

Structural indicators for monitoring education and training systems in Europe 2022

Overview of
major reforms since 2015

Eurydice background report

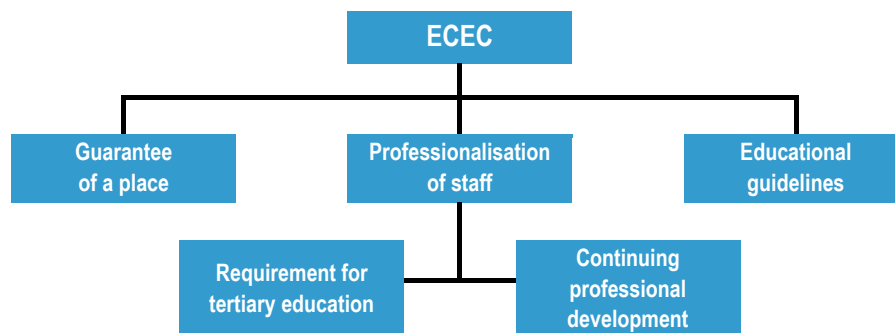
1. Early childhood education and care



1. EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE

The structural indicators in this chapter provide an overview of some key features of early childhood education and care (ECEC) systems. The choice of indicators was based on the research literature analysis and the factors listed in the Council recommendation on high-quality early childhood education and care systems ⁽²⁾. The recommendation identified five main aspects of quality in early childhood education and care: access, staff, curriculum, evaluation/monitoring and governance/funding.

However, considering the vast range of possible system-level information and bearing in mind the limitations of scope and time, only several essential and robust indicators have been chosen for yearly monitoring. The diagram below indicates the ECEC structural indicators covered in the Eurydice data collection.



In this analysis, **ECEC** refers to provision for children from birth through to compulsory primary education that falls within a national regulatory framework, i.e. which must comply with a set of rules, minimum standards and/or undergo accreditation procedures. Only centre-based provision is considered. Home-based provision or child-minding services are out of scope. The definition goes beyond the education programmes classified as International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) level 0 (early childhood education), as it includes all registered ECEC services, not only those with a defined educational component. In many European countries, the ECEC provision for children under age 3 does not qualify as 'early childhood educational development' (ISCED level 010), but it still offers an important service for children and their families.

Many European countries structure ECEC services according to the age of the children. Usually, the transition from the first phase to the second takes place when children are around 3 years old. In order to reflect the different regulations, a distinction is often made between the provision for children under 3 years old and for children of 3 years and over. However, it is important to keep in mind that in some countries the transition can be as early as 2.5 years or as late as 4 years of age.

Some European countries have several types of ECEC provision. The indicators show if a certain measure is available in the main type of ECEC provision for each age group.

⁽²⁾ OJ C 189, 5.6.2019, p. 4–14. https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv:OJ.C_2019.189.01.0004.01.ENG&toc=OJ:C:2019:189:TOC

Overview of reforms and policy developments since 2015

Since 2014/2015, when the structural indicators on ECEC were first gathered, there have been substantial changes in the **legal framework that guarantees access** to ECEC in several EU Member States. Eight countries have introduced compulsory ECEC for one year prior to starting primary education, and another three countries have prolonged the period of mandatory attendance to 2–3 years. Moreover, a few countries are extending the ages of the legal right to ECEC for every child.

Attending the last year of ECEC has been made **compulsory** in Belgium (from the school year starting September 2020), Czechia (2017), Croatia (2014), Lithuania (2016), Romania (2020), Slovakia (2021), Finland (2015) and Sweden (2018).

Three countries have made compulsory attendance longer than one year. In Hungary, ECEC has been compulsory for children from the age of 3 since September 2015. In France, the starting age of compulsory education has been lowered from age 6 to 3 since September 2019. Greece has gradually lowered the starting age of compulsory pre-primary school attendance from age 5 to age 4 (2021). Bulgaria is gradually introducing compulsory education for 4-year-olds (this aims to be implemented in all municipalities by 2023–2024). Cyprus is planning to introduce compulsory education for 4-year-olds from 2025.

A **legal entitlement** to ECEC has been introduced or extended in Czechia, Poland and Portugal. These countries have imposed a statutory duty on ECEC providers in a catchment area to secure publicly subsidised ECEC provision for all children of a certain age whose parents require a place. Czechia and Poland have been gradually extending the entitlement to age 3 (this has been fully implemented in Poland from 2017 and in Czechia from 2018). Portugal lowered the start of universal pre-school education (ISCED level 020) to age 3 from September 2018, and a strategy was carried out to adjust the pre-school network to parents' needs. A gradual expansion of the universal guarantee to pre-school education has been adopted in Lithuania. According to this plan, 2-year-olds will have a place guaranteed from 2025. In Slovakia the preparation of legal entitlement for 4-year-olds since 2024 and 3-year-olds since 2025 is under way.

There have been substantial reforms aiming to improve the quality and governance in ECEC in some countries. It is important to mention Italy, which is going through a major restructuring of the ECEC system. An integrated ECEC system from birth till age 6 is being introduced: the two components of ECEC (nursery services and pre-schools) have been integrated into a single framework with the aim of enhancing quality, effectiveness and numbers of providers all over the country.

Several countries have introduced structural reforms concerning **staff qualification or continuing professional development** (CPD). Ireland, Italy, Malta and Finland have raised or are in the process of raising a minimum qualification requirement for all or for a large proportion of staff working with children. In these countries, supporting systems of CPD to attain the necessary degrees have been established. However, the process of staff professionalisation is still ongoing. In addition, Belgium (Flemish Community), Bulgaria and Estonia introduced reforms to provide a coherent system for continuing professional development (CPD). Since September 2018 a school type called *Fachschule für pädagogische Assistenzberufe*, i.e. school for pedagogical assistant professions (ISCED level 3), operates in Austria. In Czechia, 8 hours of CPD per year are ensured for staff providing childcare services in children's groups since 2021 October.

Educational guidelines have been established for the youngest children for the first time in Belgium (Flemish Community) and in France. In Belgium (Flemish Community), a non-binding [pedagogical framework for childcare settings for babies and toddlers](#) (under 2.5 years of age) is being implemented from 2015/2016. In 2017, France adopted [the national framework for early childhood care](#) for services outside the ISCED classification (mainly ECEC provision for children under age of 3 years). This non-binding document sets the main principles and values for safe child development and provides some educational guidance. In Italy, [national guidelines](#) for educational services for children under the age of 3 years were issued at the beginning of 2022. A joint training activity has started for all those who carry out educational/pedagogical and management activities in ECEC institutions. Currently, Portugal is in the process of drafting/adapting the educational guidelines for the ECEC provision for children under age 3.

New ECEC educational guidelines are in place in several countries. In 2016, new curriculum for pre-school education (children aged 3 and over) was introduced in Bulgaria and Cyprus ([preschool education curriculum](#)). Croatia adopted the new national curriculum for early and pre-primary education (2014), followed by amendments to the preschool programme in 2018. In Slovakia, a new [state educational programme for pre-primary education](#) is applied in all ECEC settings for 3–5-year-olds from 2016. In Finland, a new national core curriculum for pre-primary education is in place since 2016 and for ECEC since 2017. Norway introduced a new [framework plan for kindergartens](#) in 2017. In France, new educational guidelines apply since September 2020 for ISCED level 020 settings (targeting children aged 3 and over). Romania adopted a new curriculum in 2019 that proposes a unitary approach to early education and care from birth to age 6, as there were previously different guidelines for each group. In Italy, [educational guidelines for the integrated system](#) (for children aged 0–6 years) were issued at the end of 2021.

A few countries changed their ECEC educational guidelines or introduced new areas of instruction. Lithuania (2015) updated its pre-primary curriculum (for the last year of ECEC) and established a detailed achievement list of children in ECEC. Poland introduced an area ‘Preparation to use a modern foreign language’ (since 2014) as well the development of reading, writing and mathematical skills (since 2017) in the pre-school core curriculum for children aged 3 and over. In Portugal, the educational guidelines for children aged 3 and over have been reviewed and updated (2016). In Greece, a pilot project on creative engagement in English language and soft skills workshops have been included in the pre-school curriculum (children aged 4 and over) from 2020/2021.

ECEC summary table 1: Legal framework, 2021/2022

	Starting age		
	Universal legal entitlement to ECEC	Compulsory ECEC	Compulsory primary education
Belgium BE fr	2y 6m	5y	6y
Belgium BE de	3y	5y	6y
Belgium BE nl	2y 6m	5y	6y
Bulgaria		5y	7y
Czechia	3y	5y	6y
Denmark	6m		6y
Germany	1y		6y
Estonia	1y 6m		7y
Ireland			6y
Greece		4y	6y
Spain	3y		6y
France		3y	6y
Croatia		6y	7y
Italy			6y
Cyprus		4y 8m	6y
Latvia	1y 6m	5y	7y
Lithuania		6y	7y
Luxembourg	3y	4y	6y
Hungary		3y	6y
Malta			5y
Netherlands		5y	6y
Austria		5y	6y
Poland	3y	6y	7y
Portugal	3y		6y
Romania		5y	6y
Slovenia	11m		6y
Slovakia		5y	6y
Finland	9m	6y	7y
Sweden	1y	6y	7y
Bosnia and Herzegovina		5y	6y
Iceland			6y
Liechtenstein	4y		6y
Montenegro			6y
North Macedonia			6y
Norway	1y		6y
Serbia		5y 6m	6y 6m
Türkiye			5y 9m

NB: The abbreviation 'y' means years, 'm' means months.

A universal legal entitlement to ECEC exists when every child of a certain age has an enforceable right to benefit from ECEC provision.

ECEC summary table 2: Selected quality aspects, 2021/2022

	1.2. Staff		1.3. Curriculum or educational guidelines
	1.2.1. At least one staff member with a tertiary qualification in education sciences	1.2.2. CPD professional duty or necessary for promotion	
Belgium BE fr	■	●	●
Belgium BE de	■	●	■
Belgium BE nl	■	●	●
Bulgaria	●	■	■
Czechia		●	■
Denmark			●
Germany	●		●
Estonia	●	●	●
Ireland			●
Greece	●	■	■
Spain	■	■	●
France	●	●	●
Croatia	●	●	●
Italy	■	■	■
Cyprus	■	■	■
Latvia		●	●
Lithuania	●	●	●
Luxembourg	■	●	●
Hungary	■	●	●
Malta		■	●
Netherlands	■		■
Austria		●	●
Poland	■	■	■
Portugal	●	■	■
Romania		●	●
Slovenia	●	●	●
Slovakia		■	■
Finland	●	●	●
Sweden	●		●
Bosnia and Herzegovina	●	●	●
Iceland	●	●	●
Liechtenstein	■	●	●
Montenegro	●	●	●
North Macedonia	■	●	●
Norway	●		●
Serbia	■	●	●
Türkiye	■	●	●

NB: ■ = children aged 3 years or more ⁽³⁾; ● = the entire ECEC phase (from birth to the start of compulsory education).

1. Tertiary qualification in education = minimum 3 years (ISCED level 6).

2. CPD refers to continuing professional development.

⁽³⁾ ■ Refers to children aged 2.5 years or more in Belgium (French and Flemish Communities) and to children aged 4 years or more in Greece, the Netherlands and Liechtenstein.