				
Greece				
Hungary				
Portugal				
Belgium FR				
Belgium NL				
Belgium DE				
Italy				
The Netherlands				
Poland				
Czechia				
Slovakia				

- CPD is not mandatory
- CPD is mandatory or a professional duty

Source: based on Key Data 2019 (Eurydice & EACEA, 2019) and Structural Indicators 2023 (Eurydice & EACEA, 2023).

To illustrate the diversity of CPD policies for core practitioners, specific examples are presented below (Eurydice & EACEA, 2023; SEEPRO, 2024):

CPD is not a compulsory requirement for ECEC staff in most federal states in **Germany**. However, in some federal states, regulations exist in this regard (e.g. in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, there is a training obligation of five days, and in Thuringia of two days per year) (SEEPRO, 2024).

In **Greece**, CPD for kindergarten teachers is partly compulsory and partly optional. It includes an introductory training for newly qualified or appointed teachers, periodic training every four to six years, and special short-term training programmes.

In **Italy**, CPD is handled differently across the integrated system 0–6, with variations between municipal and state-maintained provisions. In municipal settings, CPD planning and implementation are undertaken by local authorities with regional support. For state-maintained pre-primary schools, a national framework and guidelines exist, which describe CPD as compulsory, permanent and structural. In certain regions, such as Emilia-Romagna or Tuscany, pedagogical coordinators undertake CPD that is embedded within a strong tradition of continuously sustaining team reflection on practice in municipal childcare centres (for children aged 0-3 years) and preschools (3-6 years) (Catarsi, 2011). In recent years, in line with Italy's transition from a split to an integrated ECEC system, efforts have been made to create a 0-6 system of coaching. The *Coordinamenti Pedagogici Territoriali* have been established, which reunite all pedagogical coordinators of ECEC centres for children aged 0-3 years and 3-6 years in a specific area, in order to develop and implement a common vision and practice (Ministry of Education of Italy, 2021).

Assistants

In general, CPD for assistants is less prevalent compared with that for core professionals (Eurydice & EACEA, 2019, 2023).

Still, some countries have made CPD mandatory for assistants in recent years (e.g. **Luxembourg** and **Bulgaria**). In several countries, CPD for assistants is regulated at the

level of the individual ECEC providers or municipalities (e.g. as in **Austria**, **Germany** and **Latvia**).

The following examples shed light on the ways in which CPD is offered in different countries:

- In **Czechia,** new regulations require that caregivers in children's groups undergo at least 8 hours of further training per year, including a childhood-focused first aid course every two years (SEEPRO, 2024).

- In **Luxembourg,** assistants must undergo professional development courses and attend CPD and supervision sessions for at least 20 hours per year in order to obtain a yearly state agreement (SEEPRO, 2024).

- In **Slovenia,** assistants must spend the same amount of time on CPD as core practitioners. In addition, Early Childhood Assistant Teachers can be promoted to job titles such as Mentor and Adviser as part of their CPD, improving their career development and increasing their salary grades (SEEPRO, 2024).

In conclusion, CPD is **less frequently mandated for assistants**. Also, insufficient data are available on how many actually take advantage of it or the conditions necessary for their participation in it (such as child-free hours). When combined with evidence on the lack of minimum qualification requirements for assistants, this suggests that a significant proportion of staff involved in daily interactions with children and families lack both formal qualifications and opportunities to address this gap through CPD (Eurydice et al., 2019). Furthermore, there is a notable **absence of CPD activities that involve both assistants and core practitioners together**, which could enhance collaboration and ultimately improve the quality of interactions with children and families (Peeters et al., 2016).

ECEC leaders

In general, CPD for ECEC leaders is not prominently addressed in the databases analysed (among others, the country reports from SEEPRO). However, in countries with clear competency requirements for leaders, CPD is frequently offered and encouraged, relevant experiences is valued, and most leaders participate in some form of professional development (OECD, 2019). Notable examples include:

- In **Denmark**, no specific initial training is required for ECEC centre leaders. However, they are generally qualified pedagogues with significant experience. The further qualification for a leadership position is not a national requirement, but is seen as an advantage. It is common for leaders, after they are employed, to be encouraged to pursue theoretical management education, such as programmes in leadership (SEEPRO, 2024).

- In **Greece**, qualified ECEC practitioners can be appointed to the position of leader on the basis of an evaluation process. However, no mandatory training programmes are required for appointment to this position (SEEPRO, 2024).

- In the **French community (Belgium)**, there is an established system for CPD for leaders, with public funds being used for various training sessions based on an official programme. Fourteen focus areas are defined within this CPD programme, four of which are for centre leaders: attitudes, roles, and functions; group dynamics; educational project; and institution management. Furthermore, a team of 10 pedagogical advisers organises pedagogical support, which can include centre leaders as part of the overall childcare practitioners' community.

- In **Estonia**, centre leaders are expected to direct their own professional development. They receive support from the school administration and the state throughout their careers. The updated competency and career model for educational leaders is a significant tool in supporting this process.

In **Sweden**, ECEC leaders are required to start their training within two years of taking up their duties. This must be completed within five years of taking up the position of principal. The criteria usually focus on both personal leadership skills, such as communication, cooperation and social competencies, as well as formal leadership skills such as familiarity with legal aspects, exercising authority, etc.

In **Finland,** peer-group mentoring is organised among regional networks in order to support ECEC leaders (SEEPRO, 2024)

Although some countries have shown awareness and taken steps forward with regard to CPD for leaders, this still remains a challenge in many countries, where leaders appear to have been forgotten in terms of CPD.

In conclusion, EU Member States generally allocate more CPD time to core professionals working with children over 3 years of age, compared with those working with younger children. For assistants, CPD is often either lacking or optional. Participation in CPD is often complicated due to a lack of **supportive conditions**, or a lack of **child-free hours** to attend training. While CPD for leaders is encouraged, limited data are available regarding its implementation. Nevertheless, it is beyond doubt that CPD is crucial to enhancing the quality of ECEC for children and families. Moreover, viewed as a lifelong learning process, CPD can address the typically 'flat' career paths in the ECEC sector, offering opportunities for professional growth and development.

B.2.3.2. Strategies to improve in-service training and continuous professional development

Some countries have made efforts to increase the professionalisation of ECEC by stressing **continuous professional development and in-service training** (Eurydice, 2023; SEEPRO, 2024). Some inspiring examples are described below.

There is a new qualifying programme, "Elementar+", in **Austria**. This federal initiative is a three-year university degree that opens up new ways for those already working in ECEC institutions (mainly assistants) to obtain a fully-fledged qualification as a group-leading pedagogue (SEEPRO, 2024).

In the **French Community of Belgium,** the Pact for a Teaching of Excellence (*Pacte pour un enseignement d'excellence*) defines a reformed system for continuous professional development (SEEPRO, 2024).

In **Croatia**, CPD for those directly involved in educational work, professional co-workers and ECEC leaders is one of the focal points in the National Development Strategy by 2027 (launched in 2023). This plan stipulates: "Newly qualified ECEC teachers need more intensive training and more support to ensure the highest possible quality of pedagogical work with children according to their needs and differences. It will be particularly important to ensure that professionals have the skills to work with disadvantaged children*."* (SEEPRO, 2024).

In **Czechia**, the Act on Education Staff of 2004 already obliged all staff – including pre-primary teachers working in settings with older children – to participate in CPD. According to an amendment to the Act on Providing Childcare in a Children's Group that came into force in October 2021, all providers of ECEC services for younger children are obliged to guarantee at least 8 hours of training per year to their childcare staff, together with a first aid course once every two years. The childcare staff must provide proof that they have completed the CPD (Eurydice, 2023). Also, changes have been made to the qualification requirements for teaching assistants: the number of hours of compulsory training has been increased, and mandatory practice in ECEC services has been introduced (Eurydice & EACEA 2023).

In 2022, a plan with new ambitions for pre-primary education was put in place in **France**. One of its aims is to strengthen the skills and knowledge of all professionals, with didactic and pedagogical training adapted to pre-primary education.

In **Greece,** the Institute of Educational Policy introduced new teacher training on the Common Foreign Language Curriculum and English Learning Programmes in Early Childhood. The Education and Training Monitor (EC, 2023b) also mentions that the Institute of Educational Policy organises training related to the emerging themes introduced in the ECEC curricula, such as "skills labs" activities and teaching the English language.

In **Ireland**, "Nurturing skills", the new Workforce Plan for Early Learning and Care and school-age childcare 2022–2028, commits to strengthening support for CPD activities for ECEC staff, as well as increasing its availability. The objectives of this plan are to enhance the professional development of the workforce (core practitioners and leaders) and to elevate the career status of the ECEC sector. The plan outlines commitments under five key pillars: establishing a career framework; raising qualification levels; developing a national system for continuous professional development; supporting recruitment, retention and diversity; and moving towards regulation of the workforce. This comprehensive approach aims to create clear pathways for career advancement, as well as raising the level of staff educational qualifications, establishing a national system for ongoing professional development, supporting recruitment and retention efforts, promoting diversity, and moving towards regulation to ensure high-quality standards in the early learning and childcare sector. Another major initiative to strengthen the capacity of the ECEC workforce is to offer a course designed to support the inclusion of all children into the universal ECEC programme of free preschool. This provides the opportunity for a practitioner to grow towards the role of Inclusion Coordinator within their ECEC setting (SEEPRO, 2024). Hence, Ireland is aiming for a comprehensive reform to increase the quality of the entire ECEC workforce.

By 2025, ECEC professionals in **the Netherlands** who work with babies will need to complete specific additional training (SEEPRO, 2024) as a legal requirement for working with the youngest children (aged 0-2). Service providers must therefore pay for these courses and the time needed to take them. The introduction of the Childcare Innovation and Quality Act in 2018 has also enhanced the quality debate, in particular due to measures relating to ongoing professionalisation through on-site coaches, improved staff-child ratios, raising the level of language skills required, and strengthening cooperation between the childcare sector and education (SEEPRO, 2024)

In **Slovenia**, CPD is mandatory[46] for all ECEC staff – both core professionals and assistants – for a minimum of five days per year, or 15 days over three years. The ministry responsible for education cofinances programmes that are in line with its priority themes (Eurydice & EACEA, 2023). This mandatory CPD has been established since 1994[47]. Furthermore, assistants and core practitioners are given child-free hours to prepare, plan and evaluate activities together. This provides a vital opportunity for the whole staff to grow together, taking into account the differences that exist within the staff itself (in terms of qualification, social and ethnic backgrounds, etc.) (Peeters et al., 2016).

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[46] *According to the Organisation and Financing of Education Act, 2022.*

[47] *In the Collective agreement for the Education Sector in the Republic of Slovenia (Kolektivna pogodba, 1994). In this agreement, it is stated that unjustified refusal to participate in CPD is a minor violation of work obligations (Article 65).*

In **Spain**, the Ministry of Education and Vocational Training aimed to improve the teaching profession in ECEC. In 2022, it proposed a document intended to improve initial training, access to the teaching profession, and permanent training and professional development. (Eurydice & EACEA, 2023).

Other forms of coaching and training are mentioned by several countries and regions. For example:

In **the Flemish community of Belgium,** a new supporting system for the childcare sector (0-3 years) has been in place since 2021, offering support at the workplace. In total, 264 FTE pedagogical coaches were recruited to cover the entire childcare sector. Income-related childcare services with more than 18 full-time child places receive a subsidy for CPD, which they can use to employ or hire such a pedagogical coach, or to access existing training offers. Services with fewer than 18 places, or those whose services are not income-related, receive support via the support service network, which focuses on priority topics such as "enforcement" and "policy-making capacity" (SEEPRO, 2024).

In **Latvia**, ECEC institutions are obliged to provide a mentor for ECEC professionals who obtain or have obtained ISCED 5 level in pedagogical education. The aim of this is to promote support for young staff, to develop their cooperation skills and to make better use of the knowledge they have acquired in their daily work (SEEPRO, 2024).

In **Portugal**, to implement the Law of 2018 on inclusive ECEC, CPD processes were developed and a practical manual for professionals was produced by a team under the auspices of the Directorate-General of Education. This manual clarifies the implementation of the decree specifically at a methodological level, and includes practical materials to support professionals' observation, self-reflection and self-assessment (SEEPRO, 2024).

The Professional Development Initiative for Early Childhood Educators in **Germany** is also worthy of mention. According to Oberhuemer (in SEEPRO, 2024), this is one of the most far-reaching professionalisation initiatives for ECEC in Europe. The initiative supports the professionalisation of both ECEC staff as well as of the ECEC system as a whole. This includes producing specialist reports, field evaluations and research studies that provide up-to-date knowledge on current topics in ECEC, as well as promoting competence-oriented CPD by observing and analysing the ongoing professionalisation process. Professional networks are established through specialist conferences and workshops.

Strategies to supporting the workforce are also mentioned in the **Child Guarantee National Action Plans**, with a focus on increasing accessibility for more vulnerable children and families. The focus in the Action Plans is mostly on offering opportunities for CPD and on reducing the adult-child ratio. Examples of countries that have included such measures in their National Action Plans include:

In **Belgium**, the **Belgian Walloon-Brussels Federation** has appointed an accessibility task force to administer its five-year CPD plan for childcare professionals on the accessibility of vulnerable families.

Croatia is implementing a policy to improve quality by investing in the competencies of professionals, as well as in the number of professionals.

Denmark has provided funding for an upskilling pool and for higher qualified staff under its 2020 Finance Act.

In **France,** the *Pacte Enfance* ("Pact for childhood") considers training early-years professionals, and has a CPD programme for 600,000 professionals, established prior to the Child Guarantee.

Greece's *Kipseli* programme for the training of childcare workers and the training of trainers has been created as a result of the Child Guarantee.

Since 1 September 2021, **Slovenia** has employed Roma assistants for groups containing 10 or more Roma children. Regular training is offered to these Roma assistants. In addition, there are training programmes to strengthen the competences of staff to work in a multicultural environment.

In conclusion, efforts can be seen from several EU Member States to strengthen CPD opportunities for staff, demonstrating an awareness of the importance of ongoing training for ECEC professionals. Such opportunities range from mandatory or voluntary CPD courses, through support provided by (pedagogical) coaches, to learning networks, and the development of supportive materials and tools. However, it should be noted that these initiatives mainly address core professionals, somewhat neglecting assistants and leaders. Furthermore, efforts to guarantee **continuous reflection on practice at team level** appear to be less prevalent – despite the effect of such continuous team support having been demonstrated by research (Peeters et al., 2015; Sharmahd et al., 2017). Changes in this direction would also require investment in staff working conditions, for example, by ensuring child-free hours.

B.2.4. Working conditions

Working conditions of ECEC staff play a fundamental role in ensuring high-quality ECEC. Investing in pre-service and in-service continuous training is crucial, but not sufficient alone. Key working conditions such as adult-child ratios and group sizes, and wages are essential to combat the staff shortages, but also for the quality towards children and families. Therefore, attention to working conditions is vital for creating an environment conducive to high-quality ECEC.

B.2.4.1. State of play

Staff-child ratio and maximum number of children per group

The staff-child ratio is essential to **process quality** in ECEC. It is important for staff to have rich and meaningful interactions with each child, as this is conducive to children's cognitive, social and emotional development, and for their well-being and involement. It is also a crucial working condition for professionals, as it determines the **workload** of staff, thereby influencing the attractiveness and feasibility of the job (Eurydice & EACEC, 2019).

Analysing staff-child ratios across different countries is not a straightforward task. However, analysis of the available data indicates that the majority of EU Member States have implemented governmental regulations regarding staff-child ratios in centre-based ECEC settings[48] (Eurydice & EACEC, 2019).

Research reveals that the maximum **staff-child ratio** for the youngest children (0-3 years) generally varies between three and eight children per practitioner (see Teppers & Van Regenmortel, 2023; analysis based on 10 countries[49]). The Key Data from 2019 (Eurydice

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[48] *It should be noted that comparing adult-child ratios across EU Member States poses challenges. Each country may establish such ratios differently, depending on the types of staff employed, such as core practitioners and assistants. Some countries set limits based on the maximum number of children per staff member or core practitioner, rather than specifying a maximum number per group. Others regulate the maximum number of children per group, but grant flexibility to ECEC settings to decide the composition of staff (with or without assistants) and the number of children per group. These ratios typically take into account the ages of children, allowing higher maximum numbers as children grow older and more independent. Ratios may also depend on the presence of children with special support needs, and can also vary throughout the day (Eurydice & EACEC, 2019).*
[49] *Netherlands, France, Ireland, Luxembourg, Norway, Finland, Lithuania, Germany (Berlin), Estonia and Belgium.*

& EACEC, 2019) indicates that the maximum number of children per group is higher for older children (those aged above 3) compared with that for younger children (0-3 years).

In most ECEC systems, the **maximum group size** is different for each phase of ECEC: it increases from between 12 and 16 children at age 2 with teams of two or three staff members, to between 23 and 25 children at age 4, with one or two persons in charge.

In some EU Member States, the ECEC service or local authority has the autonomy to regulate the staff-child ratio and group size. On the other hand, there are national regulations for the entire ECEC age range in **Denmark**, **Latvia** and **Sweden**. In **Italy**, there are no national regulations on group sizes or staff-child ratios for children under the age of 3, as this type of provision is managed at regional and local levels, In **Belgium (Flemish Community)**, **France** and **the Netherlands**, the national authority regulates the ratios and group sizes for younger children (below 3 years), but does not do so for older children (Eurydice, 2019).

Table 4. Maximum number of children per staff member in centre-based ECEC settings for 2014 and 2019

	2 year olds		4 year olds			2 year olds		4 year olds	
	2014	2019	2014	2019		2014	2019	2014	2019
Finland	4	4	7	8	France	8	8	nr	nr
Slovenia	6	6	11	11	Bulgaria	nr	9	nr	23
Lithuania	15	15	20	20	Cyprus	16	16	25	25
Croatia	nr	14	nr	20	Greece	4	4	12.5	25
Sweden	nr	nr	nr	nr	Hungary	7	4	nr	8
Estonia	8	8	12	12	Portugal	9	9	12.5	13
Latvia	nr	nr	nr	nr	Belgium FR	7	7	20	20
Germany	5	variable	14	variable	Belgium NL	6.5	9	nr	nr
Denmark	nr	nr	nr	nr	Belgium DE	6	6	19	10
Spain	nr	18	nr	25	Italy	variable	nr	variable	26
Luxembourg	8	8	11	24	The Netherlands	x	8	x	nr
Austria	7.5	variable	12.5	variable	Poland	8	8	nr	25
Malta	6	6	20	19	Czechia	nr	12	nr	24
Romania	6	6	17	20	Slovakia	10	5	21	21
Ireland	8	6	8	8					

Source: based on Key Data 2014 (Eurydice et al., 2014) and Key Data 2019; Structural Indicators 2023 (Eurydice & EACEC, 2019, 2023); and SEEPRO-3 study (SEEPRO, 2024).

Note: Nr = no regulation; x = no data.

Table 4 presents disaggregated data for each EU Member State (and communities within them), as well as changes between 2014 and 2019. It reveals that several countries have regulated the staff-child ratio in recent years. This is the case in Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Spain, Hungary (only for the oldest age group) and Poland (only for the oldest age group). The data also imply positive changes in recent years in Hungary, Ireland and Slovakia for the youngest children in ECEC, and in Belgium (de) and Malta for older children in ECEC (aged 3-6). However, the data also suggest a more negative trend in Belgium (Flanders) for the youngest groups of children in ECEC, as well as in Greece, Luxemburg, Romania and Finland for older children in ECEC.

Teppers and Van Regenmortel (2023) provide detailed examples of regulations on adult-child ratios:

> The same ratios apply in **Ireland** as in **the Netherlands**, with the exception of a better ratio for 2-year-olds. These ratios apply to both part-time care (between 3.5 and 5 hours) and full-time care (>5 hours). These ratios are 1:3 for babies, 1:5 for 1-year-olds, and 1:6 for 2-year-olds.

In the **German state of Berlin**, the ratio increases for children from the age of 2. For children under 2 years old, there is a ratio of 1 full-time childcare worker for every 3.75 children in full-time day care (i.e. >7 hours). For children aged 2 years and older in full-time day care, a ratio of 1 full-time childcare worker for every 4.75 children applies. The number of children per full-time childcare worker increases when fewer hours of care are used per day.

In **Luxembourg,** a ratio of 1:6 applies for children under 2 years of age, while from 2 years to the age of 4, a ratio of 1:8 applies.

In **Lithuania**, horizontal groups (meaning mixed-age groups) have at least two childcare workers for a maximum of six babies; a maximum of 10 1-year-olds and a maximum of 15 2-year-olds. For babies under 1 year old, at least two qualified teachers (ISCED 6) must be present at the same time; from 1 year onwards, there must be at least one qualified teacher (ISCED 6) with at least two supervisors present (ISCED 3, 4 or 6).

Additional measures in relation to the staff-child ratio are crucial for children with **special support needs,** to ensure that these children receive the individualised attention and support necessary for their optimal development and inclusion in ECEC settings. Teppers and Van Regenmortel (2023) have highlighted such **additional measures**:

In **Lithuania**, a child with special support needs counts as two children.

In **Estonia**, a child with special support needs is counts as three children.

In **Finland and Italy** (for older children) and in the **German state of Berlin**, additional staff are deployed (assistants) for children with specific support needs.

In summary, the staff-child ratio in ECEC across the EU Member States typically ranges between 3 and 25 children per adult, depending on the age of the children. It is encouraging to note that some EU countries possess regulations governing this ratio. This is important, because research consistently shows that **smaller groups** and a greater number of **staff per child** result in more **enriching interactions**, fostering holistic child development and enabling professionals to better address diversity and inclusion (Siraj-Blatchford, 2006). However, meeting these quality standards poses challenges, particularly in the context of staff shortages and the limited availability of ECEC places.

Wages and type of employment

In most cases, wages for ECEC-staff are considered **rather low** in comparison, for example, to primary school teachers. The report on Teachers' and school heads' salaries and allowances in Europe (EC, 2022b) states that in the majority of countries, starting salaries for teachers increase according to the education level at which they teach. On average, in OECD countries, pre-primary practitioners earn only 74 % of the average salary earned by an average tertiary-educated, 25 to 64-year-old full-time employee (OECD, 2023). This situation is even worse for those employed in services for younger children under the age of 3 in split systems. Figures from various countries presented in the OECD Starting Strong VI report (OECD, 2021) reveal a **wide pay gap** between childcare staff and teachers working in education, with childcare staff in most countries being paid around minimum wage levels. As noted in Table 2, low salaries are one of the reasons for staff shortages.

Furthermore, recent data (OECD, 2021) regarding salaries reveals the following trends:

In many European countries, ECEC practitioners working with **older children** receive the **same statutory starting salary** as primary and secondary education teachers, as they usually have the same level of entry qualification (e.g. in Luxembourg, the Flemish community of Belgium, Denmark, Portugal, Slovenia, France, Italy, Finland, Poland, Slovakia and Czechia).

In other countries (such as Spain, Italy, Luxembourg, Hungary and the Netherlands), pre-primary teachers are required to have the same level of qualification to enter the teaching profession as primary teachers and, hence, have the **same statutory salary**.

Lastly, in several countries (such as Czechia, Malta, Slovakia, and Finland), the **level of pay and qualification requirements for pre-primary teachers are lower than those for primary and secondary teachers.** In three other countries (Germany, Estonia and Ireland), qualification requirements are lower, but no data are available regarding their statutory salaries. In Lithuania, the starting salaries of pre-primary teachers are lower despite being subject to similar qualification requirements.

The report on Teachers' and school heads' salaries and allowances in Europe (EC, 2022b[50]) shows changes in starting salaries over recent years, comparing 2014/2015 with 2020/2021. The data reveal a huge rises over recent years in Lithuania, Bulgaria, Latvia and Czechia[51].

In addition, a large proportion of ECEC staff work **part time.** This prevalence of part-time working hours might represent a preference among ECEC staff, particularly in relation to work-life/family balance. However, some EU Member States mainly employ full-time staff – as is the case, for example, in **Bulgaria, Cyprus, Estonia, Finland, France, Hungary, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia** and **Spain** (SEEPRO, 2024). The impact of part-time versus full-time contracts on the recruitment and retention of ECEC staff may warrant deeper investigation. However, evidence suggests that countries with full-time contracts do not necessarily exhibit lower staff shortages than those with part-time contracts, indicating a complex relationship between contract types and staffing challenges. Some EU Member States report lower rates of permanent employment among ECEC staff compared with the overall labour force, which might hinder recruitment and retention efforts. Moreover, the prevalence of short-term contracts might negatively affect participation in CPD programmes, further exacerbating issues in the workforce (OECD, 2021). In summary, the conditions of these contracts are likely to play a significant role and merit further investigation.

In some countries, reforms of staff wage policies are in place that **increase the salaries** of the ECEC workforce. Such initiatives are, among others, an important strategy to **overcome staff shortages,** to be included as part of an attraction/recruitment plan (see Table 2):

In **Czechia**, salaries have increased by about one-third over the last five years. The goal is to raise the average teacher's salary to 130 % of the average wage (Eurydice & EACEA, 2023).

In **Finland**, a new collective agreement in 2022 states that salaries in ECEC will be raised by 5 % up to 2025 (Eurydice & EACEA, 2023).

The **Estonian** Education Strategy (2021-2025) states that the salary of ECEC staff should be equal to the salary of primary school teachers (SEEPRO, 2024).

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[50] See https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/data-and-visuals/teachers-salaries and https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=https%3A%2F%2Feurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu%2Fsites%2Fdefault%2Ffiles%2F2022-10%2FDataToFigures.xlsx&wdOrigin=BROWSELINK

[51] *Percentage change in teachers' statutory starting salaries between 2014/2015 and 2020/2021 (at constant prices (Data source: EC, 2022b).*
- *High increases in Lithuania (164.5 %); Bulgaria (117.5 %); Latvia (73.9 %); and Czechia (61 %)*
- *Increases in Slovakia (39.3 %); Sweden (29.7 %); Hungary (22.1 %); Malta (20.4 %); Poland (14.3 %); Denmark (11.0 %); and Slovenia (10 %)*
- *Roughly stable but positive in Spain (2.9 %); Finland (2.2 %); France (1.3 %); Italy (0.4 %); Belgium, de & nl (0.2 %)*
- *Roughly stable but negative in Portugal (-2.5 %); Greece (-1.7 %); Cyprus (-0.6 %); Belgium, fr (-0.5 %)*

Hungary has also made progress in acknowledging the role of ECEC staff by raising their salaries (Eurydice & EACEA, 2023).

In **Lithuania**, the salaries of ECEC core practitioners (for children aged 0-6 years) were raised significantly in 2020 and aligned with those of primary school teachers. In 2021 and 2022, salaries for all teachers rose by 10 % (Eurydice & EACEA, 2023); the salaries of ECEC staff increased by over 46 %, and for pre-primary staff there was an increase of over 30 % (SEEPRO, 2024).

In **Sweden**, the government has since 2016 allocated funding for municipalities to raise teacher salaries (the teacher salary boost) (SEEPRO, 2024).

In **Norway**, prior to 2008, kindergarten teachers had the lowest wages of all of the pedagogical professions. From then until 2018, incomes rose and kindergarten teachers are now no longer among the lowest-paid groups within the public sector (SEEPRO, 2024).

Initiatives to increase salary are also in place in **Slovenia**, **Latvia** and **France** (SEEPRO, 2024).

In conclusion, as a response to staff shortages, many countries are striving to make jobs in the ECEC sector more attractive. **Raising salaries** is one of the means of achieving this, by **valuing the status** of ECEC staff and the work they do.

Overall, some experts claim there is a lack of legal frameworks that describe the basic working conditions required for staff in ECEC, as compared to staff in other domains, such as in higher levels of education (EC, 2021b). In split systems, greater homogeneity is needed in working conditions between the two phases of ECEC[52].

B.2.4.2. Strategies to improve working conditions for ECEC staff

Some reforms are currently ongoing with regard to the **adult-child ratio**. Three examples were found in the documents consulted:

The **Flemish government in Belgium** decided to amend the decree on childcare. In the revised document, attention is paid to an adequate child-adult ratio. The staff-child ratio for children under 3 years old will decrease from 1:8/9 to 1:5 for infants, and 1:7 for toddlers. For mixed groups, the child ratio will be 1:7 (Agentschap Opgroeien, 2024).

In **the Netherlands**, since 2019, a ratio of 1:3 has applied to babies (under 1 year old); for 1-year-olds, the ratio is 1:5, and for 2-year-olds, a ratio of 1:8 applies. These ratios apply in horizontal groups. In addition, there is a criterion for an "attachment person": at least one permanent face must be present for every day a child is present. This attachment person should provide stability and social-emotional security for the child and its parents. The aim of this requirement is that the attachment person should not change too often. However, since 2023, there has been greater flexibility with regard to this criterion. For example, if the service cannot meet this criterion, another childcare worker may be deployed. This option to deviate from the requirement only applies in the case of short-term absence due to illness, holiday or leave of one or more childcare workers (Teppers & Van Regenmortel, 2023).

In **Denmark**, a law on minimum standards for staff-child ratios (decided in 2020) is in place from 2024 (EC, 2023b). Its aim is to reduce the staff-child ratio to 1:3 in day care and 1:6 in nursery services (from the Danish National Action Plan).

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[52] *This is also reported in the outputs of the European project INTRANS, which focused on inclusive transitions in the early years in Italy, Slovenia, Denmark, Finland and the Flemish Community of Belgium (https://www.issa.nl/intrans).*

In **Finland**, an amendment to the Act on ECEC has restored the staff-child ratio to 1:7 for children aged 3 and over, as well as on the reporting obligations of ECEC staff. This regulation came into force from January 2023 (Eurochild, 2022).

Slovenia has reduced the group size for vulnerable children (5 children can form a group) in preschools (Eurochild, 2022).

In contrast, in **Poland**, standards have been lowered, allowing a greater number of children within a day care centre, in order to cater for Ukrainian children. This has resulted in poorer ratios (Eurochild, 2022).

It is crucial to have clear regulations regarding the staff-child ratio and the maximum number of children per group, as these have a direct impact on meaningful and rich interactions with children, reciprocal relationships with families and the workload of staff. The data show that some countries still possess no national regulations, leaving this to the autonomy of a more local level, or even to the providers or ECEC centres. In the latter case, a clear governance structure is needed in order to secure this important quality indicator.

B.2.5. Conclusions on training and the working conditions of staff

The training and working conditions of all staff in ECEC settings (core practitioners, assistants and leaders) are of paramount importance in ensuring high-quality ECEC for children and families. While there is widespread recognition of the necessity for trained and qualified staff, persistent **staff shortages** pose a significant challenge across many European countries. This should be a matter of urgent concern for many reasons, including the availability of and access to ECEC; process quality in ECEC; inclusive ECEC; child safety and well-being; the stability of the ECEC workforce; the attractiveness to the job; and economic impacts. (For a detailed description of these impacts, see the Policy Brief on staff shortage, EC, 2023b, pp. 6-7).

The issue of staff shortages is compounded by often **low qualification requirements** and **limited opportunities for continuous professional development** (CPD), especially for core practitioners in ECEC for younger children (those aged 0-3 years), and for assistants during all phases of ECEC.

Furthermore, the complexity of the problem of staff shortages is intertwined with broader issues, such as access to ECEC services. Increasing the number of high-quality places in ECEC settings is crucial; hence, it demands a multifaceted approach. As has previously been mentioned, some countries have seen a trend towards **temporarily lowering the qualification requirement** as a short-term solution to staff shortages. However, this response might lead to the **de-professionalisation** of the ECEC-sector, harming the quality of ECEC for children and families. Moreover, this appears to be a solution that in the long term might reduce the attractiveness of the profession itself, and thus paradoxically exacerbate staff shortages. Other options, including raising initial training requirements and prioritising CPD with an emphasis on long-term mentorship, team reflection, job shadowing and pedagogical coaching for all staff (among others) would seem more favourable.

The data analysed for this report reveals **variability in staff qualification requirements and CPD** opportunities among the various EU Member States. However, in general ECEC staff (especially in services for children under the age of 3) are relatively low-qualified. An **increase in standards** is needed in order to attract and retain highly qualified professionals within the sector, as rich and meaningful interactions are crucial to process quality in ECEC. Some countries, such as Ireland, have taken important steps forward in this direction. While it should be noted that these reforms are just the first steps in a sector that has been (and remains) undervalued for decades, it is important to recognise them as positive changes for the whole ECEC system.

We see a trend in some countries towards focusing on the **recruitment of qualified staff**. Some countries strive for all staff members to be highly qualified (e.g. all ISCED 6). Other countries opt for a certain proportion of highly qualified staff members at team level, leading to a diverse team. In the latter case, determining the optimal ratio between the highly qualified and less qualified staff members within a team remains the subject of ongoing debate. Guaranteeing **diversity within teams** (in terms of gender, socio-cultural background, qualification level, and so on) can be positive – as long as all staff members are well supported. As stated in the report 'How to recruit, train and motivate well-qualified staff' (EC, 2021b), a diverse workforce significantly benefits all children and families, as it brings a wider range of skills, attitudes and experiences into the ECEC setting. This is true in all situations. But it is particularly important when there are staff shortages, and when the ECEC sector wishes to attract potential groups of staff who are often overlooked. The CoRe study (Urban et al., 2011) has shown that successful strategies to support team diversity include the creation of a **wider range** of well thought-out **qualifying pathways**; focusing on the recognition of prior learning for experienced untrained professionals; and the provision of additional courses to support students from a minority ethnic background. Such measures could help to attract a diverse workforce in terms of qualifications, experience, socio-economic and ethnic background, and gender. All of this should go together with a **strong in-service pedagogical support system for all staff members**. In order to such support in place, **pedagogical coaching** is needed, with investment in leaders and pedagogical coaches, as well as **child-free hours** for staff to reflect together on practice.

Within this discourse, attention should also be paid to the **initial training and CPD of assistants and leaders**. This is still often overlooked in EU Member States. Investment should be made in the training and support of assistants, as they work together with core practitioners on a daily basis with children and families, and their role can support social inclusion and the reciprocal relationship with families. More attention should be paid to guaranteeing time for assistants and core practitioners to reflect together. This is crucial, since both types of professionals work with the same children and families. In addition, the role of **leaders** in terms of training and support also requires more investment, as leadership is crucial in improving the quality of ECEC. Furthermore, strategies to reinforce qualifications and **career growth** in mixed teams needs to be further explored (Van Huizen et al., 2024).

Qualitative data on the **content and types of initial and in-service training** is lacking. Such data is crucial to determining the real investment being made in improving staff competences. It is important to analyse this further, as the content of such training should align with recent research calling for a holistic and inclusive "educare" approach to ECEC. One recent exploratory EU study shows that there is room for improvement at this level (Karila et al., 2022).

Lastly, the **working conditions** of ECEC staff need to be given sufficient attention. In many EU Member States, steps forward have been taken. However, in many EU Member States the conditions for ECEC staff are worse than those of staff at other educational levels. Huge differences in staff-child ratios are still reported between countries. Even though several EU Member States have made progress, there is still potential for improvement – and homogenisation – in working conditions in ECEC in Europe.

In conclusion, while efforts have been made to address the training needs and working conditions of ECEC staff, more concerted and **systemic efforts** are required to elevate standards, address staff shortages, and prioritise high-quality training and CPD initiatives in order to ensure high quality ECEC across Europe. Staff shortages could become a major obstacle in the coming years if it is not addressed on a significant scale. This could hinder the development in other areas of the EQF. Coherent long-term plans are necessary to tackle the issue of staff shortages by improving the attractiveness of the profession. These plans must include investments in the content of qualifications, and in working conditions

and in-service support and training. All of these are elements that – in addition to having a positive influence on practice with children and families – would make the profession more attractive.

B.3. Curricula

> *"Curriculum is a powerful tool to improve well-being, development and learning of children. A broad pedagogical framework sets out the principles for sustaining children's development and learning through educational and care practices that meet children's interests, needs and potentialities"* (CEU, 2019, p. 12). Member States are therefore called to *"Enhance the development of early years' curricula in order to follow children's interests, nurture their well-being and meet the unique needs and potential of each individual child, including those with special needs or in a vulnerable or disadvantaged situation"* (CEU, 2019)

Curricula are a central aspect of the Council Recommendation for high-quality ECEC systems (CEU, 2019) as it defines children's experiences in the ECEC sector, and has a direct impact on rich and meaningful interactions between children and parents and ECEC professionals. Curricula should follow children's interests, starting from the **uniqueness of each child** and each parent, and they should nurture their well-being and involvement. In general, the content of different curricula or guidelines varies, but they should ensure a balance between physical, social, emotional, motor and cognitive growth. They are intended to support ECEC settings in defining their vision and improving the quality of care, learning and play, as well as ensuring high-quality ECEC. In general, curricula should be **inclusive**, **holistic** and **appropriate** for all children and families (CEU, 2019; Eurydice & EACEA, 2023).

B.3.1. State of play

Some EU Member States have **unitary** pedagogical guidelines for the whole ECEC period of 0-6 years. Others apply different sets of pedagogical guidelines to the two phases of ECEC, or possess guidelines only for the second phase (3-6 years old). Nevertheless, all EU Member States possess official guidelines for at least the **last years of the ECEC period**. The differences observed between countries are linked to the degree of integration of their ECEC systems (see section Part A, e.g. Figure 3 and 4, for more details), mostly relating to the model of authority (i.e. dual or single, as explained in Part B – Section 5 on Governance and Funding).

In almost all countries with an **integrated system** and where a **single authority** oversees the whole ECEC system, integrated pedagogical guidelines are laid down for the whole age range of ECEC (Eurydice & EACEA, 2023).

In contrast to integrated pedagogical guidelines, some countries – mostly those with **a split system** and **dual authorities** – have separate guidelines for the two phases of ECEC, each with different educational components. Several such countries have, in the last decade, introduced pedagogical guidelines for ECEC services for younger children (0-3). This is the case in Belgium (Flemish Community), France, Luxembourg and Portugal (Eurydice et al., 2014; Eurydice & EACEA, 2023). In the Flemish Community of Belgium and in France, the pedagogical guidelines for 0-3 years are not binding, while those for 3-6 years are. All other pedagogical guidelines in those countries with two different curricula are binding (Eurydice & EACEA, 2023). It should be noted that a quarter of the EU Member States still do not possess any pedagogical guidelines or curricula for ECEC services aimed at the youngest children (aged 0-3) (Eurydice & EACEA, 2023). However, if we compare these data with those from 2014 (Eurydice & Eurostat, 2014), an improvement can be seen: in 2014, half of all EU countries had no pedagogical guidelines for settings for children under 3 years old.

The **alignment** of pedagogical guidelines, curricula or frameworks across the whole ECEC period is a goal that has yet to be achieved among the EU Member States. The **coherence** and **continuity** of pedagogical guidelines are important for children and parents to counter

the fragmentation of different educational systems and to smooth transitions (Vandenbroeck et al., 2018). The same is true for transitions to primary school: there should be alignment between ECEC and primary school curricula, to prevent gaps from one level to the other (Vandenbroeck et al., 2018), and to facilitate transitions, which are crucial steps for children and their families. Importantly, this should start from a shift in the ambitions for the ECEC sector, whereby both ECEC and primary education are perceived as being equally important. Within such a coherent framework, the specificity of the ECEC period must be preserved and valued, to avoid the risk of so-called "schoolification of the ECEC sector"[53].

B.3.2. Strategies to improve the quality of curricula

As discussed in the section that follows, in recent years some EU Member States have revised their curricula or pedagogical[54] guidelines or frameworks, or implemented new ones, with the aim of reinforcing the ECEC quality.

Analysis of the Child Guarantee National Action Plans reveals that some Member States are also planning to work on renewing their **curricula**, introducing national quality standards and other quality measures. However, very few examples were found in the present analysis of these plans, and often these reforms were already ongoing.

Two specific examples of planned actions concerning the curriculum mentioned in the National Action Plans are:

> In **Croatia**, the Ministry of Education in July 2023 published a public call for members of a working group that will develop a new proposal for the National Curriculum Framework for ECEC. The new curriculum aligns with the National Development Strategy and the national Recovery and Resilience Plan.

> In **Finland**, a proposal is being prepared for a licence requirement for private ECEC, including the use of pedagogical guidelines.

The strategies mentioned in reforms can be grouped into the following types: 1) developing an integrated curriculum for children from 0-6 years old; 2) adding pedagogical guidelines for children 0-3 years old; and 3) revisiting existing pedagogical guidelines.

The strategies below are analysed on the basis of these groupings.

B.3.2.1. Developing an integrated curriculum for children 0-6 years old

> Some EU Member States are taking steps towards an integrated ECEC curriculum. This helps in overcoming the fragmentation between the two ECEC phases (0-3 and 3-6). A specific example is **Italy**, where there has been a change towards integrated pedagogical guidelines across the whole ECEC period (for children aged 0–6 years). **Italy** began this in 2015 with its national "Reform on the Integrated System of ECEC from birth to six years" (Lazzari, 2018). In 2022, the "Pedagogical guidelines for the integrated system" were developed. These guidelines provide the general framework for educational and organisational aspects of the whole ECEC system (for children aged 0-6 years). The integrated guidelines oversee two other frameworks: the new "National guidelines for the early childhood education services" (0-3 years old, released in 2022) and the "National Guidelines for the curriculum for ECEC for children aged 3-6" (from 2012) (Eurydice & EACEA, 2023).

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[53] *By "schoolification", we mean the tendency to treat children as "academic learners" at younger ages (Moss, 2013). With a schoolification approach, each "educational" context tends to "prepare" children for what comes next (preschool prepares children for primary school, which prepares them for secondary school). This risks losing contact with the essence of education in the here and now. Within the schoolification perspective, a hierarchy usually exists between care and education, which hinders the potential for a holistic "educare" approach.*

[54] *The term "educational guidelines" is often used. In this report, we use the term "pedagogical guidelines", to stress the difference in comparison to primary education.*

In **Romania**, discussions at national level around the EQF led to a project in 2017 with the goal of elaborating a curriculum framework for ECEC from birth to 6 years old (Lazzari, 2018).

Another specific example is **Finland**, which has an integrated curriculum for children 0-6 years old, followed by one-year pre-primary education (6/7 years old). Between 2021 and 2024, some early education centres have participated in a trial to extend the pre-primary education programme to two years (5/6-7 years old). The pilot curriculum used is therefore separate from the rest of ECEC. Thus, a reverse process is occurring, from a more integrated to a more split curriculum. It would be interesting to investigate the reasons and implications of this choice in greater depth.

B.3.2.2. Developing pedagogical guidelines for 0-3 years old

As previously mentioned, some countries did not have pedagogical guidelines for the first phase of ECEC (0-3 years) in place. Over the last decade, a number of EU Member States have been developing and introducing such guidelines, stressing the importance of high-quality ECEC for the youngest children.

In **Portugal**, a set of pedagogical guidelines for *crèches* have been in preparation since 2019. This led in 2024 to the Pedagogical Guidelines for *Crèches* (PGC, 0-3 years old). These guidelines are coherent with the Curricular Guidelines for Pre-Primary Education (3-6 years old). This deepens the idea of integrated ECEC from 0 to 6 years of age, while safeguarding the specific characteristics of ECEC for the youngest children.

In **France,** in 2017, a National Framework for the Care of Young Children was developed. This led to the curricular framework that was introduced by a national regulation in 2021 (*Charte nationale de qualité d'accueil*), for children 0-3 years old.

In 2017, **Luxembourg** established a national reference framework for non-formal education (*Cadre de référence national sur l'éducation non formelle des enfants et des jeunes*) for children aged 0-4 years. In 2019, an amending regulation was added to cover multilingual education in the non-formal sector. This framework co-exists with pedagogical guidelines for children from 3 years-old who attend preschool services. A commission (which comprises representatives of the ministry responsible, the communes, the providers, parents and scientific experts) examines and revises this framework every three years (SEEPRO, 2024).

In 2016, the **Flemish Community** in **Belgium** issued the Pedagogical Framework for Childcare for Babies and Toddlers (0-3 years old) (NESET, 2017). This framework stresses the importance of ECEC (for children aged 0-3) for children, families and society. This curriculum is non-binding.

Nine countries[55] do not currently have pedagogical guidelines in place for the first phase of ECEC (0-3 years old). However, the Netherlands and Poland are in the process of developing such guidelines.

In **the Netherlands,** where ECEC is often carried out by the private sector, there are no national ECEC curricula for children until the age of 4 years. However, centre-based settings must apply an education programme targeting disadvantaged children aged 2.5 to 4 years (Eurydice & EACEA, 2023). As mentioned in the SEEPRO

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[55] Countries without guidelines for the 0-3 phase of ECEC are: the Netherlands, Poland, *Czechia*, *Slovakia*, Greece, Bulgaria, Albania and Portugal. The German Community of Belgium also lacks such guidelines (Eurydice & Eurostat, 2023).

report (2024), various initiatives are being undertaken to formulate a Dutch pedagogical framework and curriculum. These curricula are not yet recognised by the government, although training is offered. More recently, in 2022, the national organisation of companies in the childcare sector published a discussion paper to develop a shared pedagogical vision on caring for and educating young children in the ECEC sector.

In **Poland,** a reform initiated in 2020 aims to create a framework for quality standards for the ECEC sector, including guidelines covering ECEC for children under the age of 3 (EC, 2024).

B.3.2.3. Revising existing pedagogical guidelines

In recent years, several countries have revised (or are currently revising) their pedagogical guidelines (Eurydice & EACEA, 2023; SEEPRO, 2024):

Revisions and updates to integrated pedagogical guidelines have been (or are being) carried out in: Germany (2022), Denmark (2020), Estonia (ongoing, within the broader Education Strategy 2021-2025), Finland (2022), Lithuania (ongoing, introduction scheduled for 2025), Spain (in 2020 and 2022) and Sweden (in 2018 and 2022). Slovenia also started its revision process in 2022.

Revisions and updates to the pedagogical guidelines for 3-6 years old have been (or are being) carried out in: the French Community of Belgium (2020), France (2021), Czechia (2021), Cyprus (2020), Greece (in 2023, after piloting since 2022) and Slovakia (2022).

It is interesting to note that many of the new pedagogical guidelines include reference to supporting the **language development** of children, especially for multilingual children. This is the case in France, Belgium (French Community), Cyprus, Czechia, Luxembourg and the Netherlands. For more on recent guidelines, see the recent NESET report on multilingualism and ECEC (Bergeron-Morin et al., 2023). Other countries have put additional emphasis on a **holistic approach** (Portugal), on **child-centred and play-based practices** (Denmark), **children's rights** (Italy), and support for children with **specific support needs** (Finland). The OECD's "Starting Strong" report IV provides a complete overview of the main focus of various curricula (OECD, 2021).

In some countries, changes have resulted from **multi-perspective** dialogues between different stakeholders, which have sought a deeper and shared understanding of quality, aiming for ownership by and engagement with all the actors concerned. This was the case, for example, in Denmark, Cyprus and Portugal.

▪ In **Denmark**, the Ministry of Children and Education in 2018 commissioned the revision of the curricular framework by a group of experts, stakeholders and practitioners within the pedagogical field. This process led to what is now called the "strengthened pedagogical curriculum" (Ministry of Children and Education, 2020). The basic principles of this revision include an image of the child as unique; taking into account the child's perspective; viewing play as an integral part of ECEC activities; having a broad understanding of learning through play, relationships, planned activities and the exploration of nature; viewing the group as a learning community; creating a safe and stimulating pedagogical learning environment; cooperating with parents; providing for vulnerable children; and ensuring continuity with school (SEEPRO, 2024).

In **Cyprus**, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sport and Youth, along with the Ministry of Social Welfare Services, was involved in a project funded by the European Commission and operated with the support of UNICEF. In this context, a working group of experts from both ministries and from the field of ECEC have been meeting

to define the elements of high-quality ECEC for all children. They are also providing suggestions for their development and implementation (SEEPRO, 2024.)

In **Portugal**, a broader reform in 2020 on inclusion in the context of the whole education system also influenced the development of the ECEC curriculum. This was guided by discussions with local, provincial and national stakeholders. (See the OECD report, 2022b for more information.)

The above examples are interesting as they stress the importance of the involvement of all **stakeholders**. This is crucial for pedagogical guidelines and frameworks to become an instrument for the improvement of quality at the level of the ECEC service, with the aim of ensuring high process quality for all children and families. When the development of curricula does not involve those people who will be implementing the guidelines in practice (ECEC staff, leaders, trainers, coaches, and so on), there is a risk of creating resistance towards the guidelines themselves. Such resistance has been documented in interviews with various members of ECEC staff in Lithuania following the reintroduction of national guidelines, which had previously been decentralised in 1993 (Monkevičienė et al., 2024).

In conclusion, several EU Member States are putting efforts into shared curricula or pedagogical guidelines covering the entire period of ECEC (0-6 years). In Member States with a split system, guidelines for the youngest children (0-3 years) were often previously lacking. Although the latter are still absent in a number of countries, we notice a trend within some EU Member States, which are taking steps forward, emphasising that ECEC for the **youngest children** is not only perceived as "minding children", but instead has a clear pedagogical and social function for children, families and society. In addition, several EU Member States are working on **the integration** of ECEC for the youngest children (0-3 years) and ECEC for older children (3-6 years), countering the fragmentation that can exist between the two phases of the ECEC system.

It should also be noted that although several EU Member States are currently developing or revising their curricula or pedagogical guidelines for ECEC, this is not always mentioned in their National Action Plans. The reasons for this decision should be examined. It could imply that curricula and pedagogical guidelines are not generally perceived as being elements that can reduce inequality or combat child poverty. However, the contents of curricula have the potential to guide and shape interactions with children and parents in ECEC centres. This is strongly connected to the way in which an ECEC centre is able to **value diversity and inclusion**; hence, they are an important vehicle for more inclusive, high-quality ECEC.

B.3.3. Conclusions on curricula

The data analysed sheds light on a trend observed across a number of European Member States, which are refreshing their curricula or pedagogical guidelines. In some cases, other Member States have even introduced entirely new curricula or pedagogical frameworks.

It should be noted that those countries that are implementing ongoing reforms in curricula must ensure that these efforts are **sustained** and **align with** initial training, professional development opportunities, and the monitoring and evaluation systems – again, stressing the intertwined nature of the EQF quality areas (CEU, 2019).

Because this report does not analyse the **content** of the curricula, we cannot comment on the diverse pedagogical offers within the curricula. Data on the contents of the curricula are available in the Eurydice reports (2019). Nevertheles, more **qualitative data** on the actual implementation of curricula are needed. Curricula should value and enable the **holistic** development[56] of children and a **co-educative** relationship with families within the community. As part of this approach, familiarisation processes are crucial to

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[56] *This is also referred to as the concept of "educare" in some countries (Broström, 2018; Jensen, 2018; Sharmahd et al., 2021, Van der Mespel et al., 2020).*

establishing a good and reciprocal relationship with families that favours smooth and warm transitions (Karila et al., 2022). In addition, specific attention should also be paid to how **ECEC spaces and materials** are organised, in continuity with the vision of Loris Malaguzzi. As Malaguzzi saw the space itself as a "third educator" (i.e. children learn from other children, from adults and from the space). Such an idea has also been stated, for example, in the policy recommendations of the EU project Educas (Creating Child and family-friendly learning spaces in ECEC centres)[57].

Furthermore, the **circular relationship** between **observation, planning, documenting and reflecting** should play a central role in the development of a curriculum. These processes are essential methodological tools to enhance children's participation and voice in pedagogical decision-making and planning processes (Van Laere et al., 2021).

In general, curricula should give **guidance**, rather than being too rigidly prescriptive. They should stimulate the **innovative** nature of ECEC and **value experimentation**. They should also take into account the **context** of the ECEC services in relation to the children and parents participating in the ECEC service and the staff who work in these services. Hence, curricula and pedagogical guidelines should allow sufficient **autonomy** for staff, valuing their professional role and providing the necessary support. This could positively influence their professional identity, which in turn might have a positive impact on staff retention.

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[57] https://www.issa.nl/sites/default/files/u730/EDUCAS_Policy_recommendations_0.pdf

B.4. Monitoring and evaluation

"Monitoring and evaluation sustain quality. By pointing out strengths and weaknesses, its processes can be important components of enhancing quality in early childhood education systems. They can provide support to stakeholders and policy-makers in undertaking initiatives that respond to the needs of children, parents and local communities" (CEU, 2019, p. 13). Member States are therefore called to *"promote transparent and coherent monitoring and evaluation of ECEC services at the appropriate levels with a view to policy development and implementation". (CEU, 2019)*

This chapter analyses the current state of play on monitoring and evaluation (M&E), focusing on external evaluation by inspection, internal evaluation (self-evaluation), and monitoring of the ECEC system at macro level. It is crucial that such M&E system should be a **transparent** and **coherent** system, revealing relevant data at local, regional and / or national level. It should lead to improvements in the quality of policy and practice that are in the best interests of the child (EQF, 2014).

The ECEC Working Group document "Improving the governance of monitoring and evaluation of quality ECEC" (WG ECEC, 2023b) states that the **advantages of coherent monitoring and evaluation systems** (M&E) are:

- enabling a shared vision of quality pedagogy (especially process quality), to inform each individual ECEC setting;

- ensuring that this shared vision of quality permeates across all types of ECEC provision;

- enabling authorities at higher levels to be aware of, and responsive to, needs identified at the more granular level (especially at high-need districts or centres); and

creating feedback loops in which individual-level findings can be aggregated and converted into changes at higher levels of policy-making, while new policy changes or approaches at higher levels of the ECEC system can feed into the practices of individual ECEC centres.

In its report on Making ECEC More Inclusive Through Monitoring and Evaluation of Quality, the Working Group on ECEC (2023c) identified several characteristics of an efficient M&E system that enable the evaluation of an ECEC system's inclusiveness:

"Information to be collected should inform the evaluation of both structural and process quality, it should combine quantitative and qualitative data, and it should recognise and address ethical and sensitive issues;

Multi-professional teams and a whole range of resources (methodological, legal, technical, financial) need to be available to support the M&E system;

Clear and detailed definitions of target groups to be included in ECEC must be agreed and understood by all stakeholders;

Many sources of information can be used to provide information and data to improve the quality and the inclusiveness of ECEC systems; some of the sources support the evaluation of structural quality, others contribute more to the evaluation of process quality and some contribute to both;

A system is in place to ensure quality and reliability of data and an adequate coordination of services / tools which collect data;

It is essential to build and maintain trust between the individuals / organisations providing the data and those collecting and using it;

> There must be a clear understanding by all parties of why the data is being collected and how it is going to be used;

> All the stakeholders who organise, deliver or benefit from ECEC should be heard at some stage of the M&E process. A methodology should also be in place to listen to families who do not use ECEC services."

Similarly, the NESET report on the first lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic (Van Laere et al., 2021, p. 74) also stressed the importance of a **coherent M&E system** that uses a combination of top-down "controlling" approaches and bottom-up "supporting" approaches. The evidence analysed from this COVID-NESET report (2021) indicates that the supportive element of monitoring proved to be especially useful in sustaining the ability of teams to review and improve their practice during the pandemic crisis.

The aforementioned Working Group document (WG ECEC, 2023b) mentions several **challenges** present in most European Member States with regard to their monitoring and evaluation systems:

- **Aligning** M&E processes within the complex governance arrangements under which ECEC provision is regulated, funded and managed in each country. This can lead to a **fragmented** data architecture, which has a negative impact on the usability of data for developing comprehensive quality improvement initiatives.

- If there is a lack of **coordination** between the bodies responsible for M&E, there may be inconsistencies in data collection, or gaps between quality assurance and improvement mechanisms. Policy-makers may struggle to design M&E systems that encourage higher quality, as it is easier to focus on ensuring that ECEC providers simply comply with minimum standards.

- It is important to **align** external and internal evaluation processes and tools for quality enhancement. However, this is not self-evident. For example, when data are collected only through self-evaluation processes, this may raise the issue of reliability; when data are collected only through external evaluation, such data are usually not systematically aggregated across levels in a way that can inform the improvement of ECEC quality at the level of the whole system (WG 2023).

- Coordinating M&E has potentially **high costs**.

In a nutshell, it is crucial that M&E systems are **aligned, coordinated and comprehensive** in order for them to have a positive impact on children, families and ECEC staff.

In addition, under different governance systems, the challenges faced can be different (WG ECEC, 2023b, p. 6-8):

- In **centralised systems**, while data collection and analysis might be easier at central level, this might make it more difficult to develop quality improvement initiatives that are tailored to local needs. In contrast, in **decentralised** systems, the situation is inverted, with data collection, aggregation and analysis being more difficult, due to responsibilities being spread across various regional and local authorities, while local needs are more easily heard.

- In **integrated** systems, where a single ministry coordinates ECEC provision, M&E processes are usually carried out within a unitary approach for services attended by children from birth until compulsory primary school age, thus facilitating coherent quality development initiatives across the whole ECEC sector. However, responsibilities for implementing M&E systems might be split across different agencies, inspectorates, or regional and local authorities. Also, quality frameworks defined at a central level for M&E can be very broad, and therefore the actual tools and indicators used for M&E may differ dramatically between regions. In contrast,

in **split systems**, where the responsibilities for M&E and the quality of ECEC provisions are divided between different ministries and various regional and local authorities, there is the risk of increased fragmentation in M&E initiatives.

B.4.1. State of play

B.4.1.1. External evaluation

In the various EU Member States, the **external evaluation** of ECEC settings can address structural and process quality[58]. Both **structural quality and process quality** are needed in order to provide high-quality ECEC systems (EC, 2014; Eurydice & EACEA, 2019; WG ECEC, 2023b). Hence, both structural and process quality should be the topic of external evaluations.

The data described in Key Data on ECEC (2019 and 2014) reveal that for older children (aged over 3 years), this is often usually the case: both structural and process quality are addressed in the external evaluation of ECEC services (Eurydice & EACEA, 2019). This is not always the case in the ECEC services for younger children (aged below 3 years). A similar picture was observed in 2014 (Eurydice et al., 2014): with ECEC settings for older children being more often subject to thorough evaluation, compared with those for younger children (under 3 years).

In several EU Member States (such as Germany, Lithuania and the Nordic countries[59]), external evaluation is not performed at a national level. Instead, **ECEC providers** (such as local authorities, municipalities, NGOs or other private bodies) are responsible in organising external evaluation: by who, which aspects are being evaluated, etc.

B.4.1.2. Internal evaluation

In addition to external evaluation, internal evaluation is crucial in an aligned M&E system. Internal evaluation outcomes may include, for example, a self-evaluation report, an annual activity report, a development plan or a revised pedagogical plan. The Key Data on ECEC (Eurydice & EACEA, 2019[60]) reveals that not all European Member States possess regulations or recommendations on the internal evaluation of ECEC services. This applies particularly to ECEC services for younger children (aged 0-3) in countries with separate settings for the two phases of ECEC, such as in Belgium (German-speaking Community), Bulgaria, Czechia, Greece, France, Hungary, Malta, Poland and Romania. Moreover, in Italy and Austria, no governmental or national recommendations or requirements are in place for settings to carry out any form of internal evaluation throughout the whole period of ECEC. In Austria, arrangements for the internal evaluation of ECEC services are up to each of the country's federal states.

Three categories of internal evaluations are described in The Key Data on ECEC 2019, based on the degree of obligation, the frequency specified, and the expected outcome of internal evaluations stated (Eurydice & EACEA, 2019). These are:

Loose framework: recommended; no defined frequency; no defined outcomes; no requirement to develop their own strategy.

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[58] *See Box 1 on structural and process quality.*

[59] *For example, in **Denmark**, local authorities are responsible for monitoring and evaluating public ECEC provision. Municipalities set objectives within the national legal framework, as well as guidelines for evaluation, and are responsible for carrying out quality assurance processes. A report is then produced, describing quality developments in the municipal ECEC system. The Danish Evaluation Institute (EVA) – an independent state institution operating at national level – contributes to ensuring the development of quality in ECEC throughout Denmark by working to enhance local knowledge and competences on evaluation and quality issues in daycare centres and local municipalities (WG ECEC, 2023b, p. 24).*

[60] *No data on internal evaluations were provided in Key Data on ECEC in 2014.*

Moderate framework: compulsory; no specific frequency, but must be regular or continuous; requirements for settings to develop their own strategies; outcomes not always defined.

Strong framework: compulsory; specific frequency of between one and three years; defined outcomes; no requirement to develop their own strategies.[61]

There are some ECEC systems in which a framework exists for the internal evaluation of ECEC services, but this can be considered rather "**loose**" with a lot of **autonomy** for ECEC services (e.g. in Germany, Ireland, Croatia and the Netherlands for the whole ECEC phase; Portugal for the ECEC-services for younger children aged 0-3). In these loose M&E systems, internal evaluation is not compulsory, but recommended. ECEC settings in general have a good deal of autonomy as to how and when they carry out this task, and what the expected outcomes might be. In two of these loose M&E countries (i.e. Ireland and Croatia), the situation differs slightly, as a standardised self-evaluation process is offered to ECEC settings as a source of guidance for internal evaluations.

In the majority of ECEC systems in the EU, the governmental framework for internal evaluation can be considered "**strong**". Internal evaluation is **compulsory,** and often the "when" (from annually to every three years) is defined by governmental authorities, as well as the expected outcomes (such as a self-evaluation report, an annual activity report, a development plan or a revision of the setting's pedagogical plan). The "how" (i.e. the process for internal evaluation) is often not specified by law. Internal evaluation is strongly framed across the whole ECEC period in Belgium's French Community, for example, as well as in Spain, the three Baltic countries, Slovenia and Slovakia. In the majority of these countries (i.e. Spain, the three Baltic countries and Slovenia), ECEC falls under the remit of the same authority for the whole age range (WG ECEC, 2023b, pp. 25-26).

A small group of EU countries fall into the "**moderate**" category, in which internal evaluation is compulsory, but ECEC services are responsible for developing their own strategy, timing and expected outcomes.

B.4.1.3. Monitoring

Some EU Member States also **monitor** the entire ECEC system at a system-wide level. The Key Data on ECEC (Eurydice & EACEA, 2019) mentions that almost two-thirds of ECEC systems have some form of mechanism to ensure that the results from the monitoring of ECEC settings are collected in samples of ECEC-services. The aim of such monitoring is not to provide information on the performance of individual ECEC services. Instead, the data provide useful information at a macro level, with the aim of offering clear lessons learned for national or governmental authorities.

Overall, a **coherent M&E system** is crucial for quality ECEC. This implies a system in which internal evaluation, external evaluation, and monitoring are aligned and synchronised. With regard to external evaluation, a difference can again be seen in countries with a split system: in such countries, external evaluations are more common in ECEC services for the oldest children. With regard to internal evaluation, the EU Member States can be categorised on a continuum from "strong" (where internal evaluation is compulsory and strongly regulated), through "moderate", to "loose" (offering a good deal of autonomy to the ECEC services). This variation can relate to differences in governance mechanisms (see Part B – Section 5, Governance and funding).

B.4.2. Strategies to improve the quality of the monitoring and evaluation systems

Eurydice (Eurydice & EACEA, 2023), the SEEPRO country reports (SEEPRO, 2024) and the Working Group report on M&E (WG ECEC, 2023b) yielded inspiring examples of recent

reforms in relation to monitoring and evaluation of the ECEC systems. Some of these reforms have involved the integration of a quality framework with clear indicators and a related M&E system (e.g. in Bulgaria). Some EU Member States are also reforming their M&E systems, with the aim of achieving an alignment between internal and external evaluation, and monitoring (e.g. in Cyprus, Lithuania, and Germany). Importantly, the reforms in M&E should be seen as tools for higher quality (rather than an aim in themselves), stressing a trust-based approach (e.g. as in Lithuania and Denmark). In addition, some EU Member States have piloted M&E systems (e.g. Finland), and some provide specific support to ECEC staff who are aiming to achieve high-quality M&E (e.g. in Lithuania and Finland), or to municipalities responsible for M&E (e.g. Denmark). These examples are further elaborated below.

We have clustered inspiring examples as follows: 1) developing a quality framework with clear indicators; 2) combining internal evaluation, external evaluation, and monitoring; and 3) supporting or piloting reforms in M&E ECEC-systems.

Developing a quality framework with clear indicators:

- In Bulgaria a national quality framework for ECEC has recently been developed (see Section B.3), complemented by a set of indicators and benchmarks. This system was piloted in selected ECEC settings and promoted to a wide range of stakeholders. Support was also provided to Bulgarian authorities, enabling them to gain a better understanding of how they can improve quality in ECEC by reviewing modes of governance and provision, developing effective tools and aligning relevant policies (WG ECEC, 2023b).

Combining internal evaluation, external evaluation, and monitoring:

- In **Cyprus,** a new assessment system has been in place since January 2019. The main purpose of this reform was to develop an evaluation plan to enhance the pedagogical quality of the ECEC system. The assessment system takes into account feedback from various stakeholders (such as children, staff, parents, guardians and the educational system in general). The main aim of this is to gain constructive feedback on the effectiveness of ECEC practices and to set priorities for future action, with opportunities for continuous professional development. Support is also provided to staff in performing internal evaluations (SEEPRO, 2024).

- In **Lithuania,** a new system for the internal and external evaluation of the quality has been implemented since June 2022 in preschool institutions (those for children aged 1 to 6 years) and pre-primary education (children aged 6 to 7 years). An Education Management Information System was created to collect and analyse quantitative data relating to the structural quality of the services. The goal of the new system is to create a culture of quality, in which evaluation is a tool, not an aim in itself. Lithuania tried to move away from quality assurance as a control mechanism, to a more open and trust-based approach. Different stakeholders are supported by different manuals (for external evaluators, for preschools engaging in internal evaluation, and for preschools preparing for external evaluation). These manuals stress that M&E should start from the child's best interests, and should focus on the ECEC processes (the curriculum; relationships between professionals and children, families and local communities), rather than being outcome–driven (WG ECEC, 2023b, pp. 38-39, 47-48).

- In **Germany,** the Early Education Staffing Barometer was launched in 2014. Its fifth edition was published in 2023. This barometer provides detailed information on several structural indicators, such as staff in ECEC settings, their qualification structures, ECEC teams, diversity in staff composition, staffing requirements, the employment market, earnings, and so on. Information is available per federal state. Germany also conducts state-by-state monitoring via the Bertelsmann Foundation initiative, which has been published every two years since 2008 (SEEPRO, 2024).

Supporting or piloting reforms in M&E ECEC-systems:

- In **Denmark**, which has a decentralised ECEC system, the state is responsible for overseeing the quality of the entire ECEC system, but the monitoring of quality in ECEC settings is decentralised at municipal level. Since 2022, the Danish Act on ECEC has stipulated new elements for municipalities to include in their monitoring. This starts from a trust-based approach to monitoring. To support municipalities in dealing with these new requirements, a national team was established to support the monitoring of quality in ECEC services. This support service is based at the National Agency for Education and Quality, under the Ministry of Children and Education. This team offers individual support and advice (coaching), networks on common challenges, or webinars on identified challenges relating to the monitoring of quality. The national team to support the monitoring of quality in ECEC has also carried out a mapping of the models for monitoring quality in the 98 municipalities (WG ECEC, 2023b, pp. 50-51).

- In **Finland,** there was previously no nationally shared perspective on quality factors in ECEC, nor was there a quality evaluation system (OECD, 2016; WG ECEC, 2023b). Therefore, in 2021, a two-year M&E trial for pre-primary education was set up. This trial M&E system was aligned with the development programme "Right to Learn – An Equal Start on the Path of Education (2020-2022)". The trialled M&E system investigates the quality and effectiveness of ECEC, as well as continuity between ECEC, pre-primary education and the initial years of primary education. It also explores parents' perceptions regarding the availability of ECEC places. As a part of the trial, information is being gathered at the level of children (their development, learning, social skills, and the cultivation of healthy self-esteem). In total, approximately 10,000 children from across Finland have been involved. National evaluations of this trial have revealed that ECEC organisers and providers required assistance in their internal evaluation. Therefore, support materials and tools, training initiatives and a quality evaluation network have been developed (WG ECEC, 2023b).

The examples above show that some EU Member States have taken important steps forward in developing an integrated and comprehensive M&E system for their ECEC systems. This is based around a climate of openness and trust, rather than one of micro-control. The above systems gather data in order to learn from it: to set priorities, to provide ongoing CPD for professionals. The M&E system is part of a cycle of improvement, aimed at improving ECEC quality or - as mentioned in the case of Lithuania – encouraging "a culture of quality".

B.4.3. Conclusions on monitoring and evaluation

The importance of a **comprehensive monitoring and evaluation** (M&E) system for ECEC is stressed in the EQF (CEU, 2019). This is defined in terms of three components: internal evaluation, external evaluation, and monitoring. This comprehensive model does not exclusively demand quantitative data, but also qualitative indicators; not only data on structural quality, but also on process quality. Furthermore, it demands the **capacity building of all stakeholders** – in other words, among children, parents, ECEC practitioners, ECEC leaders, providers, local municipalities, inspectorates, researchers, training or support services, towards governmental authorities, and so on. All of these groups should receive sufficient support for the M&E system to become a vehicle to improve quality for all children and families.

In addition, **monitoring and evaluation** in ECEC should be connected with **supporting strategies** and approaches. EU Member States should invest in a **monitoring structure** that structurally supports ECEC centres in the process of pedagogical planning, evaluation and review of pedagogical practices.

Again, the differing contexts in individual EU Member States influence their M&E systems. For example, the differences between decentralised and centralised monitoring systems underline the need for adaptable evaluation strategies that are **tailored to each country's context**. Moreover, in countries undertaking new reforms, the implementation strategies for M&E systems should include **sufficient support** (e.g. training, reflection, and manuals) to enable the new policy on M&E reforms to be translated into practice, with the aims of achieving high-quality ECEC.

B.5. Governance and funding

"Governance and funding are crucial to enable early childhood education and care provision to play its role in the personal development and learning of children and in reducing the attainment gap and fostering social cohesion. Quality results from comprehensive and coherent public policies that link early childhood education and care to other services concerned with the welfare of young children and their families" (CEU, 2019, p. 14). Member States are therefore called upon to *"aim at ensuring adequate funding and a legal framework for the provision of ECEC services" (CEU, 2019).*

Both the governance and the funding of ECEC systems are crucial to the provision of high-quality ECEC. They can be considered the **backbone** that links together the different areas of the EQF. As stated by Dougherty and Morabito (2023), "The funding and governance of ECEC services are instrumental in shaping their expansion, availability and accessibility". The importance of efficient governance and adequate levels of funding is also noted by other sources. For example, research reveals that the COVID-19 crisis appears to have been dealt with more effectively by those ECEC systems that had in place structural financing, a well-tailored organisation and an integrated structure. These conditions helped to reduce the need for extra support measures to ensure the sector's viability (Van Laere et al., 2021). Such evidence confirms that governance and funding are important principles in the EQF, and illustrates the effect that good structural and integrated measures can have on the resilience and quality of ECEC systems (EC, 2022).

Governance and funding of ECEC systems are **interrelated** topics, directly affecting operational efficacy and reform initiatives. For example, the organisation of governance has a major impact on the mechanisms needed to plan and distribute funding, as well as to implement reforms – as shown in the mid-term evaluation report on the Recovery and Resilience Facility (EC, 2024).

Governance and funding are dimensions for which there is a particular need for **transdisciplinary knowledge and expertise** in order to analyse variables at country level. Defining clear indicators and guidelines on "best practices" is not a straightforward process. Currently, researchers in the field of ECEC are joining their efforts with economists and experts in governance to better comprehend which governance and funding mechanisms affect each of the quality areas, and how (e.g. Beauregard et al., 2023; Chan & Liu, 2018). Studies on the feasibility and assessment of the Child Guarantee (e.g. Baptista et al. 2023; Corti et al. 2021), as well as the mid-term evaluation on the Resilience and Recovery Facility (EC, 2024) have brought a refreshing perspective on those complex questions.

In this NESET report, we aim to provide a glimpse of these areas and to highlight their importance in the organisation and quality of ECEC services in each country. Here, we bring together examples of governance and funding mechanisms and recent reforms reported by EU Member States. References are also provided to more comprehensive reports and research.

B.5.1. Governance

Governance structures and mechanisms within the ECEC sector vary significantly between and even within Member States (Van Keulen & Leseman, in press). They reflect a broad spectrum of organisational approaches, and encompass various dimensions of the governance, such as (Eurydice & EACEA, 2019; Lazzari, 2018):

The **degree of centralisation** of governance in a country, particularly within federal states (e.g. Germany, Austria and Belgium), but also in more decentralised systems with decision-making at the level of municipalities.

The **authority model**, which is closely linked to the degree of integration of the ECEC sector: from a split system with a dual-authority model to an integrated system with a single-authority model (mainly assumed by a country's ministry of education - see PART A).

The degree of **collaboration** between the various **authorities** responsible for the ECEC sector (mostly between the education and family sectors, but also including health and social sectors, employment, and higher education).

The degree of **collaboration** between **different organisations** at local level, towards more integrated working.

The presence of a **national legal framework** for ECEC that regulates the ECEC sector, whether or not this is binding, and whether or not it reinforces a shared vision on ECEC (whether or not this is explicitly linked to/in line with the EQF) (see Appendix D for more information on national frameworks).

The different types of **providers** of services (i.e. private for profit, private not-for-profit, public) and the different types of settings that can be found in each phase of ECEC (these are intimately linked with funding mechanisms).

The **accountability** mechanisms in place.

In this section, we focus on reforms affecting the governance mechanisms and system integration (including the authority model).

B.5.1.1. Reforms reinforcing the governance mechanisms between different levels of governance

The roles and responsibilities of stakeholders at different levels differ greatly between countries, and even within some countries. In some EU Member States, ECEC governance is more **decentralised**: it can almost completely fall under the competence of communities (e.g. in Belgium, Spain), regions/states (e.g. in Germany) or municipalities (e.g. in Bulgaria, Denmark), sometimes with huge regional disparities in provision and access (EC, 2024). In other EU Member States, the political responsibilities are **centralised**. Most countries combine the two approaches: they possess some overarching centralised regulations and a centralised shared legal framework[62], together with other decentralised responsibilities. This is the case in Sweden and Finland, where ECEC services are framed within a strong national framework, but their concrete organisation is executed by local authorities.

Each approach brings both opportunities and challenges. Within these systems, different models of governance can also prevail, even within a single country (see, for example, the study from Van Keulen & Leseman, in press). This must be taken into consideration by stakeholders when designing reforms.

- A **centralised** approach may favour a shared vision across the whole ECEC system, and may lead to equality in services, but it may lack adjustment to local and regional specificities.

- A more **decentralised** approach allows practices to be more finely tuned to account for local contexts and challenges, as well as offering more opportunities for the agency of parents and staff in decision-making. However, they may require more complex, multi-level modes of governance (OECD, 2014).

No major reforms or changes reported in the past few years directly address the degree of centralisation or decentralisation of governance in the EU Member States. However, some

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[62] *Appendix D provides a brief overview of the existing legal quality frameworks in each EU Member State.*

countries have made changes to the responsibilities of stakeholders at various levels. Some examples are listed below:

- In **Estonia**, a new ECEC Act was submitted in 2024, which adds clarifications to responsibilities and focuses on the different levels of governance, among others the municipalities, which are responsible for providing and organising ECEC.

- In **Portugal**, recent major reforms on funding and access have been accompanied by new roles and responsibilities at municipality level to oversee the local provision and coordination of services (OECD, 2021).

Other reforms have aimed to implement new national curricular guidelines, as in Lithuania (see the earlier Section B.3 on Curricula).

B.5.1.2. Reforms taking steps towards greater integration of the ECEC system

As well as the degree of centralisation, differences exist between the EU Member States in the governance models used (see Figure 3 and 4 – PART A): "integrated" versus "split" systems. Although several variables define the degree of integration within a system, the authority model plays an important role:

Split systems mainly have a **dual-authority model**, under which two different ministries are responsible for ECEC. The ministry of education or another governmental education authority is responsible for the second phase of ECEC education (usually covering children from roughly 3 years old), while the first ECEC phase falls under another ministry or authority, normally one responsible for children and family affairs.

More integrated systems mostly have a **single-authority model,** in which responsibility for ECEC often falls under the ministry of education (as e.g. in Finland, Croatia, Luxemburg). Denmark, Germany and Ireland are the only countries with a single-authority model in which the authority that controls the whole ECEC system is not the ministry of education (Eurydice & EACEA, 2019). It is, however, interesting to note that in these cases, a shared responsibility model is often adopted between the ministry responsible for children's services and/or family affairs and the ministry of education. Romania has now adopted such a shared responsibility model. Figure 3 in In PART A shows that around half of EU Member States have a single authority for ECEC (12 in 2019, increasing to 13 in 2024, with the addition of Italy).

In both types of authority model, **collaboration** between different ministries is crucial, and varies according to the specific contexts.

Previous projects (e.g. the InTrans project[63]), as well as research (EC, 2014b), reveals that split systems in which children and families must make an **additional transition** between the two phases of ECEC (0-3 years and 3-6 years) can **produce inequalities** with regard to accessibility, staff and financing, and in terms of difficult transitions, a lack of pedagogical continuity[64], and a lack of shared language or vision. In split systems, there are also differences in staff qualification requirements and pedagogical guidelines (see Part B – Section 2 on Staff, and Section 3 on Curricula).

The NESET report on the impact of the COVID pandemic on ECEC underlines that the level of integration and/or collaboration between different ECEC authorities and sectors had an influence on the efficiency of communication towards staff and families, as well as on the

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[63] https://www.issa.nl/intrans

[64] *Pedagogical continuity implies that education and care are integrated together as a whole concept (EC, 20214b).*

coherence of guidelines for ECEC providers, and the smooth management of ECEC practice (Van Laere et al., 2021). The above report (Van Laere et al., 2021, p.75) notes that:

> In countries in which ECEC has been framed since its inception with a strong focus on **children's rights**, ECEC systems tend to be more integrated and thus regulated and funded within a coherent public governance framework that fully recognises the educational and social value of ECEC. Conversely, in countries where the educational, social and economic functions of ECEC have traditionally been split into separate domains (i.e. childcare and early education), governance tends to be weaker and more brittle, leading to greater fragmentation of initiatives and discontinuity in public funding.

Referring to the pandemic period, the report (Van Laere et al., 2021, p.74) underlines that:

> Fragmented and under-financed ECEC systems require more additional means and measures in times of crisis. Stable ECEC systems that are **coherently** organised and financed were significantly better prepared to deal with the crisis, and needed fewer ad hoc measures to ensure the viability of the sector.

Other sources (EC, 2018, cited in Eurydice & EACEA, 2019, p.29) mention that:

> Fully integrated systems seem to offer more coherence across early childhood education and care policy [...] as well as more resources allocated to younger children and their families. Unitary systems – by providing a more coherent framework for governance and funding across the early childhood education and care sector – lead to better quality and more equitable service provision and result in greater financial efficiency.

With the growing knowledge that ECEC systems should aim for **more integration**, some changes have been observed at this level during recent years. However, these changes should always be accompanied with improvements with regard to the other aspects of quality. Some EU Member States have taken small but steady steps towards greater integration (see the examples below). Most countries with a split system have developed governmental recommendations to facilitate and smooth the transition between the two split phases of ECEC (Eurydice & EACEA, 2019), but the quality and efficiency of the reforms have not been assessed[65].

To illustrate this concretely, some reforms from "midway" systems are given as an example:

- **Malta** has different settings for the different age groups, but the governance of the ECEC as a whole falls under a single authority. In 2017, responsibility for services for younger children was transferred to the Ministry of Education, with the aim of ensuring greater policy coherence.

- In **Ireland**, major changes have occurred in the ECEC sector in recent years. These have aimed to regulate the ECEC sector, which was previously mostly informal for children under 4 years old. Although Ireland deploys a single-authority model for most ECEC services for children aged 4 to 6, there is at the same time a provision in primary schools, which falls completely under the authority of the Department of Education (SEEPRO, 2024; Eurydice n.d.; Eurydice & EACEA, 2019).

- Since 2019, **Estonia** has taken steps towards a fully integrated ECEC system. This was reaffirmed in 2022 when the Ministry of Education and Research took on responsibility for all ECEC settings for children aged 1.5 to 7 years (SEEPRO, 2024).

- In **Denmark,** age-integrated ECEC centres (for children aged 0–5 years) still co-exist with age-separated settings (0–2 years, 3–5 years), as well as regulated

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[65] *See the InTrans webinar at:* https://www.issa.nl/content/save-date-series-webinars-challenging-split-system-early-childhood-care-and-education

home-based provision. However, since 2020 the whole ECEC sector has settled (after multiple back-and-forth changes in the last 10 years) under the authority of the Ministry of Children and Education (SEEPRO, 2024).

In addition, two countries with a split system have been making huge steps towards a more integrated governance and organisation of their ECEC services:

- In **Romania**, since 2017, a partnership between different ministries has evolved towards a shared responsibility model between three ministries (the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Labour and Social Justice, and the Ministry of Health) and local authorities, while the provision for children aged 3-6 years remains fully under the Ministry of Education. The focus of this partnership has been on harmonising legislation and governance relating to children aged 0-3 years, in order to improve cross-sectoral cooperation (Lazzari, 2018). Since 2019, further steps have been taken towards more integration, with an integrated curriculum for children aged 0-6 years and the harmonisation of staff conditions, and growing responsibilities for the Ministry of Education across the whole period of ECEC (SEEPRO, 2024).

- In **Italy**, an integrated ECEC system (as part of the educational system) was recognised by law in 2017. However, ECEC is still organised into two separate levels that welcome children of different ages (0-3 years and 3-6 years). Some services might have been regrouped into the same location, but they are still in different settings, albeit under one authority. Italy is still in the process of bringing ECEC under the responsibility of the Ministry of Education at national level, but the regions remain the main regulators of provision for the under-3s (Eurydice, n.d.).

The case of Italy, where the process towards more integration began around eight years ago, reveals that making such major changes in governance can be a long journey. Such governance transformations are complex, and rooted in a specific context. Hence, they cannot occur from one day to the next, and require a long-term vision. This stresses the continuing importance of **dialogues** about ECEC at a political level (Lazzari, 2018), supported by strong and evidence-based argumentation that extends further than the economic function of ECEC. The EQF provides a shared framework and vocabulary to engage in such discussions and debates. The NESET 2018 report (Lazzari, 2018) has shown its potential in this role, including all stakeholders – including grassroots initiatives – and has led to more comprehensive public policies. However, as mentioned in the case study analysis from the Resilience and Recovery Facility (EC, 2024), "European priorities only marginally guided the selection of reforms and investments, with the link with the Child Guarantee and EQF largely **identified ex-post**," in place of driving and guiding innovation and proposed reforms.

In conclusion, where reforms are present, they appear to go in the direction of a more integrated ECEC system. This shows an awareness of the positive effects of less fragmented systems towards children and families, as well as greater collaboration at governance level. However, the steps taken in this direction remain limited. Of course, the decision to transform a split system into an integrated one is not always self-evident and needs considerable time to be fully implemented. All stakeholders should be involved. As an interim strategy, greater collaboration between authorities and sectors is needed when different ministries are responsible for the different phases of ECEC.

B.5.2. Funding

As mentioned in the OECD "Education at a Glance" (OECD, 2023a), "Sustained public financial support is critical for the growth and quality of ECEC programmes." Funding directly affects accessibility, but also the amount of well-qualified and supported staff that can be recruited to offer children and families high-quality ECEC, and their working conditions (such as the staff-child ratio, group size, wages).

B.5.2.1. State of play on ECEC financing

The funding of ECEC systems is **complex** and encompasses different facets, which can be described by various indicators. From the various documents reviewed for this report, it appears that these indicators refer to quite fragmented data sets, often with missing data[66]. Hence, this makes it difficult to aggregate, compare and analyse data.

Some of the indicators used to characterise **expenditure** and funding of the ECEC services include:

- The **percentage of gross domestic product** (GDP) spent on ECEC, which is influenced by the age range and coverage of ECEC services (OECD, 2023a). In OECD Education at a Glance 2023, it is mentioned that in 2020 just one country invested more than 1 % of its GDP in ECEC (Sweden). This GDP percentage is an important indicator. However, knowing how much money has been spent does not provide the full picture. For example, it doesn't provide information as to how such money is spent, nor on how efficiently.

- The **provenance of the funding** (private or public) is also discussed in this OECD report, with huge differences between OECD countries, in particular with regard to the first phase of ECEC.

- The indicator of **parents' out-of-pocket costs** or **net childcare costs** (NCC)[67] (OECD, 2023b). Experts explained that this indicator depends on many factors, including gross childcare fees (or childcare prices), the fee reductions and childcare benefits available to parents, parents' employment status, earnings and other factors. They considered three main categories of public support for ECEC:

  o government subsidies that directly reduce the fees (prices) parents pay (these may depend on individual family circumstances, a differentiated fee);

  o childcare benefits paid to parents who use formal childcare, in order to assist them with the childcare costs;

  o tax concessions that are conditional on childcare use or spending levels.

Before accounting for support measures, there is huge variation between countries in gross childcare fees (what families have to pay), which range from zero in **Bulgaria** (from 3 years old), to more than 80 % of the median mother's earnings in **the Netherlands**, where the market is dominated by private childcare providers (without clear regulation of fees on the supply side).

Important variations are also noted in net childcare costs, where ECEC services can be offered by different **providers**. Such variations stem from the difference between public and private providers, as well as the share of non-profit providers, and the private market (private for-profit). Here, Dougherty and Morabito (2023) proposed that countries be grouped under three main categories:

- A dominance of substantially publicly funded services (e.g. in Denmark, Finland and Sweden).

- A balance between publicly funded and private services (e.g. in Belgium, Germany, Italy and Spain).

- Mostly market-driven services (e.g. in Ireland and the Netherlands).

Experts' recommendations tend to point towards **publicly funded universal ECEC**. However, particularly in light of the need to increase the number of ECEC places, not all

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[66] For example, data on funding is provided in Key Data on ECEC 2014, but not in Key Data on ECEC 2019.

[67] Details and an explanation of this indicator can be found in the note on Net childcare costs in EU countries, 2022 (OECD, 2023), which focuses specifically on low-income families.

ECEC services are funded publicly. Often non-profit, and sometimes for-profit providers, are part of the ECEC field. Where this is the case, clear regulations (for example, governing inclusive ECEC, taking into account territorial needs, decent working conditions and accountability) must be provided at governance level, in order to limit the possible negative impacts of a market-driven field (Dougherty & Morabito, 2023).

B.5.2.2. Strategies to improve ECEC funding systems

Public funding towards universal ECEC services

The organisation of ECEC governance has an effect on the deployment of reforms, which is influenced by the allocation and distribution of funding (EC, 2023). In analysing this, we must bear in mind that "there is no one universal 'correct' way for countries to increase ECEC investment" (Dougherty & Morabito, 2013, p. 3).

After the COVID-19 pandemic, the European **Resilience and Recovery Facility** (RRF) provided funding, part of which has been used to reinforce **accessibility** in ECEC (EC, 2023 – see Section B.1 on Access). During a mid-term evaluation (EC, 2024), a case study of five countries shows two patterns:

(1) countries where the actions would not have been possible without the additional external funding (e.g. Italy),

(2) countries where the additional funding only slightly reinforced existing actions (e.g. Germany).

The case studies from the mid-term evaluation show a higher concern for attributing funds to **closing territorial inequalities**, through different strategies, for example in Italy and Spain (for more details, see EC, 2024; Corti et al., 2022). Fiscal transfer mechanisms for funding from central governments to subnational authorities are essential to **prevent territorial inequalities,** but these tend to be less efficient in a more private-dominant model (Dougherty & Morabito, 2023). On average, (and in contrast to other educational instances), less than half of the funding for ECEC services comes from a central authority, while other funds are provided by a more local level of authority. This funding is, thus, more **sensitive to territorial inequities**, and **well-managed fiscal perpetuation mechanisms** are therefore essential in order to support services in those regions where a higher percentage of vulnerable families are present.

In 2023, the OECD's Education at a Glance also reported that between 2015 and 2020, the expenditure per child on ECEC had increased by 3 % per year on average across OECD countries (OECD, 2023a). Estonia, Lithuania and Romania showed the largest annual increase. In other countries, such as Poland and Portugal, the total numbers of children increased faster than the funding, resulting in a lower net expenditure per child.

Several EU Member States are planning reforms, often related to providing more places in ECEC, providing more accessible and affordable ECEC, better staff-child ratios, or better levels of qualification of staff. All of these reforms are related to the funding of ECEC. Several examples of extra funding are provided below, based on the Eurydice description of the current reforms (2023), SEEPRO data (SEEPRO, 2024), and the Child Guarantee National Action Plans (Baptista et al., 2023).

- In **Austria,** the federal government aimed to close the ECEC gap between 1 and 3 years old (Eurydice, 2019). Allocation of funds is based on the proportion of children between 0 and 6 years old in each state, which then ensures the distribution of the funds (see SEEPRO, 2024 for a detailed description of goals for the allocated funds). Additional funding also comes from the RRF (EC, 2024).

- Since 2019, the federal government in **Germany** has been allocating additional funds to the federal states. These measures should support the development of

high quality, with the aim of enhancing quality at a national level and contributing to establishing equitable living conditions for all children and families. In 2020-2021, the German government decided to provide an additional EUR 1 billion for the expansion of childcare centres. This is intended to create 90,000 new places in childcare centres (Eurydice & EACEA, 2023). RRF investment was added to these existing measures in order to increase their coverage and affordability, paying attention to regional gaps (EC, 2024)

▪ In the **French Community of Belgium**, the government in 2023 adopted a new support scheme and budget for childcare settings, to create new places in childcare. In conjunction with additional RRF funding injected from 2021, in line with the National Action Plan for Child Guarantee (EC, 2024), the aim of this funding is to assist struggling childcare facilities, ensuring the preservation of spaces and provide support for families. The scheme directly involves reinforcing funding for subsidised childcare facilities serving low-income families.

▪ **Spain** aims to universalise education for children aged between 0 and 2 years. A funding programme has been set up to provide extra places in public institutions during the initial stage of ECEC. This has continued throughout 2023/24, with a budget of more than EUR 200 million. Part of this funding comes from the RRF, and strategies have been developed in line with the National Plan for a Child Guarantee (EC, 2024).

Most countries invest more into **the second phase of ECEC** (for children aged 3-6 years), compared with the first phase of ECEC (0-3 years). **Sweden** is a counterexample, with a higher share of GDP being spent on the first phase of ECEC.

Financial governance

Other reforms are more concerned with financial governance. For example:

▪ Another example of reform of financial governance comes from **Ireland**, a country characterised by its predominantly privatised system. In 2019, an Expert Group was established to develop a new funding model for both ECEC and school-age out-of-school care. This model was proposed in 2022, and should be in place by 2028.

▪ To distribute RRF funding, **Poland** has developed an algorithm to cope with territorial differences in access, while proposing to municipalities a fairly transparent and accessible way to access their share of the funding (EC, 2024).

▪ In **the Netherlands,** the "ECEC system is under pressure and is likely to undergo reforms in the years to come" (SEEPRO, 2024). Factors influencing such reforms include:

    o The growing legitimacy of ECEC as a formal institution with the potential to narrow early education gaps. "This growing understanding of the public role of ECEC raises questions about the privatised and marketised system in the Netherlands that was historically developed as an instrument to increase labour market participation." (SEEPRO, 2024);

    o An ongoing debate about the effectiveness of market principles in public services, and its impact on quality. "More specifically, privatisation and marketisation have opened up the sector for private equity, which raises the question as to what extent it is ethical to make private profits within a system that is largely funded by the government." (SEEPRO, 2024).

o Strong criticism has been raised regarding the demand-side funding strategy[68]. Within the new design proposed, which is supposed to start in 2025, accessibility is a key consideration. But it is also seen as a risk and a challenge, especially in maintaining access for more vulnerable populations. It will be an interesting case to follow, as changing the funding system is not easy. However, experts recommend thinking outside the box to review demand-side services in the direction of supply-side services.

In summary, the share of GDP devoted to ECEC rarely exceeds 1 %, with huge variation between EU Member States, linked to age coverage and equity in access (Dougherty & Morabito, 2023). For Dougherty and Morabito, this testifies to the need for public investment to create effective ECEC systems. As such, we conclude that while some investments have been made in ECEC over recent years, with the RRF playing an important role, there is still a need for greater understanding as to how financial governance mechanisms affect various aspects of the quality of ECEC systems – in different models of governance, and with different degrees of system integration.

B.5.3. Conclusions on governance and funding

In general, ECEC governance and funding systems and mechanisms across Europe are characterised by **diversity**, which has to be taken into account when designing reforms. Governance and funding are **complex** areas that are related to the history and context of countries.

In line with recent data sources, the traditional dichotomy between **split** ECEC systems and **unitary integrated** ECEC systems has been called into question. Recently, it has become perceived as more of a **continuum**, prompting a more nuanced approach to the governance of ECEC-systems. This implies that countries can grow towards greater integration. The NESET report on the impact of the COVID 19 pandemic (Van Laere, et al., 2021) stated that more integrated systems of governance are better suited to meeting the multiple challenges that have risen from the pandemic crisis. Although this statement refers specifically to the pandemic period, this resilience would appear a crucial aspect that should be taken into account when referring to ECEC systems in general.

This chapter has again revealed that governance and funding are determined by the context and the type of ECEC system in each country. Some EU Member States have a more centralised model of governance, whereas others have a more decentralised governance one. Under both models, what is crucial is that there should be sufficient **coherence**. At a central level, regulations must be made regarding accessibility, staff qualifications and working conditions, and **accountability systems** should be in place. The local level is important for tailoring ECEC services to the needs of each child, family and the local community, which again influences the central level.

Despite the growing recognition of the pivotal role played by high-quality ECEC, funding and investments in this sector are still often **lagging behind** those made in the later stages of the educational system. Similarly, it should be noted that there is also a **gap between the first (0-3 years) and second (3-6 years) phases of ECEC**, with greater investment generally being directed towards the second phase of ECEC. This preference has its origins in the traditional way of looking at the early years, which has historically undervalued working with young children and focused more on the economic function of childcare, neglecting its pedagogical function. It is notable that the only country that invested more in the very early years is Sweden, an integrated system in which ECEC is guided by the principles of children's rights (Van Laere et al., 2021).

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[68] *i.e. indirect funding, meaning that ECEC service providers are not paid by the government directly, but by parents who receive benefits from the government, in contrast with supply-side funding of services.*

The recommendations proposed by Dougherty and Morabito (2023) align closely with the conclusions drawn in this section, advocating for **increased public expenditure**, the implementation of effective and context-sensitive **financial governance models**, and the enhancement of efforts at coordination and integration. Moreover, effective monitoring mechanisms are indispensable, particularly in contexts involving a private (for-profit) sector, to ensure **accountability and quality standards**. If these quality standards and accountability measures are lacking, this could result in unequal access for vulnerable families, unequal distribution of ECEC centres, and unequal working conditions for staff.

Another key point is the importance of **capacity building** for stakeholders, at both national level and local levels, with regard quality in ECEC. This is essential in order to guide policy and reforms, but also for the management of ECEC services. It is crucial that all stakeholders start from a holistic child and family-centred vision, which needs to be monitored and regulated. This helps to prevent **unintended consequences, and stresses the need for a support structure within supportive systemic conditions**. For example, to improve access, there has been rapid growth in the number of places offered in ECEC centres in some countries. This could negatively impact group sizes, staff-child ratios, the physical space available, and so on. Such issues require that new reforms should be accompanied by a capacity-building policy under which all stakeholders are supported and the necessary structural conditions are put in place, starting from a child and family-centred perspective.

PART C – GENERAL CONCLUSIONS AND KEY POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

C.1. General conclusions

High-quality ECEC appears to play a crucial role in supporting children and families, due to its interconnected functions: promoting children's learning, well-being and participation (**pedagogical function**); sustaining families in bringing up their children (**social function**); and supporting parents in reconciling work and parental responsibilities (**economic function**) (Van Laere, 2021). In recent years, several EU policy documents (CEU, 2019, 2021, 2022; *EC,* 2021a, 2021b) have underlined the importance of the early years and of ECEC. Member States have made efforts to improve the various elements needed for high-quality ECEC. However, ECEC is still struggling to achieve its richly deserved status in European and national political agendas. This suggests that the start quote of this report – " quality ECEC is a priority both at the EU level and in many EU Member States" ought to be partly revised.

The neglect traditionally shown towards the ECEC sector, which has previously been undervalued in many EU countries, has meant that **the quality of ECEC is quite fragile**. From a historical perspective, ECEC has in most countries been associated with its economical function, meaning that its services allow parents to work and to produce a return on investment with regard to their children. Within this discourse, the other two functions of ECEC (pedagogical and social) have often been forgotten. In fact, all three functions should be taken into account when planning policy reforms, and efforts should be made to raise the profile of ECEC within plans and policies for the education and care sector, in order to address gaps in all five **interrelated quality dimensions** of the EQF.

The analysis presented in this report underlines the important policy reforms that several EU Member States have put in place to improve and recognise the value of ECEC. However, the sector still appears quite **vulnerable**. Reforms often appear to happen in a fragmented way. For example, tackling one of the dimensions of quality, without necessarily working on the others or having unintended consequences on the other dimensions, which are inextricably related. Instead, reforms should work in an intertwined way in all five EQF quality areas. Working on the quality of ECEC in a **fragmented** way tends to hide the risk that such measures will lead to unintended consequences. For example, reforms and strategies to improve access to ECEC are strongly related to measures concerning staff, curriculum, evaluation and monitoring, and governance and funding.

It is thus both crucial and urgent to create **competent ECEC systems** (Urban et al., 2011) that address the quality of ECEC as a whole. This should start from a **child's rights and social justice** perspective, through holistic child- and family-centred policies. The EQF provides a clear and strong framework to work in this direction – which, at the same time, is open to sufficient contextualisation. From our analysis, it seems that while EU Member States aim to take steps forward in the various aspects of quality underlined by the EQF, the latter is not necessarily referred to in their policy reforms. Further investigation would be required to determine the extent to which the EQF represents an inspiration to follow within the decision-making processes of each country.

This final part of the present report aims to draw conclusions and formulate policy recommendations for the EU Member States, based on the data analysed in the previous chapters. Specific conclusions for each quality area can be found at the end of each section. It should be reiterated here that while the data provides indications with regard to possible policy recommendations, the contexts of the EU Member States are very different and will require specific adaptation in each case.

Due to the strong interrelationship between all of the EQF quality areas, this report formulates overarching recommendations, in which the five aspects of quality are addressed in an interrelated way. However, to remind the reader of the conclusions on these recommendations are based, the box below summarises the key findings for each EQF area, as also reported in the executive summary. From these conclusions, we then draw the intertwined recommendations set out in the next section.

Accessibility

The present NESET report reveals that most EU Member States are addressing the issue of the accessibility of ECEC. Efforts are being made to both provide extra places, and to guarantee places in ECEC. However, this aspect of quantity is not always accompanied by corresponding measures in relation to the issues of quality and equity.

Despite efforts to increase enrolment rates, there remains a prevalent focus on children aged 3 and above, often neglecting younger age groups and children at risk of poverty and social exclusion. It is widely recognised that strategies to raise equity for children at risk of poverty and social exclusion) should start from an approach of progressive universalism[69], rather than a targeted approach – yet this strategy seldom appears in reforms. In many EU countries, the EU Child Guarantee offers 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 to become an effective vehicle for higher-quality ECEC.

Training and working conditions for staff

With regard to the ECEC workforce, persistent staff shortages in many EU Member States pose a significant challenge to the quality of ECEC, with a possible negative impact on children, parents, workforce and society. There is, however, no universal single solution to this problem. Raising qualification requirements, providing effective opportunities for continuous professional development (CPD) and good working conditions, including wages and adult-child ratio, are stressed in some reforms. Together, such strategies can contribute towards increasing the attractiveness of the ECEC profession.

The data also reveal that in most EU Member States, differences exist in terms of opportunities for pre-service and in-service training for different types of staff. For example, assistants and ECEC leaders are both often-forgotten groups. Further to this, in those ECEC-systems with a split system, initial qualifications are often lower and there are often fewer opportunities for CPD for staff working in services for the youngest children (aged 0-3 years old).

Some countries (such as Ireland) are taking positive steps towards increasing staff competences. However, there is still huge potential for improvement among the EU Member States. This is crucial, as well-qualified and well-supported staff and a diverse team are central to providing high-quality interactions with children and families, stressing the importance of process quality in ECEC. At the same time, good leadership is crucial to shaping the organisational conditions and strategies necessary to ensure quality (Organisation for Economic Cooperation & 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 in this, further work is needed in revising curricula, with a focus on holistic, child-centred approaches.

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[69] 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).

Curricula

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

In split ECEC systems, however, there is still a lack of alignment between curricula in ECEC services for the youngest children and ECEC services for older children. Likewise, there is a lack of alignment between the curricula of ECEC services and the curricula of primary education. Addressing this issue is crucial to smoothing the transition from one educational system to the next. Reciprocal alignment between both systems is needed.

Monitoring and evaluation

Reforms have been made to monitoring and evaluation in various EU Member States. However, there remains a need for more comprehensive monitoring and evaluation systems. In such systems, self-evaluation, external inspection and macro-level monitoring are viewed as interrelated and continuous aspects of quality improvement in ECEC. Equally important is the need for sufficient and effective support for all ECEC stakeholders. All stakeholders within the ECEC ecosystem – from children to the ministries responsible – should receive support in order to make use of and value the monitoring and evaluation system as a tool for quality improvement, rather than perceiving it 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, there cannot be high-quality ECEC.

Governance is strongly related to the continuum of integration of the ECEC-system, 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 tailoring to specific needs at local level.

With regard to funding, several countries have made important investments in ECEC through increased public expenditures. Such expenditures are expected to make the ECEC system equivalent to the primary educational system, fulfilling economic, social and pedagogical functions for children, families and society.

C.2. Key policy 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 building[70] for all stakeholders**: children, parents, ECEC professionals, leaders, providers, local 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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[70] *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.)*

PART D – REFERENCES AND APPENDICES

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D.2 Appendices

APPENDIX A - Additional information on quality statements and indicators in the EQF

This appendix provides additional information on the accessibility and workforce indicators in the EQF. This is based on the following sources:

- European Commission (2014). Proposal for Key Principles of a Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care. Brussels: European Commission. Working Group on Early Childhood Education and Care under the auspices of the European Commission.

- European Commission (2018). Monitoring the Quality of Early Childhood Education and Care – Complementing the 2014 ECEC Quality Framework proposal with indicators. Recommendations from ECEC experts. Brussels: European Commission. Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture.

- Council Recommendation of 22 May 2019 on High Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems.

ACCESSIBILITY

ACCESS to quality early childhood education and care services for all children contributes to their healthy development and educational success, helps to reduce social inequalities, and narrows the competence gap between children with different socio-economic backgrounds and their peers. Equitable access is also essential to ensure that parents, especially women, have the flexibility to (re)integrate in the labour market.

QUALITY STATEMENTS

Provision that is available and affordable to all families and their children.

Universal legal entitlement to early childhood education and care services provides a solid basis for reaching out to all children. Population data and parents' surveys on demand for early childhood education and care places can serve as a basis for estimating further needs and adjusting capacity. Provision can address barriers that may prevent families and children from participating. This may include the adaptation of the fees requested for early childhood education and care, to allow access for low-income households. There is also evidence that flexibility in opening hours and other arrangements can enable participation – especially for the children of working mothers, single-parent families and those from minority or disadvantaged groups. Provision that is distributed equally across urban and rural areas, affluent and poor neighbourhoods, and different regions can widen access for disadvantaged groups in society. The availability and affordability of high-quality services in neighbourhoods where poor families, minorities or migrant or refugee families reside is reported to have the biggest impact on supporting equity and social inclusion.

INDICATORS

- The percentage of children who have publicly funded subsidised access to ECEC.

- For parents who earn the average national income, the percentage of their disposable income that is required to pay for ECEC services for one child who attends an ECEC setting for at least 30 hours per week.

Provision that encourages participation, strengthens social inclusion and embraces diversity.

Early childhood education and care settings can actively encourage participation by involving parents, families and carers in decision-making processes (e.g. in parental committees). Reaching out through targeted initiatives to families – especially to single

parents and disadvantaged, minority or migrant families –allows them to express their needs and enables services to take these into account when tailoring provisions to the demands of local communities. Recruitment of staff from marginalised, migrant or minority groups can be encouraged, as it has been proven to be an advantage if the composition of staff in early childhood education and care settings reflects the diversity in the community. Creating a welcoming environment for children which values their languages, culture and home backgrounds contributes to the development of their sense of belonging. Appropriate continuous professional development also prepares staff to welcome and support bilingual children. Early childhood education and care settings can develop good practices in families to achieve a smooth transition from the home environment to the setting, as well as fostering high levels of parental participation by organising specific initiatives.

INDICATORS
- A system-level policy to encourage disadvantaged families to use ECEC services.
- The percentage of children who attend ECEC regularly.

2019 COUNCIL RECOMMENDATIONS
Work towards ensuring that early childhood education and care services are accessible, affordable and inclusive. Consideration could be given to:

- supporting child development in a consistent way, starting as early as possible, by using early childhood education and care services;

- analysing the supply and demand from families in order to better adapt the offer of early childhood education and care services to their needs, respecting parental choice;

- analysing and addressing the barriers that families might encounter when accessing and using early childhood education and care services, such as costs, poverty-related barriers, geographical location, inflexible opening hours, barriers related to inadequate provisions for children with special needs, cultural and linguistic barriers and discrimination, as well as a lack of information;

- establishing contact and cooperation with families, especially those in vulnerable or disadvantaged situations, in order to inform them about the possibilities and benefits of participation in early childhood education and care and, where relevant, about available support, and to build trust in the services and encourage participation from an early age;

- ensuring that all families who wish to make use of early childhood education and care services have access to affordable, high-quality early childhood education and care – ideally by working at the appropriate governance level towards the right to an early childhood education and care place of high quality;

- providing inclusive early childhood education and care services for all children, including children with diverse backgrounds and special educational needs, including disabilities, avoiding segregation and incentivising their participation, regardless of the labour market status of their parents or carers;

- supporting all children to learn the language of education while also taking into account and respecting their first language; and

- strengthening preventive actions, early identification of difficulties and adequate provisions for children with special needs and their families, involving all relevant actors, e.g. educational, social or health services, as well as parents.

TRAINING AND WORKING CONDITIONS OF STAFF

STAFF are the most significant factor in children's well-being, learning and developmental outcomes. Therefore, staff working conditions and professional development are seen as essential components of quality.

QUALITY STATEMENTS

Well-qualified staff with initial and continuing training that enable them to fulfil their professional role.

Effective early childhood education and care systems should consider raising the professional status of staff, which is widely acknowledged as one of the key factors in quality, by raising qualification levels, offering attractive professional status and flexible career prospects and alternative pathways for assistants. This can be supported by aiming for a pedagogical staff composed of highly qualified professionals who hold a full professional qualification specialising in early childhood education, in addition to assistant staff. State-of-the-art initial education programmes are designed together with practitioners, and provide a good balance between theory and practice. It is also an asset if education programmes prepare staff for working collectively and for enhancing reflective competences. Such programmes can benefit from training staff to work with linguistically and culturally diverse groups from minority, migrant and low-income families. Staff who are equipped to adjust to the developmental needs, interests and potential of young children, and who are able to detect potential development and learning problems, are able to more actively support child development and learning. Regular, tailor-made and continuing professional development opportunities benefit all staff members, including assistants and auxiliary staff. With regard to the necessary elements of child development and psychology, competences for staff should – in line with the different training structures in Member States – include knowledge on child protection systems, and more generally on the rights of the child.

INDICATORS

- The percentage of staff working directly with children who have completed professional education relevant to their role in an ECEC setting.

- The percentage of staff who receive formal support for at least their first six months at work.

- The percentage of ECEC leaders working in an ECEC setting who have completed leadership training or have a recognised, relevant leadership qualification.

- The percentage of ECEC staff working directly with children who have received at least three months' relevant work experience as part of their initial training programme.

Supportive working conditions, including professional leadership that creates opportunities for observation, reflection, planning, teamwork and cooperation with parents.

Early childhood education and care systems that aim for improved working conditions, including more adequate wage levels, can make employment in early childhood education and care a more attractive option for better-qualified staff looking for satisfying and stable careers. Adult-child ratios and group sizes are most adequate if they are designed in a manner that is appropriate to the age and composition of the group of children, as younger children require more attention and care. Professional learning communities, where they exist within and across settings, have demonstrated a positive impact by assigning time and space for staff collegial practices and joint work. Offering mentoring and supervision

to newly recruited staff during their induction can help them to quickly fulfil their professional roles.

INDICATORS

- The average salary of ECEC staff (with similar qualifications to primary school teachers) employed in the public sector, as a percentage of the average salary of a primary school teacher.
- The average ratio of children to all staff working directly with children.
- The average ratio of children to professionally trained staff working directly with children.
- The percentage of time assigned to staff for preparation and reflection, when they are not working directly with children.

2019 COUNCIL RECOMMENDATIONS

Support the professionalisation of early childhood education and care staff, including leaders. Depending on the existing level of professional qualification and working conditions, successful efforts can include:

- raising the status of the early childhood education and care profession by creating high professional standards, offering an attractive professional status and career prospects to educators in early childhood education and care, striving to reach a better gender balance and creating professionalisation pathways for staff with low or no qualifications, as well as specific pathways to qualify assistants;
- improving initial education and continuous professional development to take full account of children's well-being, learning and developmental needs, relevant societal developments, gender equality and a full understanding of the rights of the child;
- providing time to staff for the purposes of professional activities such as reflection, planning, engaging with parents and collaborating with other professionals and colleagues; and
- aiming to equip staff with the competences to respond to the individual needs of children from different backgrounds and with special educational needs, including disabilities, preparing staff to manage diverse groups.

CURRICULA

CURRICULUM is a powerful tool to improve well-being, development and learning of children. A broad pedagogical framework sets out the principles for sustaining children's development and learning through educational and care practices that meet children's interests, needs and potentialities.

QUALITY STATEMENTS

A curriculum based on pedagogical goals, values and approaches that enable children to reach their full potential, addressing their social, emotional, cognitive and physical development as well as their well-being.

Child-centred pedagogical approaches are better able to sustain children's overall development, to provide support for their learning strategies and to promote their cognitive and non-cognitive development by building more systematically on experiential learning, play and social interactions.

There is strong evidence that an explicit curriculum is an asset, as it can provide a coherent framework for care, education and socialisation as integral parts of early childhood

education and care provision. Ideally, such a framework defines pedagogical goals that enable educators to personalise their approach to the individual needs of children, and can provide guidelines for a high-quality learning environment. It gives due consideration to including the availability of books and other print materials to assist in the development of children's literacy.

By promoting diversity, equality, and linguistic awareness, an effective curriculum framework fosters the integration of migrants and refugees. It can nurture the development of both their mother tongue and the language of education.

INDICATORS

- There is an official, approved or mandatory curriculum framework for ECEC.
- The percentage of settings whose work with children is based on an ECEC curriculum framework.

A curriculum that requires staff to collaborate with children, colleagues and parents and to reflect on their own practice.

A curriculum can help to better involve parents, stakeholders and staff and to ensure that it responds more adequately to the needs, interests and potential of children.

A curriculum can define roles and processes for staff to collaborate regularly with parents, as well as with colleagues in other children's services (including in the health, social care and education sectors).Whenever possible, the curriculum can provide guidelines for early childhood education and care staff to liaise with school staff on children's transition to primary and/or pre-primary schools.

INDICATORS

- The curriculum or other guiding documents require staff to use feedback from children, parents and colleagues to systematically improve their practice.
- The percentage of primary schools that are required to use a curriculum which builds on children's experiences of learning in ECEC.

2019 COUNCIL RECOMMENDATIONS

Enhance the development of early years curricula in order to follow children's interests, nurture their well-being and meet the unique needs and potential of each individual child, including children with special needs or those in vulnerable or disadvantaged situations. Approaches supporting holistic learning and children's development could include:

- ensuring a balance in the provision of social-emotional and cognitive development, acknowledging the importance of play, contact with nature, the role of music, arts and physical activity;
- promoting participation, initiative, autonomy, problem-solving and creativity, and encouraging learning dispositions to reason, investigate and collaborate;
- fostering empathy, compassion, mutual respect and awareness in relation to equality and diversity;
- offering opportunities for early language exposure and learning through playful activities;
- considering, where possible, tailored multilingual early childhood programmes that also take into account the specific needs of bi/multilingual children;
- offering guidance for providers on the age-appropriate use of digital tools and new and emerging technologies;
  promoting the further integration of early childhood education and care into the education continuum and supporting collaboration between early childhood

education and care and primary school staff, parents and counselling services for a smooth transition for children to primary school; and

- fostering an educational environment that is inclusive, democratic and participatory, embracing and integrating the voices of all children.

MONITORING AND EVALUATION

MONITORING AND EVALUATION sustain quality. By pointing out strengths and weaknesses, the processes of monitoring and evaluation can be important components in enhancing the quality of early childhood education systems. They can provide support to stakeholders and policy-makers in undertaking initiatives that respond to the needs of children, parents and local communities.

QUALITY STATEMENTS

Monitoring and evaluation produce information at the relevant local, regional and/or national level to support continuing improvements in the quality of policy and practice.

Transparent information regarding services and staff, or on curriculum implementation at the appropriate level – national, regional or local –can help to improve quality.

The process of policy evaluation can be made easier through the regular feeding back of information, as well as by allowing the analysis the use of public funds and what is effective, and in which context.

To identify staff learning needs and to make the right decisions on how best to improve service quality and professional development, it is beneficial for early childhood education leaders to collect relevant data in a timely manner.

INDICATORS

- Information on the quality of the ECEC system is used as the basis for improvement.
- Information on the quality of the ECEC system is publicly available.

Monitoring and evaluation that focus on the best interests of the child.

In order to protect the rights of the child, robust child protection/child safeguarding policies should be embedded within the early childhood education and care system to help protect children from all forms of violence. Effective child protection policies cover four broad areas: (1) policy, (2) people, (3) procedures, and (4) accountability. More information on these areas can be found in 'Child safeguarding standards and how to implement them' issued by Keeping Children Safe.

Monitoring and evaluation processes can foster active engagement and cooperation among all stakeholders. Everyone concerned with the development of quality can contribute to – and benefit from – monitoring and evaluation practices.

Available evidence indicates that a mix of monitoring methods (e.g. observation, documentation, narrative assessment of children's competences and learning) can provide useful information and give account of children's experiences and development, including helping achieve a smooth transition to primary school.

Monitoring tools and participatory evaluation procedures can be created to allow children to be heard and be explicit about their learning and socialising experiences within settings.

INDICATORS

- The percentage of ECEC settings with monitoring systems that include a focus on the best interests of the child.

▪ The percentage of ECEC settings that use administrative and pedagogical data to improve the quality of their provision.

2019 COUNCIL RECOMMENDATIONS

Promote transparent and coherent monitoring and evaluation of early childhood education and care services at the appropriate levels, with a view to policy development and implementation. Effective approaches could include:

▪ using self-evaluation tools, questionnaires and observation guidelines as part of quality management at the system and service level;

▪ using adequate and age-appropriate methods to foster children's participation and listen to their views, concerns and ideas, and take the children's perspective into account in the assessment process; and

▪ implementing existing tools to improve the inclusiveness of early childhood education and care provision such as the Inclusive Early Childhood Education Learning Environment Self-Reflection Tool, developed by the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education.

GOVERNANCE AND FUNDING

GOVERNANCE AND FUNDING are crucial to enabling early childhood education and care provision to play its role in the personal development and learning of children, and in reducing the attainment gap and fostering social cohesion. Quality is the result of comprehensive and coherent public policies that link early childhood education and care to other services concerned with the welfare of young children and their families.

QUALITY STATEMENTS

Stakeholders have a clear and shared understanding of their role and responsibilities, and know that they are expected to collaborate with partner organisations.

Early childhood education and care provision benefits from close collaboration with all services that work for children, including social and health services, schools and local stakeholders. Such inter-agency alliances have been shown to be more effective if governed by a coherent policy framework that can proactively foster collaboration and long-term investment in local communities.

The involvement of stakeholders has been shown to be crucial in designing and implementing early childhood education and care provision.

The integration of the coordination of services can have a positive effect on the quality of the system.

INDICATORS

▪ A formal set of arrangements that enables parents and partner organisations to work with ECEC settings.

Legislation, regulation and/or funding supports progress towards a universal entitlement to high-quality, affordable early childhood education and care, and progress is regularly reported to relevant stakeholders.

Improvements in the quality of service provision for all children might be better achieved by progressively building up universal legal entitlement. This includes promoting participation in early childhood education and care from an early age. It may be useful to evaluate whether market-based early childhood education and care services create unequal access or lower quality for disadvantaged children and, if necessary, make plans for actions to remedy this.

A close link to labour, health and social policies would clearly be an asset, as this can promote the more efficient redistribution of resources by targeting extra funding towards disadvantaged groups and neighbourhoods.

INDICATORS

- The age at which there is publicly funded subsidised ECEC provision for all children (for at least 15 hours per week).

- The percentage of gross domestic product spent on ECEC.

2019 COUNCIL RECOMMENDATIONS

Aim to ensure adequate funding and a legal framework for the provision of early childhood education and care services. Consideration could be given to:

- scaling up investment in early childhood education and care, with a focus on availability, quality and affordability – including making use, where appropriate, of the funding opportunities offered by the European structural and investment funds;

- creating and maintaining tailored national or regional quality frameworks;

- promoting better cooperation between services, or further integration of services for families and children – most importantly social and health services as well as schools, at national, regional and local levels;

- embedding robust child protection/safeguarding policies within the early childhood education and care system to help protect children from all forms of violence; and

- developing a system that strives to achieve:

  ○ a strong culture of dialogue and reflection, fostering a continuous process of development and learning between actors at all levels; and

  ○ early childhood education and care infrastructures of high quality and appropriate geographical distribution in relation to the children's living environment.

APPENDIX B - Methodology

Secondary data sources

Below is a (non-exhaustive) list of important sources analysed for this report:

Previous NESET reports:

- o The current state of national ECEC quality frameworks, or equivalent strategic policy documents, governing ECEC quality in EU Member States (Lazzari, 2018)
- o Governing quality Early Childhood Education and Care in a global crisis: first lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic (Van Laere et al., 2021)

Reports from the EC Working Group on ECEC [EC WG ECEC]:

- o Improving the governance of monitoring and evaluation of quality in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) (Working Group on Early Childhood Education and Care [WG ECEC], 2023)
- o How to recruit, train and motivate well-qualified ECEC staff (EC, 2021a)
- o Toolkit for inclusive early childhood education and care (EC, 2021)
- o Staff shortages in the early childhood education and care sector. Policy brief (WG ECEC, 2023b)

Eurydice reports:

- o Key data on Early Childhood Education and Care in Europe: Eurydice and Eurostat report: 2014 edition (EC et al., 2014)
- o Key data on Early Childhood Education and Care in Europe: 2019 edition (European Education and Culture Executive Agency [EACEA] & Eurydice, 2019)
- o Structural indicators for monitoring education and training systems in Europe 2022 – Overview of major reforms since 2015 (Eurydice et al., 2022)
- o Structural indicators for monitoring education and training systems in Europe – 2023 early childhood education and care: Eurydice report. (Eurydice et al., 2023)
- o Eurydice country reports. Ongoing reforms and policy developments in ECEC. National Education Systems (Eurydice, n.d.)

Eurofound reviews and resources:

- o Guaranteeing access to services for children in the EU (Eurofound, 2023)
- o European Child Guarantee Monitor: Monitoring Access to services for children and their living conditions (Eurofound, n.d.)
- o Early childhood care: working conditions, training and quality of services – a systematic review (Eurofound, 2015)

OECD reports and data:

- o Starting Strong VI (OECD, 2021)

Child Guarantee-related documents:

- o National Action plans and projects implemented during the Child Guarantee pilot phase (7 countries) (Eurochild, 2021)

Seepro country reports:

- o Seepro-3 2024: Early Childhood Workforce Profiles in 30 Countries with Key Contextual Data
- o Seepro-2 2018: Early Childhood Workforce Profiles in 30 Countries with Key Contextual Data

Other European Commission reports, policy documents and resources:

- o Mid-term report on the RRF (and case study on ECEC)
- o Monitoring framework for the Council Recommendation on a European Child Guarantee – First version of the joint monitoring Framework for the European Child Guarantee, prepared by the Social Protection Committee's Indicators Subgroup and the European Commission
- o Benchmarking childcare and support to children: Overview of the benchmarking framework for childcare and support to children (European Commission, Social Affairs, 2021) and Benchmarking Framework for Childcare and support to children. Update 2024 (European Commission, Social Protection Committee)
- o Education and Training Monitor (EC, 2024)

List of key experts

Jan Peeters (Ghent University & VBJK)

Mathias Urban (Dublin City University)

Mihaela Ionescu (ISSA)

Noirin Hayes (Trinity College Dublin)

Pamela Oberhuemer (University College London)

Paul Leseman (University of Utrecht)

Peter Moss (University College London)

Christian Morabito, international expert in reducing inequality (for example, for Save the Children International)

Akvilė Motiejūnaitė-Schulmeister (Education Policy and Systems Analyst, EACEA)

Jana Huttova (external consultant and advisor for OSF)

Ruben Fukkink (University of Amsterdam)

Gordon Cleveland (University of Toronto, Canada)

APPENDIX C – Child Guarantee National Action Plans

	Data on differential enrolment?	Identification of barriers?	Actions for accessibility / availability?	Clear targets?	Actions for quality?	Coordination and budgets ensured?
BE	Some	Some	Yes	No	Yes	No
BG	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
DK	Yes	Yes	No	-	No	No
EE	No	Some	No	-	No	No budgets
EL	Yes	Yes	No	-	Yes	Yes
FI	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	No budgets
FR	No	Some	Some	No	Yes	No budgets
HR	No	Yes	Some	No	Yes	Indicative budget
IE	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No budgets
IT	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
LU	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
MT	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
NL	No	No	Some	No	No	No
PL	No	No	Some	No	No	No budgets
SE	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No budgets
SI	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
SK	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Some	No budgets

Examples of the **identification of barriers** in the National Action Plans:

Bulgaria notes financial difficulties; uneven territorial distribution; limited access to mobile services; a lack of capacity among specialists; stigmatisation; a lack of intersectoral cooperation; the need to increase qualifications and skills; and language barriers (e.g. for Roma).

Greece mentions insufficient places in public structures; geographical distance in some regions; inequalities between municipalities; costs such as transportation costs; limited opening hours of ECEC services; a lack of qualified staff to work with children with disabilities; and the absence of rules, leaving governance to the municipalities.

Portugal identified several concrete barriers, including financial barriers; availability and infrastructural problems; administrative and procedural barriers; geographical inequalities; ethnic and cultural barriers. Many of these barriers are substantiated with data.

The Italian plan mentions various groups of vulnerable children. Figures are given for these different groups, as well as an estimation of the intensity of the barriers that each group faces in each domain. It also underlines the regional differences in availability as a challenge to be overcome.

Below are examples of **clear targets** for countries in which expansion plans have been initiated or are in the planning stages and are mentioned in the National Action Plans:

Denmark plans to expand the coverage of children aged 0 to 2 years from 20.6 % (in 2021) to 25 % by 2030, and for children aged 3 to 7 years from 80.4 % (in 2021) to 86.3 % by 2030.

Greece details concrete expansion plans. The target for 0 to 3-year-olds is to grow from 31.65 % in 2019 to 48 % in 2030. The target for the 3 to 6-year-olds is to grow from 95.7 % in 2019 to more than 96 % in 2025, and to 75 % of Roma children in 2030. This includes creating 50,000 new ECEC places for the youngest children, and reforming the framework for access.

Italy plans to increase the supply of full-time places in childcare services to 50 %, and in preschool to 100 %.

Portugal plans a progressive extension of free ECEC, towards a free and universal access to children 0-3 years by 2024. It aims to increase the attendance in preschool for children aged 3 and up from 92.8 % (in 2020) to 96 % by 2030.

In **Slovakia,** the project 'Assistants in Kindergarten' aimed to provide 340 educators to increase enrolment rates (2022-2023).

Estonia plans to increase the enrolment of 3-year-olds from the actual 92 % to 95 % by 2035. No plans are mentioned for children under 3.

In **Belgium**, the Brussels Region planned a budget of EUR 2 million to fund additional jobs in childcare in 2022, prioritising those areas with the lowest coverage and the most vulnerable groups. The French Community Commission in Brussels launched a plan to increase the numbers of childcare places, with 2,518 new places by 2025. However, no social priorities are mentioned. The Walloon-Brussels Federation of Belgium launched a call for new childcare places in the period 2021-2026, involving the creation of 5,243 new childcare places by 2026. However, here too there is no mention of social priorities, or of addressing geographical inequalities.

Finland plans free ECEC for 5-year-olds for four hours per day.

In 2022, **Sweden** adopted the Förskola för fler barn (preschool for more children) to increase the numbers of children in ECEC. In addition, two proposals were adopted on greater equality between schools, less segregation, and better distribution of resources.

Croatia secured EUR 216 million from the Recovery and Resilience Facility, which will be invested in two calls. The funds from the first call should enable the creation of 16,316 new kindergarten places, and the second call is expected to cover another 6,184 kindergarten places.

Some of the National Action Plans also mention specific measures, **i.e. actions on quality,** to facilitate access to ECEC for vulnerable children, in particular addressing the issue of affordability:

In the **Walloon-Brussels Federation of Belgium**, a revision of means-tested parental fees is planned, with the aim of improving access for low- and middle-income families and reducing the complexities.

Italy plans a gradual reduction in parental fees, with the goal of achieving a cost of zero by 2030 for low-income families.

Slovenia plans to exempt low-income families from kindergarten fees to facilitate access to preschool education for this group.

The government in **the Netherlands** intends to abolish means testing from 2025, and to reimburse 95 % of ECEC costs. However, this measure mostly targets working parents, which could impede its ability to reach the most vulnerable families.

Other Member States address in their National Action Plans various other measures towards more affordable and accessible ECEC:

In **France,** a bonus for *mixité sociale* (desegregation) is planned of between EUR 300 and EUR 2,100 for a place.

Slovenia is installing short programmes for preschool children who are not included in kindergarten: free kindergarten of 240 hours for 5-year-olds and some 4-year-olds, and lower norms for vulnerable children, including Roma children. It is planned to develop more flexible forms of preschool to increase participation rates.

Some Plans are more **concrete** in their ambition to expand access. However, no clear timelines and targets are mentioned:

Croatia states three objectives: the right to ECEC from 3 years of age by 2030; improving the regulatory framework to counter regional inequalities; and addressing hidden costs to ensure equal access by additional support mechanisms. To realise these goals, investments in infrastructure, including building new ECEC centres, are planned, as well as the development of innovative models in more sparsely populated areas. However, no targets or budgets are provided.

Ireland plans to double investment in early learning and care and in school-age care, and wishes to establish its ECEC programme as a precursor to legislation on a legal entitlement to preschool.

Malta plans to extend free childcare services (which exist for parents in work or education) to all children, regardless of whether or not their parents are in work. The plan mentions new childcare centres, but does not mention geographical inequalities or the number of places.

Slovakia also mentions an intention to build new facilities and to renovate existing facilities for children aged 3 years and over (2021-2027); however, no data or targets are given.

Lastly, several Member States mention **new measures** in their Action Plans. However, they do so in rather general and vague terms, without concrete targets, timelines or budgets. Examples include the following:

Finland mentions implementing a development programme for quality and equality in early childhood (the "Right to Learn" programme), but without details, figures or budget.

Portugal speaks of a general aim to provide free access to ECEC to all vulnerable children, without further details.

Flanders (Belgium) states its wish to increase the financial viability of childcare facilities with flexible opening hours and urgent admission.

APPENDIX D – Brief overview of National Quality Frameworks in the EU Member States

Country	National quality framework[71]	Legal framework	Access	Staff	Curricula	Governance	M&E	Link	Situation in 2018[72]
Austria (EU)	under development	Agreement on Elementary Education (2022/23 - 2026/27)[73]	Yes	yes		yes	yes	Link	Comprehensive framework governing ECEC quality was under development. Recent reforms had been implemented in relation to access, workforce, curriculum and governance.
Belgium (French community)	yes	Quality and Care Code (2003)	Yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	Link	Comprehensive reforms were in place and under development.
		Code of Fundamental Education (2020)		yes	yes			Link	
Belgium (Flanders)	yes	Decree on Childcare for Babies and Toddlers (2014, amended 2024)	Yes	yes		yes	yes	Link	Comprehensive reforms were in place and under development.
		Decree on Primary Education (1997, amended 2024)	Yes	yes			yes	Link	
Bulgaria (EU)	under development	National Framework for the Quality of Early Childhood Education and Care (2022)	Yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	Link	Comprehensive reforms were under development.
Croatia (EU)	yes	National Plan for the Development of Education and Training (up to 2027)	Yes	yes		yes	yes	Link	Recent reforms had been implemented in relation to curriculum and M&E.
		National Preschool Curriculum[74] (2024)			in preparation			Link	

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[71] In this review, we understand NQF as an explicit framework or as a collection of policy standards that regulates the quality framework.

[72] From *Lazzari, A. (2018). "The current state of national ECEC quality frameworks, or equivalent strategic policy documents, governing ECEC quality in EU Member States"*, NESET II Ad Hoc Report No 4/2017. The report divides the countries into: (1) countries in which comprehensive reforms were in place or under development, with a focus on quality frameworks; (2) Countries where recent reforms had been implemented in relation to the key principles and action statements from the EU ECEC QF. We have maintained this division.

[73] The agreement between the Länder and the Federal government has been operational since 2022, although arrangements are being concluded based on the division of competences for the ECEC system in Austria (the Federal states have their own legislation) (Austrian Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research, 2024).

[74] The last National Preschool Curriculum was issued in 2007. In 2023, the Minister of Science and Education appointed a Working Group to draft a proposal for a new National Curriculum for ECEC, which is currently under development (Eurydice, 2024).

Cyprus (EU)	under developm ent	Recovery and Resilience Plan – RRP (2021-2026). Axis 5[75]	Yes					Link	-
		National Action Plan for the Child Guarantee (2022-2030)	Yes	yes			yes	Link	
Czechia (EU)	under developm ent	Long-term Plan for Education and Development (2023-2027)	Yes	yes		yes	yes	Link	Comprehensive reforms were in development.
Denmark (EU)	yes	Masterplan for Quality Development (2017)	Yes	yes	yes			Link	Comprehensive reforms were in place.
Estonia (EU)	under developm ent	The Early Childhood Education Act (from 2025)	Yes		yes	yes		Link	-
		Preschool Childcare Institutions Act (2000) amendments up to 2014	Yes	yes		yes		Link	
Finland (EU)	yes	National Curricular Framework for Pre-primary education (2014) (Esiopetuksen opetussuunnitelm an perusteet)			yes			Link	Recent reforms had been implemented in relation to access, the ECEC workforce, curriculum and M&E.
		National core curriculum for early childhood education and care (2022), according to the Act on ECEC (2018)	Yes		yes		yes	Link	
		Early Childhood Education and Care Act (540/2018)		yes	yes		yes	Link	
		Act on Client Fees in Early Childhood Education and Care (1503/2016)				yes		Link	
France (EU)	under developm ent	National framework for the care of young children (2021)		yes				Link	Recent reforms had been implemented in relation to

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[75] *Since the adoption of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (RRP) in 2021 (EU Regulation 2021/2410), Cyprus has been working on supporting the expansion of compulsory ECEC services, with the aim of enhancing the quality, affordability, accessibility and inclusiveness of ECEC for children aged 0-6 years. The RRP is accompanied by a National Action Plan.*

Country	Framework	Policy						Link	Notes
		Legislative Part of the Education Code (2000)			yes	yes		Link	curriculum and governance.
		Plan for the individual care of children under the age of 3 (2021)		yes		yes		Link	
		An action plan for preschool: giving all students the foundations for success and ensuring their development (2023)	yes					Link	
Germany (EU)	yes[76]	Joint Framework of the Federal States for Early Education in Day Care Centres[77] (2004)	Yes	yes				Link	Comprehensive reforms were in development.
		Developing early education together (2019)	Yes	yes		yes	yes	Link	
		Standard Regulation of Operation for Municipal Infant/Child Care and Child Care Centres (2017)	Yes					Link	
Greece (EU)	no	Curriculum for Early Childhood Education (2023)			yes			Link	Continuing policy debates triggered by the EQF for ECEC
Hungary (EU)	no	National Core Strategy for early education and care in nurseries (2017)	Yes					Link	-
		Public Education Act (Act CXC 2011)		yes				Link	
Iceland (EFTA)	yes	Preschool Act (2008)		yes	yes		yes	Link	-
Ireland (EU)	yes	Siolta, the National Quality Framework (2017)	Yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	Link	Comprehensive reforms were in place
		First 5 Strategy (Integrated into the Siolta) (2023)	Yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	Link	
		Nurturing Skills: The Workforce Plan for Early Learning and Care and School-		yes				Link	

[76] There is a National Quality Framework at Federal level, and 16 at the level of the Länder.
[77] Agreement between the Länder and the Federal state, which applies to the whole country (Gemeinsamer).

Country		Document							Comments
		Age Childcare, 2022-2028 (Integrated into the Siolta) (2021)							
		Partnership for the Public Good: A new Funding Model for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare (Integrated into the Siolta) (2021)	Yes					Link	
Italy (EU)	yes	Pedagogical Guidelines for the integrated zero-six system (2021) following Legislative Decree 2017		yes				Link	Comprehensive reforms had been implemented
		National guidelines for early childhood education services (2017)		yes	yes			Link	
Latvia (EU)	yes	Guidelines for Children, Youth, and Family Development (2022-2027)	Yes	yes		yes		Link	Recent reforms had been implemented in relation to the ECEC workforce and governance.
Liechtenstein (EFTA)	no	Child Care Contribution Ordinance (2009) with amendments until 2022				yes		Link	-
		Guidelines for the Pedagogical Concept of Child Care (2014)						Link	
Lithuania (EU)	yes	Outline of Criteria for Preschool Education Curricula (2005) with amendments until 2017			yes			Link	-
		Guidelines for the Pre-school Curriculum (2023), with amendments in 2024	Yes		yes			Link	
		Methodological recommendations for preschool (2015)	Yes	yes	yes		yes	Link	
Luxembourg (EU)	no	National Reference Framework for Non-formal Education (2017)		yes		yes		Link	-

		Curricular Development Law (2018)			yes			Link	
Malta (EU)	yes	National Standards, Early Childhood Education and Care Services (0-3 years) (2021)	Yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	Link	Recent reforms had been implemented in relation to access and curriculum.
		National Quality Standards in Education (3-16 Years) (2023)	Yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	Link	
		National Curriculum Framework for All (2012)	Yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	Link	
		Early Childhood Education and Care (0–7 years) – national policy framework for Malta and Gozo (2021)	Yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	Link	
Netherlands (EU)	under development	Childcare Innovation and Quality Act (IKK) (2019)		yes	yes		yes	Link	Comprehensive reforms were in development (on access and quality)
		Core Objectives for Primary Education (2006)			yes			Link	
Norway (EFTA)	yes	Framework plan for the kindergarten (2017)	Yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	Link	Comprehensive reforms were in place. Recent reforms had been implemented in relation to access, ECEC workforce and curriculum.
Poland (EU)	no	Regulation by the Minister of National Education (2017)		yes	yes			Link	Recent reforms had been implemented in relation to access, curriculum, M&E and governance.
		Act on Care for Children under 3 (2011, amended 2023)		yes			yes	Link	
Portugal (EU)	under development	Curricular Guidelines for Preschool Education (2016)		yes	yes			Link	Reforms related to the five quality dimensions were under development
Romania (EU)	no	National Education Act (Law on National Education No. 1/2011)		yes	yes			Link	Project was set to be implemented on curriculum and staff.
		Regulations on the Organisation and Operation of Pre-Kindergarten			yes			Link	

Country	Status	Document						Link	Notes
		Education Institutions (2019)							
Slovakia (EU)	under development	Act on Social Services (2008)	Yes		yes	yes		Link	Policy debates and planned policy development
		Kindergartens Regulation by Education Act (2024)			yes			Link	
Slovenia (EU)	yes	Kindergarten Act (1996/2021)	Yes		yes			Link	Recent reforms had been implemented in relation to access, ECEC workforce and M&E.
		Curriculum for Preschools (1999)	yes	yes		yes	yes	Link	
		Act on the Organisation and Financing of Education (1996/2023)	Yes			yes	yes	Link	
Spain (EU)	yes	Education Act (Organic Law 3/2020)	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	Link	Recent reforms had been implemented in relation to access, curriculum, M&E and governance.
		Law for Improving the Quality of Education (Organic Law 8/2013)	yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	Link	
		Royal Decree (95/2022)	Yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	Link	
Sweden (EU)	yes	Education Act (Skollag (800/2010)	Yes		yes			Link	Recent reforms had been implemented in relation to the ECEC workforce, curriculum and governance.
		Curriculum for the pre-school (2019)		yes	yes			Link	
		Curriculum for the elementary school, pre-school class and after-school centres (2024)	Yes	yes	yes	yes	yes	Link	
Switzerland (EFTA)	no	Switzerland does not have a unified national quality framework for ECEC. Each canton is responsible for setting its own guidelines and regulations for early childhood education.						Link	-

Note: based on desk research.

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