

## ROADMAP

Title of the initiative: **Communication on Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) – agenda for future cooperation**  
Type of initiative (CWP/Catalogue/Comitology): CWP, Annex II  
Lead DG: DG EAC  
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### Initial IA screening & planning of further work

#### **A. Context and problem definition**

(i) What is the political context of the initiative? (ii) How does this initiative relate to past and possible future initiatives, and to other EU policies?

The new EU 2020 strategy calls for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. This requires – among others - improving the quality and equity of Europe's education and training systems. The Europe 2020 flagship initiative 'Youth on the Move' explicitly calls for the improvement of the education and training system (from the early years to higher education level) to provide more young people with the necessary competences to become lifelong learners and to give more young people the chance to experience learning mobility.

European benchmarks on education and training show progress in several Member States, but the targets are still not reached. Children and young people from a disadvantaged background (including socio-economic and cultural) are often the ones that underperform most at school. ECEC services contribute a great deal to the development of the individual's learning potential from birth onwards. ECEC includes all arrangements providing care and education for children 0 to compulsory school age, regardless of setting, funding, opening hours, or programme content.<sup>1</sup> A recent opinion prepared for the Economic and Social Committee (2010) acknowledges the importance of a holistic and comprehensive approach to childcare matters, in order to have a better understanding of the inter-related procedures and secure human, social and economic development. ECEC should be articulated with wider social services.

It has been demonstrated that investing in early years education is beneficial, particularly for the disadvantaged. Its benefits are wide-ranging and multilevel: economic, social solid foundation for future learning (including preventing school drop-out, increasing equity of outcomes and overall skill levels). According to the Commission Communication on 'Equity and efficiency of education and training systems' (2006) it is a serious investment into future generations that will bring positive advantages – if of high-quality - 20 or 30 years on and clearly reinforces the equity and efficiency of systems.

The Communication on 'Improving competences for the 21<sup>st</sup> century: an agenda for European cooperation on schools' (2008) and the Council Conclusions on migrant education (2009) further explained the benefits of quality provision for all, and in particular for low-income and ethnic minority children in the early years, not only from a labour market perspective but also from the perspective of children's social and emotional development and well-being. In the follow-up Council Conclusions on schools (2008) Member States have agreed on cooperation in this policy area. ECEC is part of priority 3 in the new strategic framework for cooperation in education and training, Education and training 2020, addressing the promotion of equity, social cohesion and active citizenship in education.

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<sup>1</sup> OECD Starting Strong I. (2006), p. 7. This concept includes pre-school and pre-primary provisions as well. It consists of a set of wide-ranging services provided for newborn to pre-school children including often services for their families as well.

Several countries are currently working on the development of high-quality ECEC services. These services, however, require more development both in availability and in quality of provision.

As far as availability is concerned the Barcelona targets encourage Member States to supply full-day places by 2010 to formal childcare arrangements to at least 90% of children aged three to the compulsory school age and to at least 33% of children under three years of age. The benchmark in the strategy on education and training up to 2020 targets the participation of the four year olds across the EU (by 2020 at least 95% of children between years of 4 year old and the age of starting compulsory primary education should participate in early childhood education). Furthermore, parental leave policies were improved and more possibilities for flexible working hours introduced as part of the Social Agenda in 2008.

So far the childcare issue has been mainly addressed at EU level from a labour market perspective: concerning the employability of women with children. However, childcare, also concerns the present and future of the children (and their families) who participate in the services. High-quality ECEC services lay the foundations for good learning outcomes in education and for employability when these children become adults. Children's earliest experiences and learning form the basis for subsequent learning. 'Skills beget skills', and infancy and early childhood are critical periods for learning.

What are the main problems identified?
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As managing social diversity is one the greatest challenges facing EU policy makers, it is very important that high-quality ECEC services also support children's integration into society. These services can contribute to combating social inequalities and to social mobility. However, many ECEC services across Europe are of insufficient quality. Low quality services impact adversely, particularly on disadvantaged children. Given the new priority on inclusive growth in the Europe 2020 strategy, it is important now to extend the policy discussion in the field of ECEC to the personal, social and educational development of the child and the role of his/her parents, and consequently to increase access to and quality of the services.

For the 0-3 year olds the analyses towards the Barcelona targets of 2008 shows that while five countries have surpassed the target, five others are approaching it, the majority is falling behind. For the over 3s eight Member States have surpassed the Barcelona objective, while three others are approaching this target. Seven Member States have a coverage rate that is substantial but nevertheless still some way short of the target, between 70% and 85%. Moreover, in many countries a high proportion of childcare facilities for children in this age-group operate on a part-time basis only. For example, the coverage rate for full-time attendance is below 50% in more than half of the Member States and not even 30% in a third of Member States. Concerning the European benchmark although there is a general increase of the EU average in participation of children between 4 and the compulsory school age, a number of countries are far below the benchmark.

Different reasons contribute to this, such as operational and financial constraints in increasing the supply of early childhood education in the whole country, cultural norms and pedagogical approaches. All of the following strongly affect the quality of the services. Thus issues of access and quality have to be addressed simultaneously. Work needs to be done in addition to the Barcelona targets which view ECEC as an aspect of women's labour market participation to ensure that ECEC will be seen also as a service in its own right combining both education and care.

Areas that are problematic from an access and quality point of view are:

On the level of governance and management there is often a lack of coordination between the services. Care and education are often treated as separate issues. This is then also reflected in the way in which the services are organised and funded, which can lead to uneven quality of services and mismatch with individual needs. Coherently governed, integrated systems of care and education that involve the parents and wider community into the policy design and implementation are more prepared to provide multidisciplinary teams that can facilitate inclusive education, early intervention and smooth transitions.

In early childhood, returns to educational investments are highest because of their effects on facilitating later learning. In addition, returns to early interventions are particularly high for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. By contrast, returns to educational interventions in late adolescence and adulthood are lower, often because they do not build on a solid base of earlier learning (and since people may be beyond sensitive or critical periods to acquire certain skills).<sup>2</sup> Currently of all education levels, the lowest share of public expenditure is spent on the early childhood phase despite the fact that this investment brings high long-term returns.<sup>3</sup> In order to keep the positive effects of early investment further investments are needed through the lifecycle. Thus a combination of investments at different stages is likely to be most effective, though a lack of investment at a very early stage is likely to create high costs for investments further down the line.<sup>4</sup>

In many countries there is a lack of overarching pedagogical frameworks for the ECEC services, although such a framework can play an important role to define the legal status, pedagogical goals, pedagogical orientations and the regulatory framework (including programme standards) for early childhood services.

The staff in the sector are very heterogeneous, with very different qualifications and competences in different Member States. Women are heavily overrepresented.

#### Who is affected?

Coherent policy work within the early childhood field needs to take into consideration the different needs, competing values and interests of the different players involved: children, parents, employers, education, staff; education authorities, social and health services, etc. Successful policies in the early childhood field contribute to the fight against poverty and social exclusion, education for lifelong learning, demographic issues, equal opportunities for men and women, differences in geographical distributions, reconciliation of working, family and private life, active citizenship and solidarity between generations.

(i) Is EU action justified on grounds of subsidiarity? (ii) Why can the objectives of the proposed action not be achieved sufficiently by Member States (necessity test)? (iii) As a result of this, can objectives be better achieved by action by the Community (test of EU Value Added)?

Education and Training Policy is an area where the subsidiarity principle applies and the EU has only supporting competence as defined by the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (Lisbon Treaty). The Treaty (Article 165) provides that "the Community shall contribute to the development of quality education by encouraging cooperation between Member States and, if necessary, by supporting and supplementing their action".

In addition Art 9 requires EU to "take into account requirements linked to the promotion of a high level of employment, the guarantee of adequate social protection, the fight against social exclusion, and a high level of education, training and protection of human health."

An initiative on ECEC addresses the development of quality education and supports improved employability, social integration and active citizenship.

Extensive research has been done in the field across the world (though a rather limited amount in

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<sup>2</sup> Efficiency and equity in European education and training systems COM (2006) 481 final , Staff Working Document pp.14-15.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 53. For more recent statistical evidence about the same trend see *Doing better for children*, OECD/DELSA (2009), p.74.

<sup>4</sup> Efficiency and equity in European education and training systems COM (2006) 481 final , Staff Working Document, p.17.

the EU) and there is an impressive range of innovation and excellent policy practice in EU systems. However, particularly due to the very different social, cultural and economic contexts, many Member States are still developing provision and policy in this field, and a Communication which draws together trends and good practice would help inform this process and form the basis for cooperation between Member States under the Open Method of Coordination. This would also help supplement existing research, which is not strong on evidence for following certain policy paths but not others, and in which there are large gaps at European level.

## **B. Objectives of EU initiative**

What are the main policy objectives?

The general objective of the initiative is to improve the employability, well-being and social integration of all children, but particularly of vulnerable groups through strengthening ECEC services.

A specific objective is to help Member States in implementing effective and efficient policies in order to achieve universal availability of high-quality services. The Communication will outline the main elements of a policy framework for ECEC systems and efficient tools to implement them.

The operational objective is form a basis for policy cooperation and exchange of experiences between Member States.

Do the objectives imply developing EU policy in new areas or in areas of strategic importance?

The flagship initiative 'Youth on the Move' of the EU 2020 strategy invites Member States to ensure efficient investment across the lifelong learning continuum and to improve educational outcomes addressing each segment from early childhood up to higher education level. Moreover, the reduction of people with risk of poverty with 20 million is one of the EU headline targets within the new strategy of EU 2020. 19 million children are at risk of poverty in the EU, which means 1 child out of five. Child poverty impacts severely on children's educational performance, their sense of self-worth and their subsequent societal contributions. High-quality ECEC services for these children can help to lift them out of poverty. ECEC is a new EU policy area.

## **C. Options**

(i) What are the policy options? (ii) What legislative or 'soft law' instruments could be considered? (iii) Would any legislative initiatives go beyond routine up-date of existing legislation?

The options outlined below are reflecting the possible legislative or soft-law instruments available in education and training policies. As it is a **new policy area** in education and training Option A is the most feasible, option B might follow afterwards. There is no specific funding programme included among the options set out here, as the Lifelong Learning Programme and other EU funding programmes notably the European Social Fund can and do already support initiatives aiming at the improvement of the quality of ECEC services and there is neither the scope nor the need for a separate funding instrument.

Baseline scenario: Within the New Strategic Framework for Cooperation in Education and Training (ET 2020) Member States agreed that by 2020, at least 95 % of children between 4 years old and the age for starting compulsory primary education should participate in early childhood education. In this scenario Member States individually develop policies to improve access to the ECEC services in order to reach to European benchmark for 2020. Member States use the existing possibilities to support these initiatives within the Lifelong Learning Programme or other EU funded programmes

Option A (Open Method of Coordination): ET2020 defines 'promoting equity, social cohesion and active citizenship' as one of its four strategic objectives. It foresees for the period 2009 to 2011 to 'develop cooperation on per-primary education: promote generalised equitable access and reinforce the quality of the provision and teacher support'. Within this very broad framework, a Commission Communication would propose a concrete agenda for cooperation with Member

States within the existing OMC. This would form the basis for a discussion in Council followed by Conclusions, adopted probably in May 2011, setting out concrete priorities for cooperation between Member States which would be addressed through the OMC: e.g. launching comparative and analytical studies, contributing to data collection, setting up expert groups or organising seminars, conferences and peer-learning activities. This option needs no legal action. It uses the existing OMC framework as well as already existing possibilities to support initiatives within the Lifelong Learning Programme or other EU funding programmes. It is a necessary first step so that Member States can establish a consensus on the most important policy issues within the ECEC field on which they wish to cooperate in the future.

Option B (Council Recommendation): In order to support the implementation of evidence-based, coherent and policies for the improvement of access and quality of ECEC services in the Member States, the Commission could propose a Council Recommendation which outlines a quality framework of ECEC services. This can be a helpful reference for Member States to develop their own national targets according to which they can monitor, assess and evaluate their respective ECEC systems.

Does the action proposed in the options cut across several policy areas or impact on action taken/planned by other Commission departments?

Both options cut across several policy areas – notably health, social and employment policies. There is evidence that in order to have successful ECEC services orchestrated policy work cutting across sectoral boundaries is needed. In preparation of this inter-sectoral work we first need to establish policy within the education field in ECEC.

Explain how the options respect the proportionality principle.

The proportionality is respected as ECEC is a) a general issue for the European societies and economies, but also b) related to the specific conditions within Member States.

In the area of education and training the EU has supporting competence as defined by the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (Lisbon Treaty). All options proposed within this impact assessment aim to support MS in their policy to implement high quality ECEC services for all.

## **D. Initial assessment of impacts**

What are the significant impacts likely to result from each policy option (cf. list of impacts in the Impact Assessment Guidelines pages 32-37), even if these impacts would materialise only after subsequent Commission initiatives?

Having high-quality ECEC services available for all has significant positive economic, social and educational impacts. It is a public good that can improve learning outcomes as well as integration into society. It is a good investment in that it mitigates the expenses of remedial action. It also generates social mobility.

A. Gives the opportunity to reach a consensus between Member States at European level on which areas are the most important for improving the quality of the services. Through allowing then cooperation in these areas – remaining strictly within the confines of the education field – it will help to analyse success factors and to organise peer-learning among Members States.

B. The Recommendation on a European quality framework needs to be based on comparative research and existing country experiences. As there has not been an exchange of country experience in the ECEC field yet, it would be too early to draw up such a framework. The fulfilment of option A can lead to the compilation of these country experiences that can then in turn lead to the design of a quality framework on ECEC.

Could the options have impacts on the EU-Budget (above 5 Mio €) and/or should the IA also serve as the ex-ante evaluation, required by the Financial Regulation?

Neither of the options would impact on the EU budget. The costs of meetings, peer learning activities, studies, and projects would be covered by the existing Lifelong Learning Programme

budget.

Could the options have significant impacts on (i) simplification, (ii) administrative burden or on (iii) relations with third countries?

Investing into the early years education has the highest rate of return in the lifelong learning continuum. Improving the efficiency and accessibility of ECEC systems would bring cost savings in the long run, including reducing the scale of and associated administrative burden associated with remedial health, employment and social policies.

There is no direct cost of option B. It is for Member States to decide on spending priorities. The Commission Communication will form part of the evidence they can take into account in reaching such decisions, but has no direct cost.

### **E. Planning of further impact assessment work**

An impact assessment is not considered necessary, given that the aim of this Communication is to give an overview of trends and identify potential areas for peer learning under the open method of coordination, to which Member States are invited to respond. The Communication is therefore a scene-setting document, but will not have direct or even indirect financial implications.

When will the impact assessment work start?

(i) What information and data are already available? (ii) Will this impact assessment built on already existing impact assessment work or evaluations carried out? (iii) What further information needs to be gathered? (iv) How will this be done (e.g. internally or by an external contractor) and by when? (v) What type and level of analysis will be carried out (cf. principle of proportionate analysis)? The Communication draws upon policy related research carried out by the OECD, UNICEF Innocenti Centre, UNESCO and other international organisations and distinguished policy and research experts. It also refers to the 40 quality targets that were established as criteria for the definition of quality ECEC services by the EU Childcare Network in 1996. This report was prepared within the framework of the Council Recommendation on Childcare (1991).

Which stakeholders & experts have been/will be consulted, how and at what stage?

The draft of the Communication will be discussed in September with an ad-hoc expert group containing colleagues from DG JLS, DG EMPL, BEPA, EACEA Eurydice unit, distinguished experts in the field (Thomas Coram Research Institute, London; Teacher's College, Eger, Hungary; Department of Education of the Faculty of Social Sciences of Utrecht University and the OECD Secretariat currently working on the OECD quality project).