

Structural Indicators for Monitoring Education and Training Systems in Europe 2021

Overview of
major reforms since 2015

Eurydice Background Report

1. EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE





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INTRODUCTION

This report contains more than 20 key structural indicators on education policies in four areas: early childhood education and care (ECEC), achievement in basic skills, early leaving from education and training (ELET) and higher education.

Policy context

The indicators provide information on the national policies and structures that contribute to achieving the benchmarks set in the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training ('[ET 2020](#)').

The performance of the EU and its Member States with regard to the ET 2020 benchmarks is analysed in detail in the European Commission's *Education and Training Monitor*. The Eurydice project on structural indicators for monitoring education and training systems in Europe contributes to the contextual information for this analysis. It provides yearly data, from 2015 onwards, which illustrate the main policy developments in education and training systems across Europe.

Selection of indicators

The structural indicators were selected by the European Commission's Directorate-General for Education and Culture (DG EAC) using information from several recent Eurydice reports that provide an extensive focus on specific policy areas.

The selection of the structural indicators was discussed with the Eurydice national units and country representatives of the Standing Group on Indicators and Benchmarks (SGIB).

2021 update

This report contains the updated indicators for the 2020/21 school/academic year together with a short overview of the major reforms since the start of the 2014/15 school/academic year in four policy areas:

1. Early childhood education and care (ECEC)
2. Achievement in basic skills
3. Early leaving from education and training (ELET)
4. Higher education

The 2021 update of the Structural indicators marks the transition to the new strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (2021-2030) ⁽¹⁾. The next editions will contain a revised set of indicators in order to be aligned with the new strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (2021-2030).

Information on the scope of each indicator, along with detailed definitions of the terms used, can be found in Section 5.

Further information on recent reforms in all countries in the Eurydice network can be found in the [Education system descriptions, chapter 14](#).

⁽¹⁾ Council Resolution of 19 February 2021 on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area and beyond (2021-2030). 2021/C 66/1.

Part of the information in this report that concerns the EU Member States was published in the [*Education and Training Monitor 2021*](#).

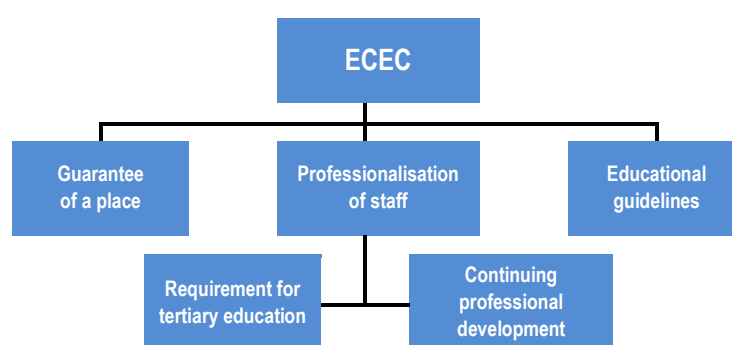
Country coverage

The 2021 update of the structural indicators covers the EU Member States, as well as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Norway, Serbia and Turkey. The information was collected through a questionnaire completed by the national representatives of the Eurydice network.

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 ECEC: access, staff, curriculum, evaluation/monitoring and governance/funding.

However, considering the vast range of possible system-level information and having in mind the limitations of scope and time, only several essential and robust indicators were 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 childminding services are outside the scope of this analysis. 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 just those with a defined educational component. In many European countries, the ECEC provision for children under age of 3 years 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 between provision for ‘children under 3 years old’ and provision for ‘children of 3 years and over’ is often made. However, it is important to keep in mind that, in some countries, the transition can be as early as 2½ 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, pp. 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 2014/15, 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. Seven countries have introduced compulsory ECEC for 1 year prior to starting primary education, and another three have prolonged the period of mandatory attendance to 2–3 years. Moreover, a number of 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), Finland (2015) and Sweden (2018). In Slovakia, such reform is in effect since September 2021.

Three countries have made compulsory attendance longer than one year. In Hungary, ECEC has been compulsory for children from the age 3 since September 2015. In France, the starting age of compulsory education has been age 3 (lowered from age 6) since September 2019. Greece is gradually lowering the starting age of compulsory pre-primary school attendance from age 5 to age 4 (between 2018 and 2021). Bulgaria is gradually introducing compulsory education for 4-year-olds (the aim is for this to be implemented in all municipalities by 2023–2024). Cyprus is planning to introduce compulsory education for 4-year-olds from 2024.

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 (fully implemented in Poland from 2017 and in Czechia from 2018). Portugal lowered the start of universal preschool education (ISCED 020) to age 3 from September 2018. A gradual expansion of the universal guarantee of a place in preschool education has been adopted in Lithuania. According to this plan, 2-year-olds will have a place guarantee from 2025.

There have been substantial reforms aiming to improve the quality and governance of ECEC in some countries. It is important to mention Italy, which is going through a major restructuring of its ECEC system. An integrated ECEC system from birth till age 6 is being introduced: the two components of ECEC (nursery services and preschools) 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, training pathways to attain the necessary degrees have been established. However, the process of staff professionalisation is still on-going. In addition, Belgium (Flemish Community), Bulgaria and Estonia introduced reforms to provide a coherent system of CPD. Since September 2018, a school type called '*Fachschule für pädagogische Assistenzberufe*' [school for pedagogical assistant professions] (ISCED 3) has been operating in Austria.

Educational guidelines have been established for the youngest children for the first time in Belgium (Flemish Community) and France. In Belgium (Flemish Community), a non-binding [pedagogical framework for childcare settings for babies and toddlers](#) (under 2½ years) is available from 2015/16. In 2017, France adopted [the National Framework for Early Childhood Care](#) for services outside the ISCED classification (mainly ECEC provision for children under age 3). This non-binding document sets the main principles and values for safe child development and provides some educational

guidance. Currently, Italy and Portugal are 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, a new curriculum for pre-school education (children aged 3 and over) was introduced in Bulgaria. Croatia adopted the new national curriculum for early and pre-primary education (2014), and made amendments to the preschool programme in 2018. In Slovakia, a new state educational programme for pre-primary education has applied in all ECEC settings for 3–5-year-olds from 2016 onwards. In Finland, a new national core curriculum for pre-primary education has been 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 from September 2020 for ISCED 020 settings (targeting children aged 3 and over). In 2019, Romania adopted a new curriculum that proposes a unitary approach to early education and care from birth to age 6, as previously there were different guidelines for each group.

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 'preparation to use a modern foreign language' (2014) and the development of reading, writing and mathematical skills (2017) into the preschool core curriculum for children aged 3 and over. Cyprus introduced the [new national curriculum](#) in 2016, targeting children aged 3 to 6 years old, followed by in-service teacher training. The new curriculum highlights elements such as play and a broader concept of learning by combining various subject areas. In Portugal, the educational guidelines for children aged 3 and over have been reviewed and updated (2016). In Greece, pilot creative engagement in English language and soft skills workshops has been included in the 2020/21 preschool curriculum (children aged 4 and over).

ECEC summary table 1: Legal framework, 2020/21

	Starting age		
	Universal entitlement to ECEC (*)	Compulsory ECEC	Compulsory primary education
Belgium fr	2y 6m	5y	6y
Belgium de	3	5y	6y
Belgium 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	5y 8m
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
Turkey			5y 9m

Notes: Abbreviation 'y' means years, 'm' means months. Age in brackets indicates the situation from 2021 September.
 (*) 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, 2020/21

	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	■	●	●
Turkey	■	●	●

Notes:

■ = children aged 3 years or more in most countries. Exceptions: children aged 2.5 years or older in Belgium (French and Flemish Communities); children aged 4 years or older in Greece, the Netherlands and Liechtenstein.

● = the entire ECEC phase (from birth to the start of compulsory education).

Tertiary qualification in education = minimum 3 years ISCED 6.

CPD refers to continuing professional development.