



European  
Commission

# Eurydice Policy *Brief*

Early Childhood Education and Care 2014

Education and  
Training

# Eurydice Policy Brief

## Early Childhood Education and Care

2014

This executive summary succinctly explains the main contents of the *Key Data on Early Childhood Education and Care in Europe 2014 Edition*, a report published by Eurydice jointly with Eurostat in June 2014 and elaborated in conjunction with the thematic working Group on Early Childhood Education and Care under the auspices of the European Commission. The Eurydice report and the thematic working group report published in October 2014 which is entitled *Proposal for key principles of a quality framework for early childhood education and care*, were drafted in close cooperation with each other. The common areas addressed mean that these two timely reports are complementary giving the reader a comprehensive understanding of this specific policy area.

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## Importance of ECEC?

*ECEC participation has a stronger positive effect on the reading scores of disadvantaged children than on the results of their better off peers.*

**A**t a time of unprecedented economic and social challenges, the importance of giving all our children a solid start in life by providing high quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) is crucial. The extensive benefits that high quality early childhood education and care brings have been widely acknowledged, ranging from economic advantages for society as a whole to better outcomes for individuals in schools. The results of international skill surveys (PISA (OECD) and PIRLS (IEA)) report that children and teenagers perform better in reading and mathematics if they have attended ECEC. Research also indicates that providing high quality ECEC may help reduce future public spending on welfare, health and even justice. By laying strong foundations for successful lifelong learning, high quality ECEC brings personal benefits to children, particularly to those from disadvantaged backgrounds. ECEC is therefore a cornerstone for building better and more equitable education systems.

In support of evidence-based policy-making, Eurydice has published *Key Data on Early Childhood Education and Care in Europe – 2014* in cooperation with Eurostat. The report covers 32 European countries – including all EU Member States except the Netherlands, plus Switzerland, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Turkey. The reference year for all national policy data is 2012/13.

### Definition of early childhood education and care (ECEC)

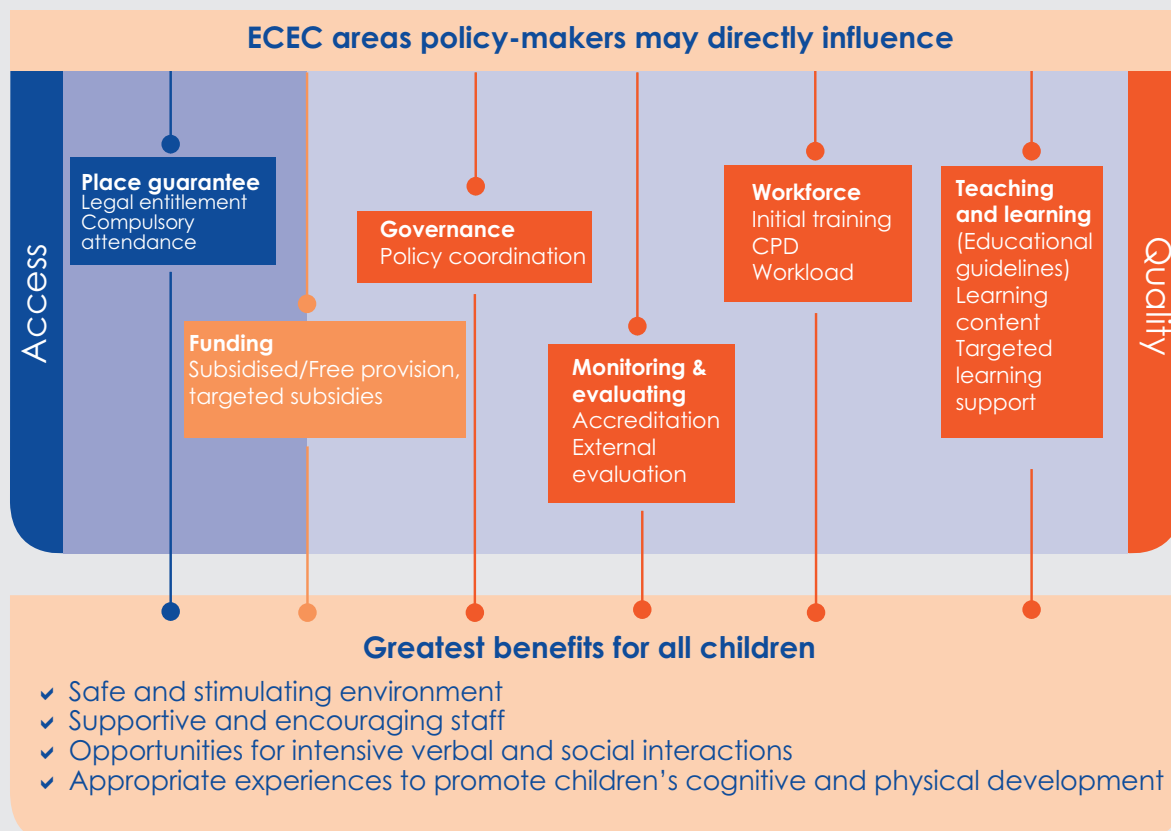
Provision for children from birth through to primary education that is subject to a national regulatory framework, i.e., it must comply with a set of rules, minimum standards and/or undergo accreditation procedures. It includes:

- public, private and voluntary sectors;
- centre-based as well as home-based provision (in the provider's home).

*Meeting the challenges: ensuring access and improving quality in ECEC.*

This policy briefing gives an overview of the key findings on ECEC that emerge from the report. It focuses on the most important challenges on which policy makers can have a direct influence (see Figure 1). Short case studies provide a glimpse into some of the ways policy-makers across Europe are meeting these challenges.

Figure 1: Main ECEC aspects for policy-makers



CPD: Continuing Professional Development

## What are the main challenges for ECEC systems?

Access and quality are the two main ECEC issues facing policy-makers in European countries at present. Ideally, they need to be addressed simultaneously. Providing access for all without ensuring quality might not bring the desired benefits for children. Likewise, ensuring high quality ECEC without securing enough places might not be an acceptable solution when the broader goal is to provide equitable and efficient education systems.

This briefing discusses the ways in which policy-makers can make a difference and responds to two main questions with regard to access: 'how can places be guaranteed?' and 'what is affordable ECEC?' This has been and still is one of the main policy priorities in many European countries. The two main approaches for ensuring access are discussed and the varying degrees of public commitment to availability and affordability are shown.

*Policy-makers can make a difference providing guarantee to an affordable place.*

*Access to high quality ECEC brings the greatest benefits for all children.*

Improving **quality** in ECEC requires changes in several different areas, which policy-makers may directly influence <sup>(1)</sup>. This paper therefore examines how countries seek to:

- build a skilled workforce, which is essential if children are to have the best opportunities for learning and development;
- improve teaching and learning through the provision of educational guidelines;
- monitor and evaluate provision to ensure that quality standards are put into practice.

In times of financial constraints, countries need to consider their priorities carefully and they may find it expedient to decide whether measures to improve accessibility are more urgently needed than improvements in quality. However, these decisions should be made while keeping in mind that access to high quality ECEC brings the greatest benefits for all children.

**Governance** is also discussed in terms of which ministries/top-level authorities are responsible for the development and coordination of policies relating to the care and education of young children.

*In most European countries ECEC is split into two separate phases according to age.*

The different approaches to access and quality taken by European countries are reflected in the overall design of ECEC systems. Countries that have separate settings for younger and older children tend to have different measures according to the type of setting or the age of children. In contrast, countries with unitary settings that encompass the entire age range in ‘early childhood education and care’ services tend to have a more uniform approach both to access and quality issues. However, even in the countries with separate settings, or so-called ‘split systems’, differentiation between ‘childcare’ and ‘early education’ spheres is gradually diminishing, with more and more European countries integrating both dimensions into their ECEC policy.

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<sup>(1)</sup> The same areas are underlined in the ‘Proposal for a Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care’ (European Commission, 2014).

## ACCESS

In light of the research revealing the numerous benefits of participating in ECEC, there is an overwhelming consensus that ECEC should be **available** and **affordable** for all children. This has been largely achieved for children in the year (or even two) before primary education. In the EU-28, on average, 93 % of children between the age of 4 and the starting age of compulsory primary education are enrolled in pre-primary education. The situation is very different for younger children – only 30 % of under-3s are in ECEC.

### How can the availability of ECEC places be guaranteed?

Guaranteeing the availability of ECEC places means, in essence, ensuring that supply meets demand. For the most part, and in most countries, ECEC is not compulsory; therefore availability does not necessarily mean that every child needs to have an allocated place. However, it does imply that the children whose parents request a place should be able to find one without undue delay and within a reasonable distance of their home. Demand varies considerably across European countries, especially for the youngest children.

Demand is not only influenced by the quality of the ECEC system, and by the cost of services. Cultural beliefs associated with child rearing and parenting as well as social and labour policies are also important. For example, some countries have extensive childcare leave (up to two years) designed to enable parents to look after their own children in the early stage, while others provide only a few months. The official age when children become eligible for ECEC provision and the child's age when parents start looking for an ECEC place are largely influenced by the length and remuneration of available childcare leave.

The supply of ECEC places can be arranged by public or private bodies. Where and when profit-oriented ECEC prevails or fills considerable gaps in supply not met by publicly subsidised establishments, prices tend to be high and therefore low income families find it difficult to afford services. However, it is precisely these children who are in greatest need and benefit most from ECEC.

*32 million children are in the age range to use ECEC services in Europe, but almost 20 million were not in ECEC in 2011.*

*Demand is not only influenced by the quality and cost of the ECEC system. Cultural beliefs are also important.*

Figure 2: Main approaches to ensuring access to ECEC

Guaranteeing places in ECEC	
Compulsory ECEC	Legal entitlement to ECEC
Obligation to attend	Universal right
Requirement to provide a place for every child	Requirement to satisfy demand
Free	Subsidised and affordable (might be free)

*A legal entitlement means that a child has a right to ECEC. Compulsory ECEC means a child is legally obliged to attend.*

Only a few European countries have not introduced specific measures to increase the supply of ECEC places. The majority, however, use two approaches: some countries provide a **legal entitlement** to an ECEC place, while others make ECEC attendance **compulsory**. In both ways public authorities commit themselves to guaranteeing a place in ECEC. However, there are some fundamental differences. A legal entitlement means a child has a right to ECEC, while compulsory ECEC means that a child has a legal obligation to attend. By making it a legal entitlement, public authorities have to guarantee a place for each child whose parent’s demand it (in the age-range covered by legal entitlement), regardless of their employment, socio-economic or family status. In contrast, in countries where ECEC is compulsory, public authorities have to ensure a sufficient number of pre-primary places for all children in the age range covered by the legal obligation. Moreover, a legal entitlement does not necessarily imply that provision is free, only that provision is publicly subsidised and affordable. Compulsory ECEC implies that provision must be offered free in public settings (see Figure 2).

The legal entitlement to ECEC is a ‘softer’ policy measure than compulsory attendance both for families and public authorities. In essence, it allows families the freedom to choose whether to provide their children with learning and development opportunities in a family or institutional environment. On the other hand, the legal entitlement is less of a financial burden on public authorities than compulsory education both in terms of the places needed and the proportion of actual costs covered.



Most European countries have committed themselves to providing an ECEC place for all children, (see Figure 3) either by establishing a legal entitlement to ECEC or by making attendance compulsory. In 2013, only seven countries, namely Croatia, Italy, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, Iceland and Turkey, have not taken either step. From September 2014, in Croatia one year of pre-primary ECEC is compulsory and in Romania, a legal entitlement for 5-year-olds is available.

In Europe, there are significant differences in the age at which children have a guaranteed place in ECEC. Moreover, even with the guarantee, some countries face difficulties in providing enough ECEC places in catchment areas.

Only six European countries, namely Denmark, Estonia, Slovenia, Finland, Sweden and Norway, guarantee a legal right to ECEC to each child soon after its birth, often immediately after the end of childcare leave. Two countries joined this group recently. In August 2013, Germany has extended the legal entitlement to all children from age one; and Malta in April 2014 established a guarantee to free ECEC to children from the age of three months whose parents are in employment or education.

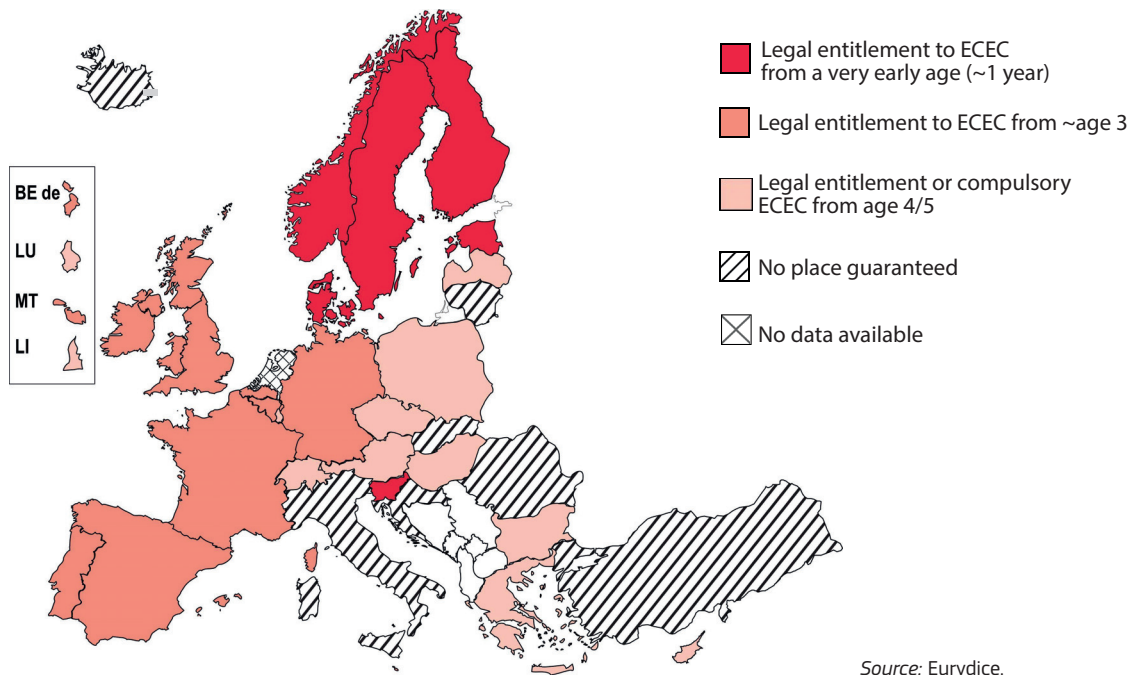
In around a third of European education systems (Belgium, Germany, Ireland, Spain, France, Luxembourg, Hungary, Malta, Portugal and the United Kingdom), the legal entitlement to publicly subsidised ECEC starts when children are 3 years old, or a few months before they reach this age. In most of these countries, demand and supply is more or less balanced at the start of the legal entitlement. A few countries (Ireland, Hungary and Portugal) face difficulties in providing enough places in certain areas.

Enough ECEC places are usually available for children from the age of 4 to 5 in those countries that provide a legal entitlement. Moreover, in 2012/13 in nine countries, the last year or two of pre-primary education was compulsory and therefore a sufficient number of places must be provided.

*Almost all European countries guarantee a place in ECEC. However, the starting age of the guarantee varies significantly.*

*Even with the guarantee, some countries face difficulties in providing enough ECEC places in the areas that children live.*

Figure 3: Guarantee to a place in ECEC, by age, 2012/13



Source: Eurydice.

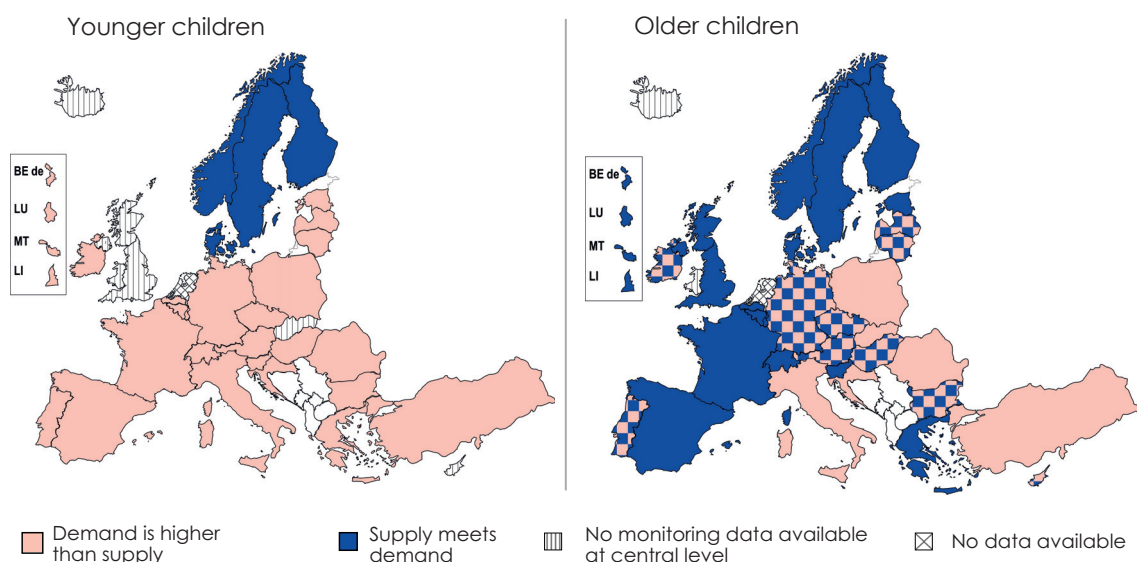
Country specific notes: See the full report (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat, 2014, p. 41).

*In ten countries, the last year or two of pre-primary education is compulsory.*

In Luxembourg and most cantons in Switzerland, education is compulsory from the age of 4, while primary education only starts when children reach the age of 6. In Bulgaria, Greece, Cyprus, Latvia, Hungary, Austria and Poland, compulsory education starts when children are around 5, whereas primary education only starts when they reach the age of 6 or 7. Since September 2014, in Croatia, the last year of pre-primary education is compulsory.

Not all these countries, however, manage to balance supply and demand (see Figure 4). Only Denmark, Finland, Sweden and Norway do not report any significant imbalances between demand and supply for any age group. In Estonia and Slovenia, despite the efforts to widen access to ECEC, the number of places for younger children still does not meet parental demand. For example, recent data show that in Estonia the demand for ECEC for younger children is 5 % higher than supply. In Germany, the availability of ECEC services varies significantly between *Länder*, moreover, there is a shortage of full-time provision.

Figure 4: Demand and supply of places in publicly subsidised centre-based ECEC settings, 2012/13



Country specific notes: See the full report (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat, 2014, p. 59).

### Case study: Legal entitlement to ECEC in Sweden

All children from the age of 1 are legally entitled to ECEC. When parents require a place for their child in ECEC, the municipality should be able to offer one within four months. ECEC must be offered as close as possible to the child's home, taking into account the efficient use of local and other resources as well as parents' preferences. When demand is higher than available places, a municipality may offer a place in an ECEC institution run by another organisation or in another municipality. Usually, parents have the option to move the child to the preferred institution when a place becomes available. Since 1995, the Swedish Schools Inspectorate can take action against a municipality that does not offer a place within the time limit, for example by imposing a fine. A recent government report (SOU, 2013:41) shows that supply meets demand in most municipalities. Only around 2% of children starting ECEC have to wait for a place on average two to three months longer than the statutory four months. The Government is currently looking into whether new measures or incentives are needed to ensure that all children receive a place within the statutory time limit.



## What is affordable ECEC?

*Free ECEC available to all children – still an aspiration.*

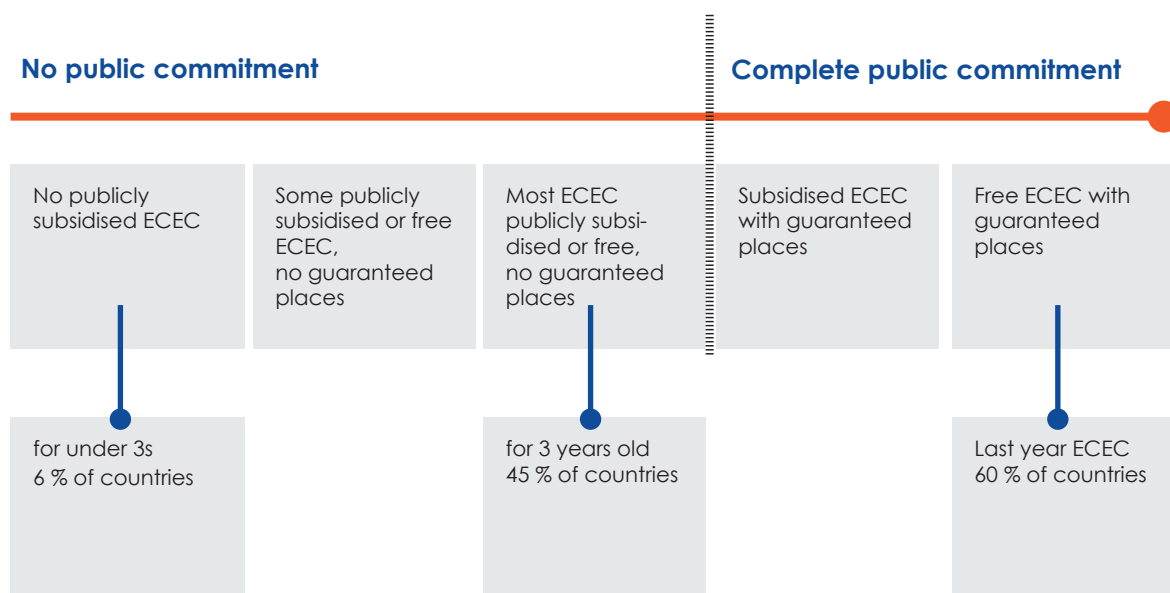
The funding of ECEC varies significantly across European education systems. Many countries consider it an essential public service and provide substantial amounts of public funding. Some countries leave ECEC provision for younger children (under 3 years old) to the private sector and expect parents to bear all the costs of these services; while in others, children may attend ECEC free of charge from the earliest age. In a few countries, parents pay fees throughout the early years until the beginning of primary education. ECEC may, however, be subsidised via payments to families (through tax relief, allowances or vouchers), via payments to ECEC providers, or through a combination of both.

*Affordable ECEC needs to be guaranteed by legal entitlement – otherwise it is not available.*

Affordability, of course, is a relative concept. High-income families can afford expensive private education and sometimes choose it even when free or publicly subsidised options are available. On the other hand, low-income families may need additional assistance even when access is free or subsidised as they may not be able to afford the necessary educational equipment or to pay for their child's food in the ECEC setting. Therefore, depending on countries' distribution of wealth and the number of children living at risk of poverty and social exclusion, there may be a need for different solutions to the problem of making ECEC more affordable. For example, in Denmark, which has the lowest rate of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion, well-off parents pay fees that amount to a maximum 25 % of a setting's operating costs. Furthermore, fee reductions and exemptions are offered based on family income, family composition and the number of children in ECEC. In contrast, in Bulgaria and Romania, where approximately every second child under 6 years old is at risk of poverty and social exclusion, ECEC is offered free or almost free to every child.

Availability, moreover, is as important as affordability. Having free or heavily subsidised services without a guaranteed place may result in long waiting lists and parents competing to get a place. Therefore, effective measures for making ECEC affordable are normally complemented by a place guarantee (either by compulsory attendance or legal entitlement), as discussed earlier. Figure 5 shows the various approaches to public commitment to the affordability and availability of ECEC.

Figure 5: Scale of public commitment to ECEC affordability and availability, 2012/13

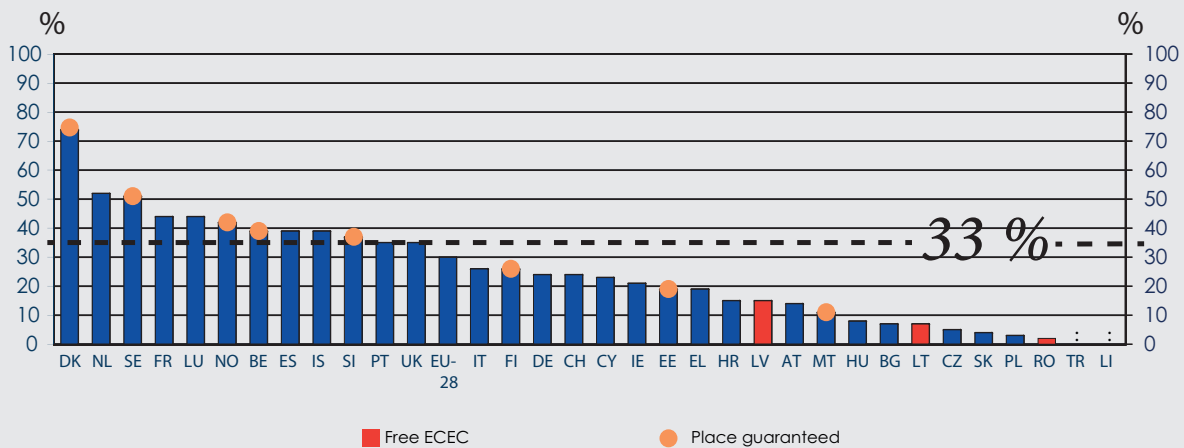


Explanatory note: Below the scale, % of countries by age range are shown. The countries analysed were attributed to a single category, based on the predominant situation. Countries with several education systems were counted as one entry. The Figure does not account for the country size or the proportion of children.

In fact, different levels of commitment to ECEC affordability, ranging from no public commitment to complete public commitment can be found in European countries. In most countries, the commitment increases as children approach primary school age. Actually, most European countries have the highest level of commitment to providing affordable ECEC in the year preceding primary education. However, in a few countries public authorities place a priority on ECEC availability and affordability from the earliest possible age of participation.

*Most European countries have the highest level of commitment to providing affordable ECEC in the year before the start of primary education.*

Figure 6: Participation rates of children under the age of 3 in centre-based ECEC, 2011



Source: Eurostat, EU-SILC (data extracted November 2013).

*The different ways of making ECEC affordable and available affect the participation rates for the youngest children.*

Figure 6 shows the proportion of children under 3 years of age attending centre-based ECEC <sup>(2)</sup>. It shows how the different ways of making ECEC affordable and available affect the participation rates in ECEC for the youngest children, where the highest differences between countries are evident. Countries providing a legal entitlement or free ECEC are indicated. The dotted line at 33 % marks the ‘Barcelona target for childcare facilities’ agreed in 2002, which was supposed to be reached by 2010 <sup>(3)</sup>. However, in 2011, only ten European Union countries (as well as Iceland and Norway) had achieved the goal of ECEC provision for a minimum of 33 % of children under 3 years old.

*Affordable ECEC for all children – subsidised, or free for those in need – a reality in Nordic countries.*

Most countries providing a legal entitlement have reached the 33 % target of participation rates for under-3s. The few exceptions include Finland, where many young children are in home-based provision (12 % of 1 year-olds and 17 % of 2 year-olds (THL, 2011)) and thus supply and demand is balanced. In Malta, in 2011, the legal entitlement applied only to children from 2 years and 9 months.

The only four countries (Denmark, Finland, Sweden and Norway) that have balanced supply and demand (see Figure 4) offer subsidised ECEC coupled with a legal entitlement (guarantee to a place) from an early age. This includes Denmark with the highest participation rates, where 74 % of under-3s attend centre-based ECEC. ECEC is

<sup>(2)</sup> Home-based care forms a substantial proportion of ECEC for the under-3s in several European countries (BE, DK, DE, FR, FI, UK and IS). Unfortunately there are no reliable comparative statistics for this sector.

<sup>(3)</sup> SN 100/1/02 REV 1, Barcelona European Council, Presidency Conclusions, 2002.



both affordable and available in these countries, as fees are rather low. In Sweden, for example, fees for ECEC are capped at PPS<sup>(4)</sup> EUR 110 (SEK 1257) per month. In Denmark, Finland and Norway, ECEC is slightly more expensive, with monthly fees at PPS EUR 270, PPS EUR 216 and PPS EUR 200, respectively. In order to make ECEC affordable for all families, fee reductions or exemptions for those in need are offered. Moreover, in Norway, parents receive ECEC-specific tax relief, while Finland offers support through the family allowance if a child attends private ECEC.

In contrast, the private self-financing sector is prominent in a few countries where a more liberal welfare state philosophy operates. In Ireland, Cyprus, Luxembourg and the United Kingdom, young children are considered the responsibility of parents, and state 'interference' is minimised. The fees in private ECEC can be rather high. For example, the average monthly fees for a 40-hour week for a two-year-old reach PPS EUR 866 (£ 754) in England. However, some targeted subsidies are available: some two-year-olds from disadvantaged families can benefit from some hours of free provision (10-15 weekly).

Three countries (Latvia, Lithuania and Romania) offer free ECEC from the earliest possible age of participation (under 1). Parents contribute only for meals. The fees also mostly cover food in Bulgaria (amounting to PPS EUR 50). However, in these countries, there is no guaranteed place (except in Romania from age five) and many children still cannot access ECEC. In addition, childcare leave is rather long (up to the age of two) and therefore mothers usually take care of their children themselves. This situation is clearly reflected in the rather low participation rates of children under 3 years old (from 2 to 15 %).

*Private self-financing sector is prominent in a few countries where a more liberal welfare state philosophy operates. Fees can be rather high.*

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<sup>(4)</sup> Purchasing power standard (PPS): The artificial common reference currency unit used in the European Union to express the volume of economic aggregates for the purpose of cross national comparisons in such a way that price level differences between countries are eliminated. PPS thus buys the same given volume of goods and services in all countries. For example, in Eurozone countries 1 PPS varies from EUR 0.7 in Slovakia to EUR 1.2 in Finland.

## QUALITY

**E**CEC quality is a complex and much debated concept. While this paper does not attempt to provide a comprehensive definition of ECEC quality, the following criteria are generally accepted to be the basic characteristics of good quality settings:

- a safe yet stimulating environment;
- supportive and encouraging staff;
- opportunities for intensive verbal and social interactions;
- appropriate experiences to promote children’s cognitive, physical, social and emotional development.

*Skilled staff are key to providing high quality ECEC.*

This briefing highlights some of the key areas that policy-makers may directly influence, and which help to create the right conditions for high-quality ECEC provision.

### How to ensure that staff have the right skills?

ECEC staff have a major role in determining children’s experiences and their learning outcomes (Bennett and Moss, 2011). The 2011 Commission Communication states that staff competences are key to high quality ECEC <sup>(5)</sup>. However, there is still a tendency to allocate ‘educational’ work for older children to qualified staff, and ‘care’ for the younger ones to less qualified staff.

*Educational provision given by higher qualified staff generally only begins when children are around 3 years old.*

In most countries, several types of staff have direct regular contact with children. In the Eurydice report, these have been grouped into three broad categories:

- educational staff, usually qualified at tertiary level (Bachelor level);
- care staff with a minimum qualification at upper-secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary level; and
- auxiliary staff/assistants who usually are either not qualified or have a minimum qualification at upper secondary level.

However, not all European countries have educational staff in ECEC, especially in provision for children under three. Having at least one staff member with a minimum of three years’ tertiary education (Bachelor level) in education is still not required in the Czech Republic, Germany, Ireland, Latvia, Malta, Austria, Slovakia, the United Kingdom (Scotland) and Liechtenstein for the entire period of ECEC.

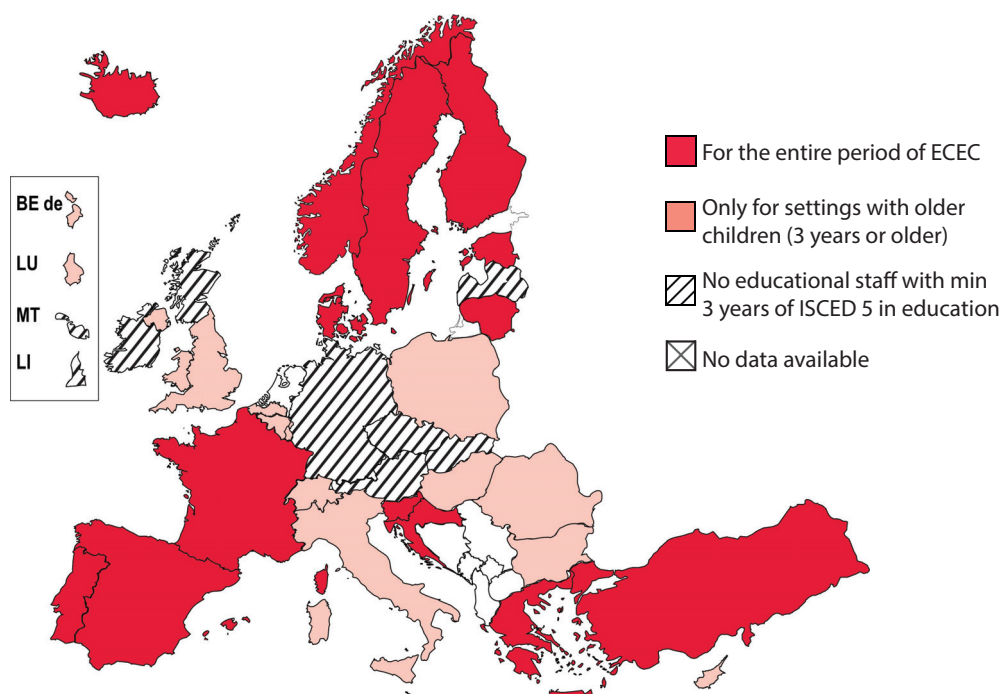
<sup>(5)</sup> Communication from the European Commission (2011) – Early Childhood Education and Care: Providing all our children with the best start for the world of tomorrow [COM (2011) 66 final].



The requirements for staff in home-based settings usually tend to be lower. The most common approach to qualifications for home-based workers in ECEC is to require them to undertake a special training course. The length of these courses is often quite short, but does vary greatly – between 18 and 300 hours. Only Denmark and Norway require staff to have a minimum three years' Bachelor's degree for education in both home- and centre-based settings.

*Home-based childminders are usually required to undertake a special training course.*

Figure 7: Requirements for tertiary qualifications (at least a 3-year Bachelor level degree) for staff in centre-based ECEC settings, 2012/13



Country specific note: See the full report (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat, 2014, p. 102).

Establishing the initial qualification requirements for staff working with children is only the starting point to ensure a well-qualified workforce. Continuing professional development (CPD) is an important means by which employees can upgrade their knowledge and skills throughout their career. In certain cases, participating in training also allows staff to upgrade their qualifications. However, continuing professional development is a professional duty for education and care staff in settings for children under 3 years of age in only half of European countries. For older children, it is a professional duty and/or necessary for promotion everywhere except in Denmark, Ireland, Cyprus, Sweden and Norway.

*CPD is an important means by which employees can upgrade their knowledge and skills throughout their career.*

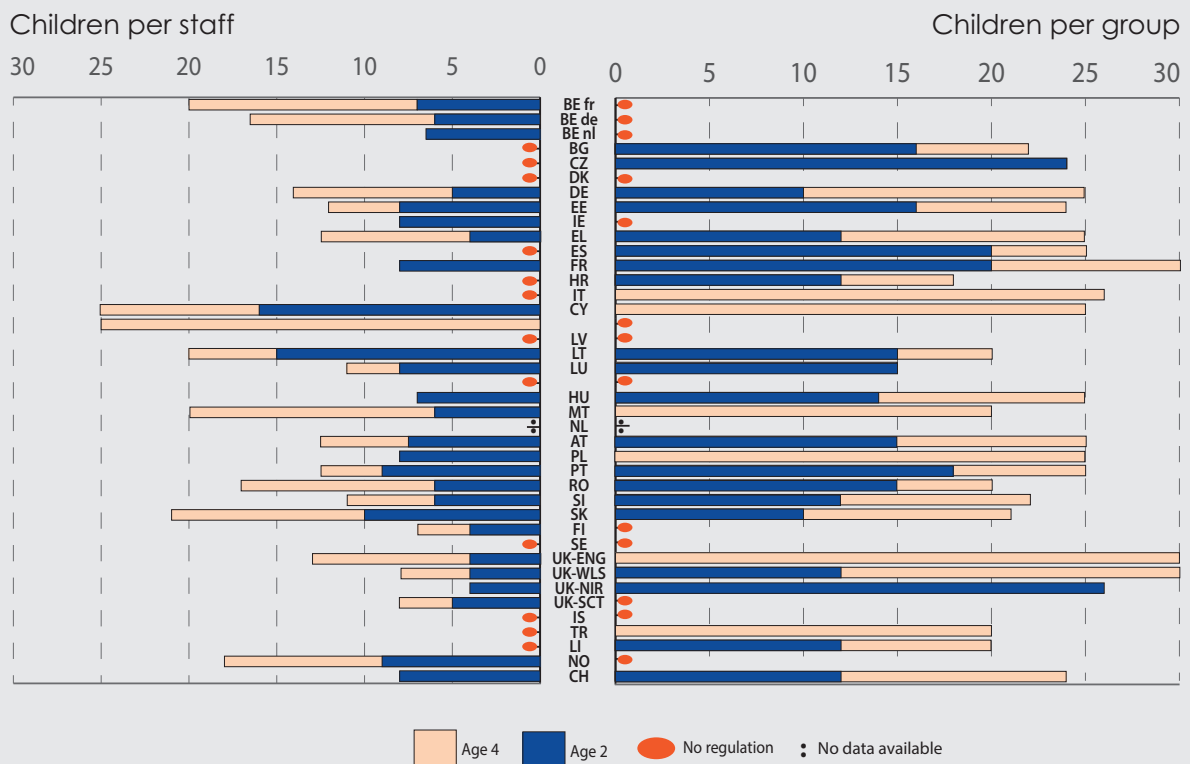
*Staff-child ratios and group sizes appropriate to children's age are often seen as essential both to reducing staff turnover and enabling meaningful interactions with children.*

Other ECEC staff members rarely have the same opportunities for in-service training or continuous professional development as school teachers.

### Why workload is important?

Supportive working conditions form another set of important factors contributing to ECEC quality. Workload, in terms of the number of children per staff member, is particularly important. Staff/child ratio and group size appropriate to children's age are often seen as essential both to reducing staff turnover and enabling meaningful interactions with children. Therefore, the majority of European countries have introduced central regulations covering the maximum number of children allowed per staff member and/or per group in centre-based settings. Although, in practice, the actual numbers of children may be lower than the stated maximums, the levels set by these regulations provide a useful indication of the standards operating across Europe.

Figure 8: Maximum number of children per staff member and per group for age 2 and 4 in centre-based ECEC settings, 2012/13



Country specific note: See the full report (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat, 2014, pp. 45-46).

The limits set for the number of children per adult or per group are usually formulated taking into account children's ages. As children get older and more independent, the maximum number of children allowed per staff member increases. In order to provide an overview, Figure 8 shows the ratios and group sizes for ages 2 and 4. The variation across European countries is significant. In Greece, Finland and most parts of the United Kingdom, one staff member cannot look after more than 4 children aged 2 years, while in Cyprus and Lithuania the limit is set at 16 and 15 respectively. The group sizes may vary from 10 in Germany and Slovakia to 26 in the United Kingdom (Northern Ireland). Usually, a team of several ECEC practitioners work together with a group of younger children.

*The maximum number of children allowed per adult often doubles when children reach 3 years of age.*

The maximum number of 4-year-olds per staff member varies from 7 in Finland to 25 in Cyprus. The maximum size of groups are usually set at around 20 children and reach up to 30 children in several countries. Usually, two staff members work with a group of 4-year-olds, but only one staff member is required in Cyprus, Lithuania, Malta and Slovakia.

#### Case study: Ensuring high quality staff in Norway

In all centre- and home-based provision, all teams must have at least one member of educational staff with a three-year Bachelor level degree as a minimum. In total, 35.4 % of all ECEC staff hold a Bachelor level qualification. These members of staff work with assistants, for whom there are no minimum qualification requirements. Nonetheless, 12 % of assistants have an upper secondary level vocational certificate in child care and youth work.

Regulations on staff/child ratios stipulate that in centre-based settings, one kindergarten teacher with a Bachelor level degree should be in charge of 7-9 children under 3 years old, or 14-18 older children. Including assistants, the average ratio of ECEC staff to children is 4.9 (BASIL 2012/13). For home-based provision, one kindergarten teacher with a Bachelor level degree usually divides his/her time between several settings, where the total staff/child ratio is set at 1:5.

Continuing professional development is optional. However, a recent strategy for competence and recruitment in ECEC (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2013) emphasises the need for continuing professional development for all staff and highlights the need to improve the status of the profession.

Norway is one of the countries at the forefront of addressing the gender balance in ECEC: men constitute almost 10 % of assistants and 7 % of Bachelor level staff. Current regulations stipulate that a man, who is equally qualified, or almost as well-qualified as a woman, must be selected for a job in an ECEC setting. With the Equality Action Plan 2014, Norway aims to ensure at least 20 % of male staff in ECEC (BLD, 2011).



## How to influence the quality of teaching and learning?

*The effectiveness of the teaching and learning process largely determines the quality of ECEC provision.*

The effectiveness of the teaching and learning process largely determines the quality of ECEC provision. Appropriate teaching methods, learning activities based on well-defined objectives, good communication between children and staff, follow up of progress towards the desired learning outcomes, as well as the involvement of stakeholders such as parents and the local community, all contribute to the delivery of high quality education and care (see EACEA/Eurydice, 2009 and European Commission, 2014). At national level, policy-makers seek to influence the quality of teaching and learning by issuing ‘steering documents’ for ECEC, which include educational guidelines on a range of issues.

### Definition of educational guidelines

Official guidelines are issued on a range of matters to help ECEC providers offer a high-quality service. Educational guidelines may cover learning content, objectives and attainment targets, as well as teaching approaches, learning activities and assessment methods.

*Often ECEC settings are free to develop their own curricula and choose their own methods.*

## What form do educational guidelines take?

In some countries, educational guidelines are incorporated into legislation as part of an education programme, whereas in others they are published as a reference framework of skills, care and education plans, educational standards, criteria for developing local curricula or practical guidelines for ECEC practitioners.

Recommendations are usually quite broad, and often institutions are free to develop their own curricula and choose their own methods. In several European countries, central ‘steering documents’ contain general principles and objectives for ECEC and these may serve as a basis for guidelines issued at regional or local level. Thus, in federal systems with significant regional autonomy, as is the case in Germany and Spain, the education authorities of the *Länder* and the Autonomous Communities are responsible for providing more detailed programmes of study for ECEC containing objectives, content and assessment methods, etc. In other countries (e.g. Estonia, Denmark, Lithuania (prior to pre-primary groups), Sweden and Finland), the guidelines and principles established in the national framework provide a reference point for producing local curricula at the municipal level or within ECEC settings.

## Which countries issue educational guidelines?

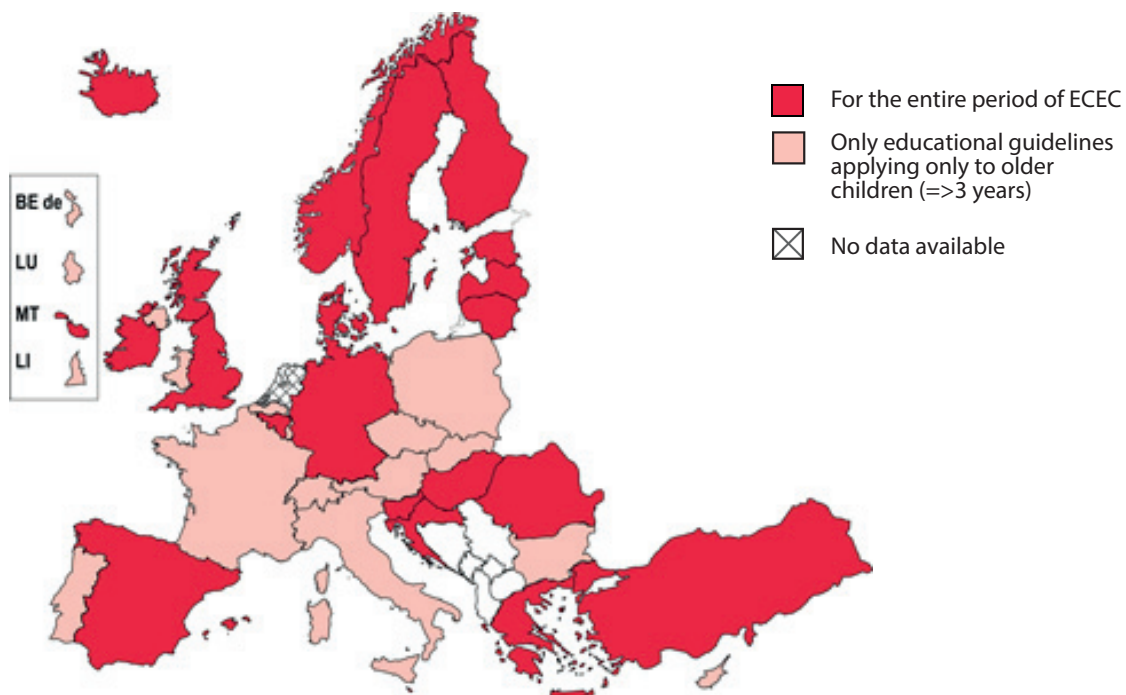
It is becoming increasingly accepted that early years' provision is the foundation of learning throughout life; consequently, all European countries now issue official educational guidelines to help settings improve their provision. However, in around half of all European countries these guidelines are restricted to settings for children over 3 years old (see Figure 9). Guidelines for younger children often emphasise care aspects and health/safety.

In a few education systems where steering documents do not apply to younger children, ECEC providers must draw up their own education and care plan in order to become accredited. Settings are required to outline, for example, their proposed socio-pedagogic activities, the education and support provided for children, and information on cooperation with parents.

In the countries where home-based provision is a significant part of the ECEC sector and where educational guidelines exist, they usually apply to both home-based and centre-based provision.

*In half of all European countries, there are no educational guidelines for settings catering for younger children.*

Figure 9: Provision of educational guidelines in central steering documents for centre-based ECEC settings, 2012/13



Country specific note: See the full report (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat, 2014, p. 119).

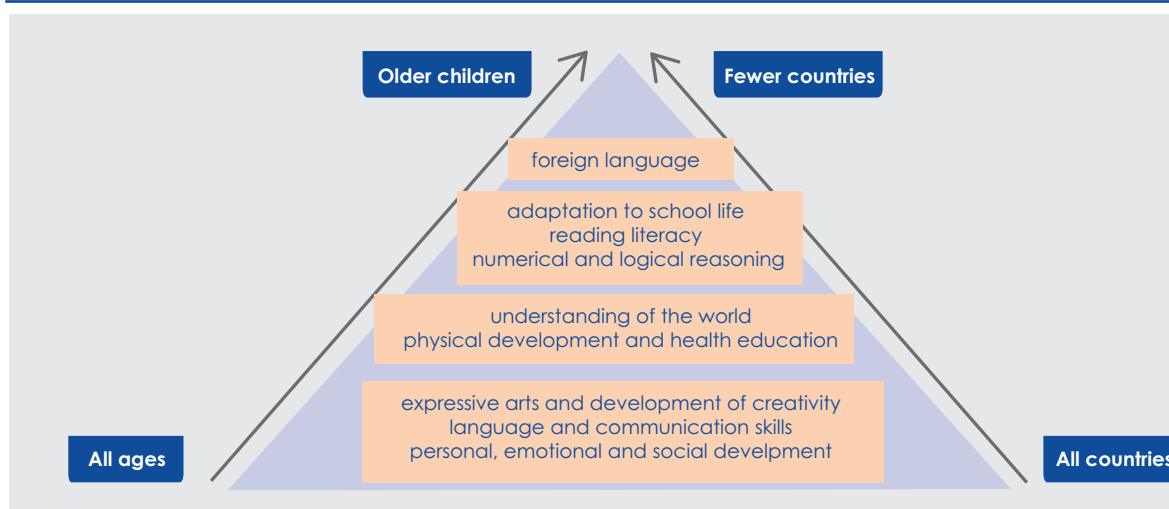
## What do educational guidelines cover?

*Reading literacy and numerical and logical reasoning, as well as adaptation to school life are more often cited in relation to older children.*

All countries that have educational guidelines – be it only for older children or for the entire ECEC phase – list learning objectives referring to personal, emotional and social development, language and communication skills as well as expressive arts and development of creativity. Physical development and health education as well as understanding of the world are also included almost everywhere for both groups (see Figure 10).

Reading literacy and numerical and logical reasoning, as well as adaptation to school life are more often directed at older children. Early second/foreign language learning is recommended in educational guidelines for older children in about half European countries.

Figure 10: Areas of learning and development in educational guidelines in European countries



*Recommended teaching approaches usually refer to finding the right balance between adult-led and child-initiated activities.*

Most countries recommend the type of approaches to education that institutions should adopt. Usually, these approaches refer to finding the right balance between adult-led and child-initiated activities as well as between group and individual activities. The principle of free play is underlined in around half of countries. Steering documents may also include guidelines on assessment methods, the most common being continuous observation. In the case of older children, observations often form the basis of a written record of assessment. Testing and self-assessment are rarely used. However, self-assessment is becoming increasingly important in Nordic countries.



### Case study: Síolta — National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education in Ireland

Educational guidelines are expressed as a standard on Curriculum in the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education – Síolta. It states that 'encouraging each child's holistic development and learning requires the implementation of a verifiable, broad-based, documented and flexible curriculum or programme'. Six components of Curriculum are further explained by a set of Signposts for Reflection and 'Think-about's' which are intended to support practitioners in early education settings to become aware of and be critical of their practice.

The framework was published in 2006, following a three-year developmental process, which involved consultation with more than 50 diverse organisations, representing childcare workers, teachers, parents, policy-makers, researchers and other interested parties. The objectives of Síolta are to define, assess and support the improvement of quality across all aspects of practice in ECEC settings for children aged between birth and six. The Framework is addressed to all ECEC providers: full and part-time daycare, home-based childminders, sessional services as well as infant classes in primary schools.

The website ([www.siolta.ie](http://www.siolta.ie)) has been designed to support ECEC staff's engagement with the Framework as individual practitioners, in working with colleagues in a setting and also as a support for networking with other professionals who work with young children.



### How is additional learning support provided?

Participation in ECEC from a very young age improves the likelihood that children from disadvantaged backgrounds will be successful in their education, and reduces their chances of becoming socially excluded. However, in order to reach their full potential, these children might still need some additional support. Therefore, all European countries without exception, have adopted measures to provide support for children who have additional educational and/or developmental needs. There are two main approaches to identifying these children:

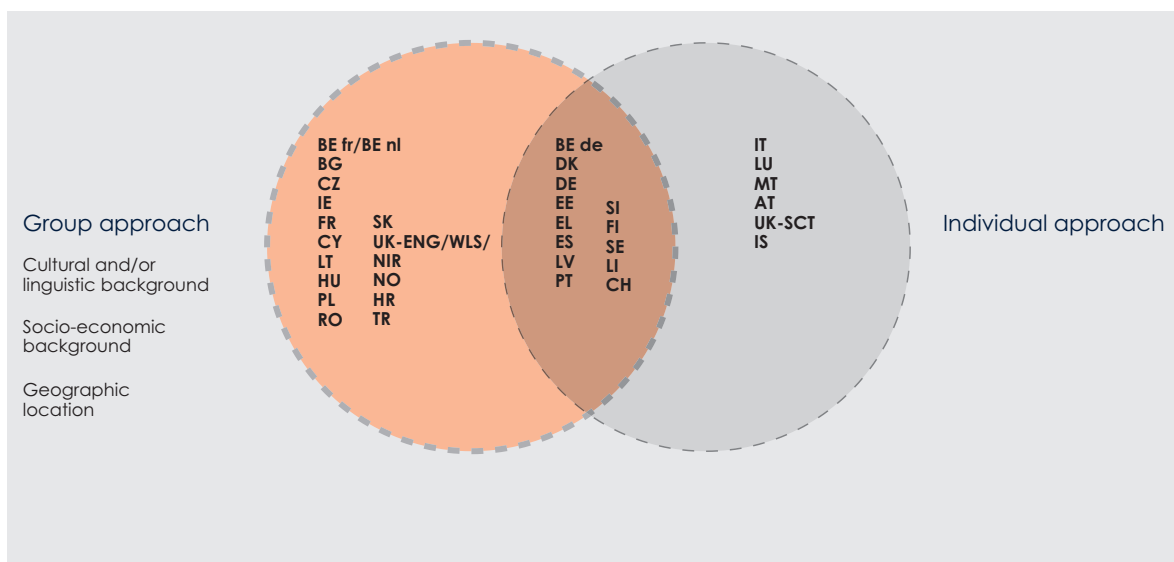
- specific **groups** that meet defined criteria may be targeted; or
- an **individual approach** may be taken, where specific needs are assessed and determined on a case-by-case basis.

*Children in need of additional support are identified according to group criteria or individually.*

*Most education systems use cultural and/or linguistic criteria to target the groups most at risk.*

In order to reach those children who might have learning difficulties as a result of their background, most education systems use cultural and/or linguistic criteria to target the groups most at risk. Socio-economic and geographic criteria are also considered important in many European countries. A third of countries combine this target group approach with the assessment of children’s individual needs. The individual approach alone is rarely used.

Figure 11: Approaches for identifying children with additional needs, 2012/13



There are three main ways in which additional support is provided for disadvantaged children:

- specific measures to support children’s development, learning and attainment especially language development;
- provision of additional or specialist staff;
- establishment of special organisational and/or funding arrangements.

*Language support is the most common form of centralised support for disadvantaged children.*

Language support is the most common form of centralised support for disadvantaged children and is usually targeted at migrant children or those from ethnic minorities. Most countries with many children who are either foreign citizens or foreign-born, have issued central recommendations on language support programmes. However, the involvement of staff from a minority or immigrant background in supporting children with language difficulties is quite rare.





### Case study: Slovenia

Slovenia has a long-standing tradition of bilingual ECEC settings in the context of minorities' legal right to be educated in their own language, to know their culture and to develop their national identity. Thus, in the area where the Italian minority lives, ECEC is conducted in one of two ways: the language of instruction is Slovenian and children learn Italian as a second language, or vice a versa. Bilingual settings also exist in the areas inhabited by the Hungarian minority, and the education is held in both Slovenian and Hungarian. In total, in 2012/ 13, around 1 % of all children in ECEC were attending settings where the language of instruction was Italian or bilingual Slovenian-Hungarian settings.

Educational authorities have issued a Supplement to the Curriculum for working in the bilingual areas. This document highlights principles, specific goals and examples of activities to support staff involved in bilingual education. These practitioners are not specifically trained for teaching in a bilingual environment; however, they are required to speak Italian (in settings with Italian as language of instruction) or to be bilingual (Slovenian-Hungarian). Bilingual settings are entitled to receive extra funds for CPD for staff, related to ECEC practice in ethnically mixed areas. Moreover, these settings may benefit from such advantages as smaller group size, extra staff or a higher level of education of the staff. Additional funds for starting a new intake are provided to institutions even though the minimum required number of children is not reached.

## How are ECEC settings monitored and evaluated?

A fundamental aspect of quality management is the extent to which standards and regulations are enforced by the responsible authorities. The vast majority of countries employ two separate processes to ensure that all ECEC settings meet the required standards. New settings must undergo a process of accreditation, while existing settings are subject to regular evaluation, which is nearly always carried out by authorities outside the setting (external evaluation).

*Virtually all European countries have put in place a system for the accreditation and external evaluation of ECEC settings.*

### **Monitoring and evaluation processes**

Accreditation is the process of assessing whether settings intending to provide ECEC comply with the regulations in force, i.e. a certain set of rules and minimum standards. External evaluation is a quality control process carried out by individuals or teams from outside an educational/ care setting which seeks to evaluate and monitor the performance of ECEC settings, report on the quality of provision and suggest ways to improve practice.

*In many countries, the evaluation of settings for older children is usually more comprehensive than it is for settings for the younger age group.*

Virtually all European countries have put in place a system for the accreditation and external evaluation of ECEC settings. Moreover, most countries' central/top-level regulations/recommendations stipulate which aspects of provision should be taken into account when evaluating ECEC settings.

Where the central level defines the aspects of provision to be evaluated, they commonly include compliance with regulations, particularly in respect of health and safety (e.g. premises, facilities and equipment both indoors and outdoors), child-staff ratios, as well as staff qualifications. However, there are wide variations both between countries and between types of setting with respect to the other aspects that might be covered. In particular, in many countries the evaluation of settings for older children is usually more comprehensive than for settings for the younger age group.

## GOVERNANCE

The way that the system of ECEC is designed and organised is largely influenced by the responsible central/top-level authorities. Historically, childcare came under the remit of social and family affairs, with the ministry responsible for health, welfare or family affairs in charge. With pre-primary provision increasingly becoming more education oriented, the ministries of education are gradually becoming more involved in ECEC policies or even assuming formal responsibility for the entire period of early childhood education and care. Some case studies show that bringing the policy coordination for the entire ECEC phase into one ministry results in overall financial gain (Unesco, 2003).

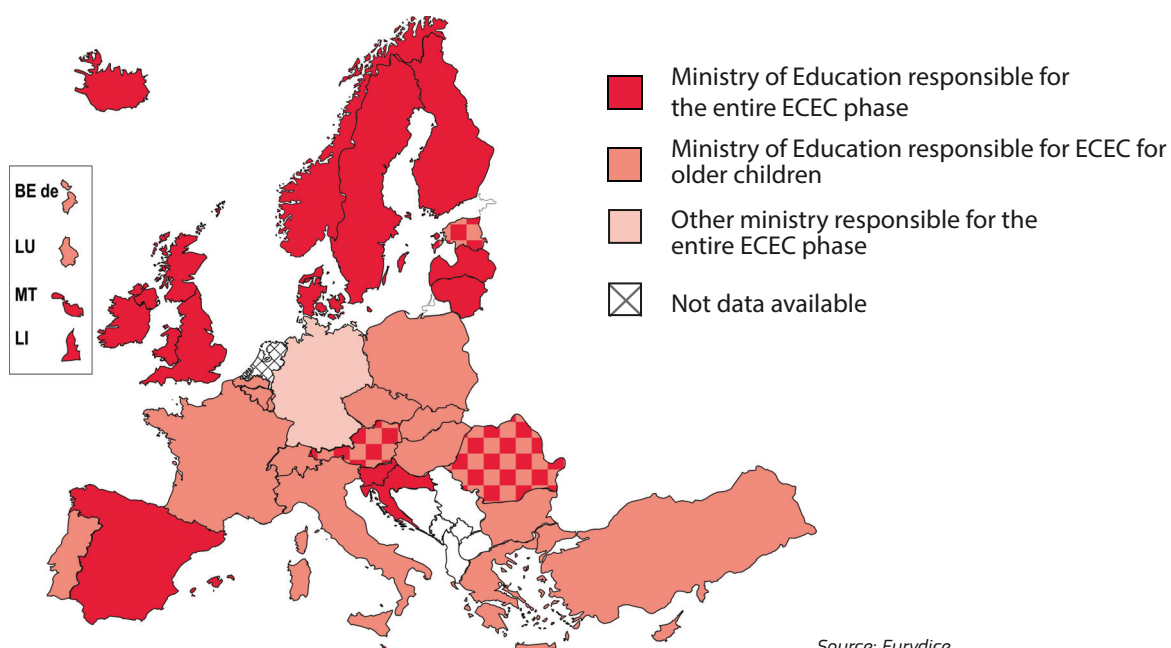
*Historically, childcare came under the remit of social and family affairs.*

### Who is responsible for policy development and coordination?

Currently, the final two-three years of ECEC (before children become eligible for primary school) falls under the responsibility of education ministries in all European countries except Germany, where the Federal Ministry of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth is responsible for the entire ECEC phase. However, even in

*In approximately half of European countries, the ministry of education is responsible for the entire phase of ECEC.*

Figure 12: Responsibility for ECEC policy falling under Ministry of Education, 2012/13



Germany, at Land level, the ministry of education is often in charge. In approximately half of European countries, the ministry of education is responsible for the entire phase of ECEC. In the other half, the ministry of education only becomes involved at the later stage, namely pre-primary education for older children (usually from age three). When there are different types of provision, responsibilities might be shared. For example, in Estonia, the Ministry of Education and Research is responsible for most ECEC provision catering for children from age one and a half to seven, but additional childcare services for the youngest children fall under the responsibility of the Ministry of Social Affairs (see Figure 12).

### What is the current trend in the structure of ECEC provision?

*In the standard unitary system, children have no breaks or transfers between institutions until they start primary school.*

Many of the decisions made by policy-makers on ECEC access, affordability and quality issues discussed in this briefing are reflected in the overall design of ECEC systems. Two main forms of ECEC structure in Europe can be distinguished. In some countries, ECEC forms a unitary system or single phase, while in others ECEC provision is split into two separate phases. In the standard unitary system, children have no breaks or transfers between institutions until they start primary school. In the split system, younger children attend different settings to older children. Usually, the transition from one setting to the next takes place when children are around 3 years old, but it can be at 2½ years or as late as 4 years in some countries.

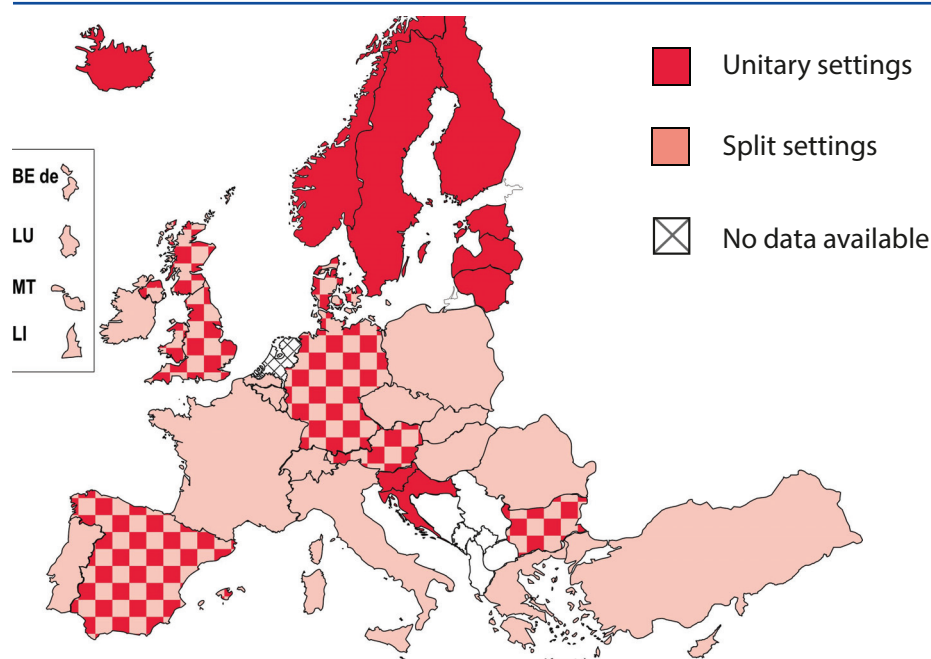
As shown in Figure 13, the majority of European countries have split settings. Yet, children attend one unitary setting before starting compulsory school in most Nordic countries, the Baltic countries, Croatia and Slovenia. There are some exceptions, with the last year or two of pre-primary education delivered both in primary schools and ECEC settings. For example, in Sweden, the last year of ECEC – the pre-primary class for 6-year-olds (*förskoleklass*) – takes place only in primary schools.

Moreover, several European countries have both unitary and separate settings. In Bulgaria, Denmark, Germany, Spain and Austria <sup>(7)</sup>, ECEC services can be delivered either in separate settings for younger and older children, or in unitary settings catering for both age groups. However, some distinctions may be maintained between the two age groups even in unitary settings.

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<sup>(7)</sup> Also, in the Czech Republic and Portugal, some private settings might include groups for both younger and older children.

Figure 13: Organisation of centre-based ECEC, 2012/13



Source: Eurydice.

Country specific notes: See the full report (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat, 2014, p. 35).

Physical transition is only one of the aspects that distinguish split and unitary systems. Typically, there are differences in the ministry responsible, in educational guidelines, in the minimum requirements for staff qualifications, in the limits on adult/child ratios as well as whether a place is guaranteed. (see Figure 15).

In the typical split system, younger children attend settings with a focus on ‘childcare’, while older children move on to ‘early education’. The responsibility for ECEC governance, regulation and funding are divided between different authorities. The ministry responsible for health, welfare or family affairs is usually in charge of provision for younger children, while the ministry of education is responsible for the provision aimed at older children. Consequently, educational guidelines normally apply only to the provision for older children. In the split system, the requirements for staff qualifications also usually differ depending on the type of provision, with tertiary degrees in ECEC required mostly in settings for older children. Staff/child ratios are usually much lower for younger children and double or even triple when moving to ‘early education services’. Moreover, conditions of access may vary greatly; with a legal entitlement usually applying to older children and not to younger children.

*In the typical split system, the ministry responsible for health, welfare or family affairs is usually in charge of provision for younger children.*

*Unitary settings have a single management team running provision for children of all ages and the same level of staff qualification.*

In contrast, in unitary systems, ECEC provision for all children of pre-school age is organised in a single phase and delivered in settings catering for the whole age range. The ministry of education is responsible for ECEC governance, regulation and funding. The provision is considered as ‘early childhood education and care’ services and educational guidelines cover the entire ECEC phase. Unitary settings have a single management team running provision for children of all ages and the same level of staff qualification (usually tertiary level) is required for working with the entire age range. Staff: child ratios tend to be lower for the entire phase of ECEC than in the ‘early education’ provision in split systems. Furthermore, in unitary systems, a legal entitlement to ECEC or free ECEC is often granted from a very early age.

Split systems showing all the attributes mentioned above are in operation in Belgium (German-speaking and Flemish Communities), the Czech Republic, Italy, Cyprus, Luxembourg, Poland and Slovakia. Other countries with split settings as shown in Figure 14 may have some of the attributes that also characterise unitary ECEC systems.

Figure 14: Characteristics of split and unitary systems





## Towards greater integration

In reality, the divisions between the two types of system are becoming blurred, since many of the countries with split settings are beginning to apply some of the policies which were originally introduced in settings for older children, to settings for younger ones as well. The first step taken is usually the introduction of educational guidelines for younger children. These can be set down either in the same steering document(s) that apply to the entire age range (e.g. as in Ireland), and/or in separate documents for younger and older children (e.g. in Belgium (French Community), Greece, Spain, Malta, Hungary, Romania and Turkey). Often educational guidelines are set in collaboration with education ministries. In some split systems, however, education ministries have the main responsibility for provision for both younger and older children. For example, in all parts of the United Kingdom the departments responsible for education set the standards for learning, development and care for children from birth to the age of compulsory primary education in all types of ECEC provision.

Some split systems require at least one member of the team working with both younger and older children to have high level qualifications. In Greece, France, Portugal and Turkey, educational staff working in settings for younger children are required to have at least a tertiary level degree.

Some countries have integrated settings, or eliminate the physical transition of children from one setting to another. For example, in Austria, alongside *Kinderkrippen* for children up to age 3, and *Kindergartens* from age 3, an increasing number of children attend mixed age group settings (*Altersgemischte Betreuungseinrichtungen*) for those from 1 to 6 years. These groups are mostly provided in *Kindergartens*.

These examples show that by integrating some aspects of 'early education' into 'childcare' oriented settings for younger children, European ECEC systems are increasingly moving towards an 'early childhood education and care' approach. Furthermore, with many countries gradually expanding place guarantees to lower age groups, ECEC is increasingly becoming an integral part of the education system across Europe.

*The divisions between the two types of system are becoming blurred, since many of the countries with split settings are beginning to apply some of the policies applied in settings for older children, to settings for younger ones.*

*By integrating some aspects of 'early education' into 'childcare' oriented settings for younger children, European ECEC systems are increasingly moving towards an 'early childhood education and care' approach.*



### Case study: Malta – Towards greater integration

In Malta, there are separate settings for younger and older children. Educational guidelines (called 'Good Practice Guidelines for Programme of Activities') for 'childcare and family support centres' catering for the youngest children (aged between 3 months and 3 years) have been in place since 2006. For 'kindergarten centres' catering for older children (2 years and 9 months to 4 years and 9 months), educational guidelines are included in the National Curriculum Framework. In 2009, the responsibility for 'childcare and family support centres' was moved to the Ministry for Education and Employment.

All four-year-olds have been legally entitled to free ECEC in state or church establishments since 1975 whereas provision for three-year-olds has been available since 1988. The attendance is nearly universal, with 98 % of three-year-olds and 100 % of 4-year-olds in kindergarten centres in 2012/13 (MEDE, 2012/13).

In contrast, until recently, child care services in Malta have been underutilised with only 11 % of one-year-olds and 26 % of two-year-olds in childcare and family support centres in 2011 (DSWS, 2011). Affordability, cultural beliefs regarding child rearing and lack of qualified services have been identified as the main challenges. In order to tackle affordability issues and facilitate female employment, from April 2014, the Maltese Government extended the legal entitlement to free ECEC to public and private childcare and family support centres. PPS 5.1 million (EUR 3.8 million) have been allocated for that purpose. However, currently the Free Child Care Scheme is available only for children whose parents are in employment and/or in education. An extension to universal entitlement is being debated.

### Where to look for further information

European countries have very different and varied solutions for the education and care for children under compulsory school age. This briefing has summarised the main challenges in improving access to and the quality of ECEC, and has demonstrated how these challenges are currently being addressed by policy makers across Europe.

For more details on these and other important issues, as well as detailed country information, please consult the full report: 'Key Data on Early Childhood Education and Care – 2014 Edition' ([http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/documents/key\\_data\\_series/166EN.pdf](http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/documents/key_data_series/166EN.pdf)).



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The Eurydice Network's task is to understand and explain how Europe's different education systems are organised and how they work. The network provides descriptions of national education systems, comparative studies devoted to specific topics, indicators and statistics. All Eurydice publications are available free of charge on the Eurydice website or in print upon request. Through its work, Eurydice aims to promote understanding, cooperation, trust and mobility at European and international levels. The network consists of national units located in European countries and is co-ordinated by the EU Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency. For more information about Eurydice, see <http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice>.

