



# **Peer Review on "Furthering quality and flexibility of Early Childhood Education and Care"**

**Thematic Discussion Paper**

**The policy road to better and more  
affordable care for all children?**

**Copenhagen, Denmark, 13-14 December 2018**

Written by Tine Rostgaard  
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## 1 Introduction

Across advanced economies there is a growing interest in providing affordable and flexible high-quality childcare. It is widely recognized that high-quality childcare benefits the child in its cultural, cognitive, emotional and social development. Furthermore, availability of adequate childcare facilitates parental and in particular female labour force participation, thus contributing to gender equality in paid and unpaid work as well as the reduction of child poverty. Subsequently, a common interest across EU countries exists with regard to promoting childcare as a universal element in the life of the child and the family, serving simultaneously the aims of facilitating employment of parents as well as ensuring the developmental and learning needs for children are met.

This Thematic Paper presents an overview of EU Member State<sup>1</sup> policies that focus on achieving Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services, which are flexible, generally available, of high-quality and affordable. Where data is available, the paper covers the specific policies implemented in the six Member States participating in the Peer Review, namely Bulgaria, Cyprus, France, Germany, Luxembourg and Malta, as well as the host country, Denmark. The focus of the presented analysis is in detailing key institutional features of childcare services in these seven countries, such as accessibility, quality and affordability. Furthermore, differences in organizational structure and social expenditure levels will be covered briefly with regard to the implication of these for the varying levels on providing affordable, flexible, and high-quality childcare services for all.

## 2 Setting the scene – The EU Policy Approach

The importance of childcare has been emphasized by the EU since the early 1990s, promoting childcare as part of the policy agenda on reconciling work and family life. The EU has no competence in the policy area of ECEC and therefore its actions are limited to providing policy guidance on the basis of non-binding recommendations. In 1992, through the European Council Recommendation on Childcare, the EU recognised the need for a more coherent policy response in order to address new social risks, such as lone motherhood, childhood poverty and inter-generational transmission of disadvantages. The Recommendation emphasized the need for policy actions that would address childcare services alongside parental leave, labour regulations and gender equality as a total package to respond to the new social risks (Council of the European Communities, 1992).

Initially, the main interest was in removing barriers to employment for parents, and mothers in particular, by increasing the quantity of childcare services (Campbell-Barr and Bogatić, 2017). There were several policy steps towards achieving this goal. The launch of the EU Lisbon Strategy in 2000, with the aim to 'make Europe the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-driven economy by 2010' (European Commission, 2000), consolidated this approach in visioning a 'Europe-wide Adult-Worker model' (Annesley, 2007) in which childcare was a means to ensure that both men and women take up paid work.

Following up, the Barcelona Targets, adopted in 2002 as part of the European Employment Strategy (EES), introduced a more concrete but still 'soft policy' measure in relation to childcare policy. Although its main aim remained increasing parental employment, the Barcelona targets were also inspired by new ideas, such as an influential evaluation by Esping-Andersen and colleagues (2002) for the EU Presidency, which for the first time pointed at the need for a child-centred (and childcare-based) social investment strategy, implying also the need for high-quality childcare. The Barcelona target quantified the political aims for childcare provision by

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<sup>1</sup> Data references will in many cases cover a broader range of OECD countries.

introducing a minimum participation rate for childcare attendance. By 2010, Member States should have achieved a minimum of 33% participation of children aged zero to two in childcare and 90 % for children between three and school age. Setting targets in this area ensured that progress could be monitored as part of the Open Method of Coordination (OMC), thus pushing Member States to have a continuous focus on producing results (Zeitlin, 2008). The ECEC benchmark was adopted in 2009 within the Education and Training (ET) 2020 Strategic framework "with a view to increasing participation in high-quality early childhood education as a foundation for later educational success, especially in the case of those from disadvantaged backgrounds", and further outlining that 95% of children between the age of four and compulsory school age should participate in education and care by 2020 (Official Journal of the European Journal, 2011, p.7). The ECEC ET 2020 benchmark thus differentiated from the Barcelona targets in emphasising the learning dimension (Flisi et al, 2016). In 2011, the Commission dedicated a Communication entirely to ECEC as part of its Europe 2020 Strategy contextual framework, entitled 'Early Childhood Education and Care: providing all our children with the best start for the world of tomorrow' (European Commission, 2011). The document emphasised the urgent need to expand the ECEC services for pre-schoolers as well as the need for rethinking the continued advantages of an integrated and comprehensive approach.

The long-term social investment perspective gained progressively ground in EU policies. For instance, in its recommendation on "Investing in Children: Breaking the Cycle of Disadvantage" from 2013 (European Commission, 2013) the European Commission emphasized childcare as the essential foundation for successful lifelong learning, social integration and personal development, and – once again underlining the view of children as potential future contributors to the economy – later employability. Also noteworthy is the new interest in the quality of childcare, to be achieved, amongst others, by ensuring well-integrated services that build on a joint vision of the role of childcare, effective curricular frameworks, professionalization of staff competences and integrated governance arrangements (European Commission, 2013).

The EU Social Investment Package launched in 2013, placed childcare in a central position as a key element in the overall strategy to strengthen children's current and future capacities as citizens and workers. In addition, provision of generally available, high-quality and affordable childcare is seen as a key factor to break inter-generational transmission of disadvantages for children growing up in less resourceful families, as well as to ensure gender equality in labour market participation.

More specifically, this led to the setting up of the ECEC Thematic Working Group which in 2014 presented a European ECEC Quality Framework (QF), based on four key principles: a child-centred approach, link between education and care, involving parents as partners, and the need for developing a shared understanding of high quality services (European Commission, Thematic Working Group on Early Childhood Education and Care, 2014). The QF presents ten statements of recommendations for Member States in order to improve access to high-quality and affordable childcare, under the five headings of: access; workforce; curriculum; monitoring and evaluation; and governance and funding (*Ibid*) (see the ten statements in Annex A). The work culminated so far in the 2017 development of 22 indicators to be used to evaluate the effectiveness of the ECEC systems and its capacity to support and promote the quality of ECEC provision and practice, and eventually in the narrowing down to the ten core indicators most applicable (European Commission, 2018a) (See Annex B for the ten indicators), of which a selection will be presented in this report.

### **3 Approaches to Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)**

Taking into account the recommendations for the application of the ECEC QF indicators, this section looks into how the EU policy recommendations are nationally implemented in regards to accessibility, quality and affordable childcare. In order to provide the context, the section will firstly introduce the importance of the organizational structure and social expenditure for the achievement of affordable, flexible and high-quality ECEC services for all.

#### **3.1 Organisational structure**

In many countries, there has been a historical division of 'education' and 'care'. This is still today reflected in the organisation of childcare, in regards to who holds the overall organisational responsibility, but also expressed in access, quality and parental costs. Provision of childcare that builds on the education system often provides universal access and entitlement, with well-qualified teaching staff, established curriculum and without costs for the parents, but mainly within the school year and within school hours. Provision of childcare that builds on the welfare system on the other hand often provides all-year care provided by educated staff with a pedagogical background, with long opening hours, (originally) intended for children whose parents are working and for a parental fee.

The historical division between "care" and "early -learning" has in many countries survived until today, so that younger and older children are cared for in different settings and under different organisational auspices, such as is the case in Cyprus, France, Luxembourg and Malta. In response to the progressive emergence of the learning and developmental aspects in the EU policy agenda, some countries have moved away from split systems and instead set up a unitary or mixed organizational structure for both care and early-learning services. The educational dimension of childcare has in this way in many EU countries been underscored by transferring responsibility for childcare from Ministries of Social Affairs/Family Affairs to Ministries of Education. As an example, formal ECEC in Luxembourg in 2009 became a part of a comprehensive elementary school (*école fondamentale*), however, only services for older pre-school children were transferred under the responsibility of the Ministry of Education. In Denmark, ECEC services were first transferred from the Ministry of Social Affairs to Ministry of Children, Education and Gender equality, but are now once again being under the responsibility of the Ministry of Children and Social Affairs. The organisational structure is here mixed as ECEC services can be delivered either in separate settings for younger and older children, or in unitary settings catering both age groups.

The integration of childcare and education in a unitary system is favoured as a way to ensure within-country standardization of the provision of childcare services (European Commission, 2011). It may also facilitate closer cooperation between childcare centres and primary school and the introduction of a curriculum in childcare, such as learning plans. According to Kaga et al. (2010), however, some variation can be found in the depth of structural as well as conceptual integration between childcare and education across countries, even in unitary systems.

#### **3.2 Social expenditure**

Another general development over the last decades and in accordance with the desire to make ECEC services more available for all children – and investing in high-quality care - has been the major investments in social expenditure for this policy area. This can be assessed by looking at one of the core ten QF indicators recommended, *Indicator 22 'The percentage of gross domestic product spent on ECEC'*.

There has traditionally been a variation in social expenditure levels dedicated to ECEC between EU countries, but growth in social expenditure levels for childcare has been quite spectacular in the 2000s, levelling the country variation somewhat. This is partly



explained by the GDP drop as consequence of the 2008 financial crisis, where some countries were more hit than others. If countries were to uphold a consistent investment in childcare over time, GDP investments would be expected to increase from 2008 and onwards until GDP levels stabilized again – and so they have.

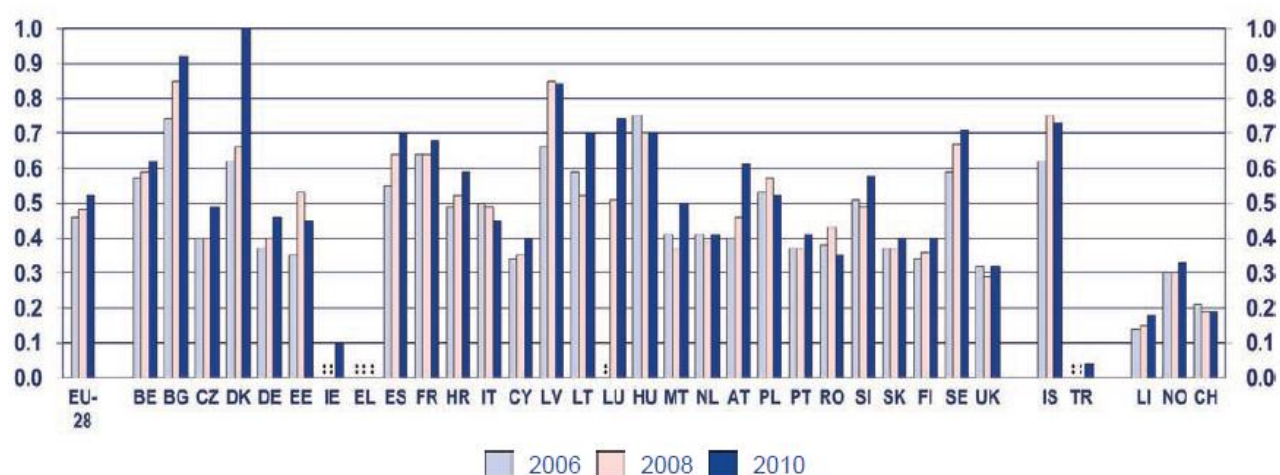
While the EU did not formulate any recommendations on minimum target goals for expenditure investments into ECEC, UNICEF sets this level at 1 % of GDP.

Figure 1 presents the most recent comparable data across all EU Member States. The figure shows that across EU countries, spending on childcare as a proportion of gross domestic product (GDP) increases over the period 2006-2010. Germany is a good example of how the broad interest in expanding ECEC provision has led to extraordinary national state initiatives. More specifically, an intensive federal government funding initiative took place between 2008-2014, which ensured a provision of Purchasing Power Standards (PPS) of 5.2 billion Euro to the regional Länder that are normally in charge of ECEC funding (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat, 2014).

On average, total public expenditure on pre-primary education rose from 0.46 % of GDP in 2006 to 0.52 % in 2010 in the EU. The highest increase is found in one of the countries participating in the Peer Review, Bulgaria, as well as in the host country Denmark. Both countries also stand out in having a total public expenditure on ECEC provisions higher than 0.80 % of national GDP in 2010, as the only countries in the EU. In comparison, France and Luxembourg spent approx. 0.70 % of GDP on ECEC provisions, Malta 0.50 %, Germany 0.46 % and Cyprus 0.40 % (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat, 2014).

Looking at more recent OECD data from 2013 (however not including all Peer Review and Host countries), show that only the Nordic countries and France exceed the recommended level of 1% social expenditure investment in ECEC while the remaining countries across OECD spent on average 0.60 % of GDP (OECD Social Expenditure Database, 2018).

**Figure 1. Trends in total public expenditure on pre-primary education (ISCED 0) as a % of GDP, 2006, 2008 and 2010.**



Source: European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat, 2014

### 3.3 Accessibility and participation

#### *Universal or targeted approach*

If the general understanding is that childcare is a means to facilitate maternal employment in the reconciliation of work and family life, it could be argued that it should be provided universally. If childcare is (also) seen to benefit the child in general in its social, cognitive and emotional development, it may equally well be

argued that it should be a universal solution. Today, the universal approach is widely advocated by the EU (see, e.g., European Commission, 2011), as well as by the OECD, and often with direct reference to the American economist Heckman's theory of the high economic returns from investing early in the child. His research shows that investment in early years can lead not only to improve children's opportunities in general but can be measured directly in reductions in public expenditure, including incarceration, welfare dependence, teen pregnancy, grade retention and referral to special education (Heckman, 2006). When taking account of the productivity gains from facilitating mothers' employment also, the economic return from providing childcare is estimated to be up to ten times the costs of service provision (Barnett and Masse, 2007), even when considering also high-cost childcare systems as found in some European countries (Barnett and Nores, 2015). However, the compensating effect factor of childcare for children's life chances may be less clear-cut than often presented. While meta-studies studies such as Anderson et al. (2003) do find a positive short-term outcome on cognitive and non-cognitive abilities, it is often difficult to conclude on long-term effects and even more difficult to identify the causal institutional features of effective and efficient programs. This obviously complicates policy learning across countries.

The (Heckman) paradox is also that children from less resourceful families benefit disproportionately and longer lasting from high-quality childcare, compared to children who live in a more stimulating family environment (Christoffersen et al., 2014; Christoffersen, 2017). In terms of maximizing the returns from the investment in childcare, a targeted approach may therefore yield a higher societal return. Results are, however, not consistent; other research findings point to the general positive effect of a universal and high-quality childcare service provision for all children, regardless of family circumstances (see, e.g., Van Belle, 2016; Lazzari and Vandenbroeck, 2014). A universal approach has the additional advantage of preventing stigmatisation of those children who attend childcare (as well as their parents).

Targeting mechanisms are mainly advised with regard to those children who are considered particularly disadvantaged. There is strong evidence that high-quality ECEC can help mitigate many of the effects of a poor start (see e.g. OECD, 2006; Ruhm and Waldfogel, 2012; Van Huizen and Plantenga, 2015). Referring, amongst others, to the improved reading performance of immigrant children who have participated in childcare, the OECD recommends targeting this group of children to promote equality (OECD, 2016a; 2018b). Such policy advice has been followed up, for instance, in Denmark where the government has decided to make childcare mandatory for immigrant children from the age of 1 year, if they and their parents live in a socially deprived neighbourhood. The aim is for them to develop their language capabilities but also to broaden their socialization environment from the min. 30 hours weekly provision of childcare.

### **What is best for the (young) child?**

What is considered best for the child may nevertheless be viewed quite differently across countries – and also supported quite differently through different means of family policy – especially what concerns the young child under three. Even within relatively comparable cultural systems, this may vary as is the case in the Nordic welfare model: here, policies either promote the caring at home for an extensive period of time, through long parental leave in Sweden or as in Finland, supported through extensive cash for care benefits. In Denmark, the general belief is that children benefit from an early start in childcare and 15 % of all Danish children under one year are cared for in formal childcare.

The large cross-national differences which we find in the use of childcare is therefore partly explained by a variation in policy approaches and attitudes towards non-parental care, especially among children under the age of three, reminding us that

there is no 'universal yardstick by which children's best interests can be measured' (Kjørholt, 2008, p. 15).

### **Right to childcare**

The overall tendency is nevertheless that the provision of childcare has become more universal, in that access to and coverage of childcare have expanded, and at least eight European countries, had by 2014 introduced an actual right to childcare after parental leave. These countries included Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Malta, Norway and Slovenia and Sweden. As an example, in Germany, a right to childcare for children under 3 years was introduced in 2013, followed by the aforementioned federal initiative to expand provision (Olivér and Mätzke, 2014). Children may also be legally entitled to pre-primary education the last year or two before starting compulsory school, which is the case in the Czech Republic and Liechtenstein (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat, 2014; León et al., 2014a). A legal right to ECEC provision entails that all children living in a catchment area have a right to a childcare place, regardless of their parents' employment status, socio-economic background or family status, but it does not imply that provision is free. In three of the Peer Review countries, Bulgaria, Cyprus, and Luxembourg, the last year or two of pre-primary education is even compulsory. The same is the case in Austria, Greece, Hungary, Poland and Switzerland (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat, 2014).

Where there is no legal entitlement, allocation of places are based on selection criteria defined either by some central or local level criteria or directly by heads of settings. In education systems, the allocation criteria are centrally defined and often taking into account parents' employment status, family status or socio-economic background. However, even when there is a central level allocation policy, this is most often in the shape of recommendations rather than regulations, giving local authorities or heads of settings significant autonomy when allocating places (European Commission, 2018b).

### **Childcare enrolment rates**

A closer look at one of the ten core QF indicators recommended, *Indicator 1 The percentage of children who have publicly funded subsidised access to ECEC*, illustrates that a high proportion of children now attend childcare. If we look at the most recent data available as shown in Figure 2, across OECD figures enrolment rates for the zero to two years old in childcare and pre-school services<sup>2</sup> have increased since 2006, but have fallen especially in Southern European countries, including Cyprus although it was only a small drop, from 31.6% in 2006 to 30.0% in 2014 of the age group zero to two years old.

However, the cross-country variation remains substantial even in 2014, with the highest rate in Denmark (63 %) and the lowest in the Czech Republic (3 %). Among the Peer Review countries, provision for the zero to two years old is highest in Luxembourg (55.1%), Malta (54.8%) and France (51.9%), followed by Germany (32.3%) and lowest in Bulgaria (11.2%). As presented in the section above, Bulgaria was also one of the countries with the highest percentage GDP investment into ECEC, although in 2010. This illustrates well how sensitive the interpretations of social expenditure levels are, in this case reflecting that Bulgaria has a lower GDP than the comparison countries, and therefore can have both a high proportion of social expenditure invested in ECEC and low levels of ECEC provisions (as of 2014).

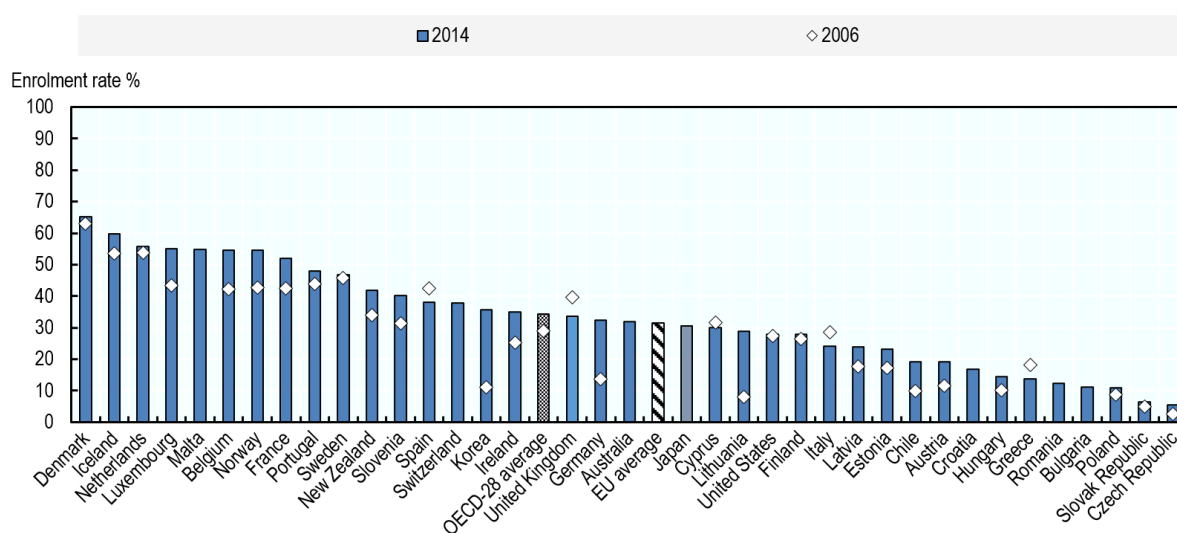
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<sup>2</sup> Data covers centre-based services (e.g., nurseries or day care centres and pre-schools, both public and private), organized family day care, and care services provided by (paid) professional childminders. Exact definitions differ across countries.

If we look across the EU countries in 2014 (or most recent data), on average 32% of the children aged zero to two years old are in childcare, and there is a similar average across OECD (34 %). A number of EU countries are thus well below the Barcelona target of 33 % enrolment rate for this age group.<sup>3</sup>

The cross-country variation is much smaller with regard to children from three years old to school age. Figure 3 shows children aged three years old only but illustrates the general (and historically longer) tendency to provide childcare for children over two years old. Enrolment rates for the three years old have generally been increasing since 2005 and are close to 100 % in most countries by 2014, which is the latest year for which comparable data is available. Data for 2005 is missing for a number of countries but we see a decline over time in enrolment of the three years old in the Czech Republic, Italy and Switzerland. Again, the EU and OECD 2014 averages are close, at 80 % and 74 %, respectively. It is also evident from the figure that the EU Barcelona target of 90 % coverage for this age group is not met in a number of EU countries as of 2014.

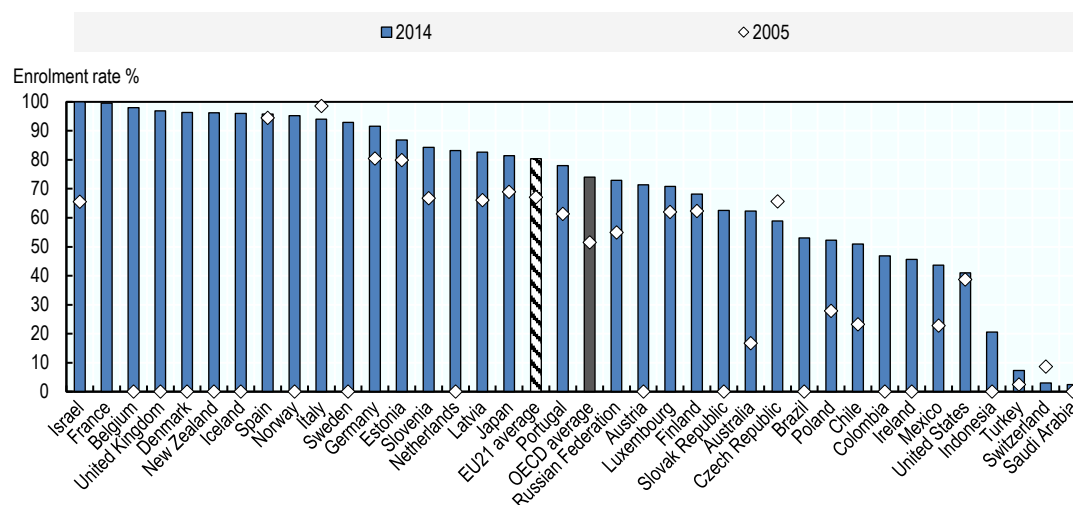
**Figure 2. Enrolment rates 0-2 years old in formal childcare and pre-school, 2006 and 2014 or latest available year**



Source: OECD Family Database, PF3.2.A. <http://www.oecd.org/els/family/database.htm>. Note: Data missing for 2006 for Croatia, Malta, Australia, Switzerland, Japan, Romania, Bulgaria and EU average.

<sup>3</sup> Participation rates are based on the EU Survey on income and living conditions (SILC). For a discussion about the quality of this data, including the under-representation of certain groups, as well as on the comparability with the ECEC Benchmark on 95% participation of four years old to compulsory school age, see Flisi et al, 2016.

**Figure 3. Enrolment rates 3-years old in pre-primary education or primary school, 2005 and 2014 or latest available year**



Source: OECD Education at a Glance, Indicator C2.1. Note: 2005 data is missing for Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Latvia, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Slovak Republic, Sweden and United Kingdom. Data in 2014 includes early childhood educational development (ISCED 01) and pre-primary education (ISCED 02). Data in 2005 includes only ISCED02. For the sake of comparison over time, the figure shows children aged 3 only, not including the whole age group up to compulsory school age, normally also 4 and 5 years old

As a number of the Peer Review countries are not covered in the data from 2014, for comparison reasons, we here include reference to the 2011 participation rate, and now for children four years old and of thus of compulsory school age. Participation rates were as follows: Cyprus 85.0%, Bulgaria 86.6%, Luxembourg 95.6%, Germany 96.4%, Denmark 97.9% and finally France and Malta 100.0 % (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat, 2014). As also these figures illustrate that even though the participation rate for this age group is generally high, nevertheless for a number of countries, the rate is below the ET 2020 Target of 95% for this age group.

### **Equal distribution of childcare**

However, the figures do not reveal the consistent and systematic unequal distribution of childcare resources – an issue which is addressed in *Indicator 3 - A system-level policy to encourage disadvantaged families to use ECEC services*. In most OECD countries, children’s participation in childcare differs with parental income and/or maternal level of education, and especially for children aged zero to two. Only in the Nordic countries, such as in Denmark, children under three participate in childcare irrespective of family background. In contrast, in other countries, such as France, children from high-income families are over four times more likely to use formal childcare than children from low-income families. In France, part of the explanation is the lack of services in disadvantaged neighbourhoods (OECD, 2016b). Given the evidence that childcare can benefit disadvantaged children in particular, this is of course not optimal. In response, the French government in line with the Plan against Poverty and for Social Inclusion from 2013 set out to create by 2017 an additional 275 000 childcare places for children under three years old as well as prioritising the provision of financial resources to the poorest regions (Lazzari, 2017).

On a more positive note, the various policy efforts to increase participation of children of single parents by means of priority access and reduced fees seem to have paid off. Participation in formal ECEC services in most EU countries does not vary much between children of single and dual parent families - apart again from France, where children of single parents are about 23 percentage points less likely to attend childcare (OECD, 2016b).

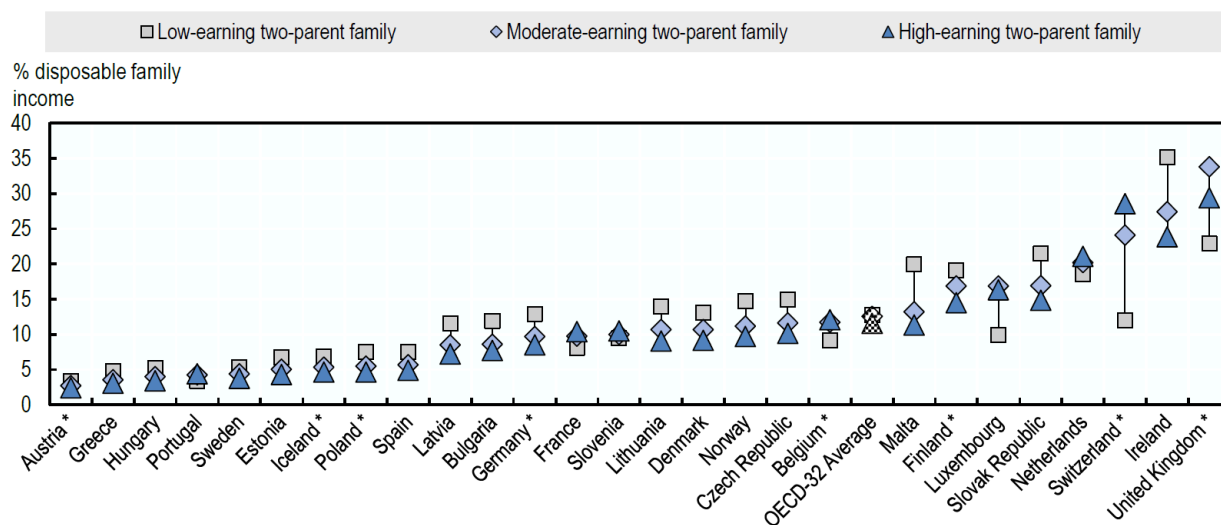
### 3.4 Affordability

Part of the explanation of the large gap in participation across levels of income, education and family type are the high childcare fees. The OECD generally recommends that childcare costs are kept to an affordable level (e.g., OECD, 2016a). High childcare costs for instance led Malta to introduce the budgetary measure 'Free Childcare for All' in 2014, mainly aiming to increase women's labour market provision through the means of affordable early care to children whose parents are in employment or education (Lazzari, 2017). Affordability is addressed in *Indicator 2 - For parents who earn the average national income, the percentage of their disposable income which is required to pay for ECEC services for one child who attends an ECEC setting for at least 30 hours per week*, of the EU ECEC QF – although it is not among the ten core quality indicators.

However, fees generally remain high, especially for care for the zero to two-year-olds while care for the children aged three and above may be free of charge, although this is often only for a few hours of childcare a day. Across the OECD-32 countries, parents pay on average 10–15 % of their disposable income, depending on whether they live in a high- middle-or low-earner two-parent family (OECD, 2016a), and costs tend to be lowest in Eastern European and Nordic countries (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/ Eurostat, 2014). Various policy approaches can be applied in order to keep costs low, such as taking into account the family income, which is the most often applied approach, followed by taking into account the number of children in the family/number of children attending ECEC services or according to family type, reducing costs for instance for single parent families. Countries can also give subsidies to providers (e.g. applied in the Nordic countries) or apply central or local regulation placing a ceiling on monthly fees (as applied in e.g. Luxembourg) (for more information on each country, see Annex C, figure C1)

Figure 4 shows the latest available data on the net cost of full-time childcare for a full-time employed dual-earner family with two children aged two and three, and shown for three level of incomes. Among the Peer Review and Host countries included in the figure, out-of-pocket costs are highest in Luxembourg and Malta, both exceeding the OECD average, and in Malta costs are even proportionally highest for low-income families, around 20% of disposable family income.

**Figure 4. Out-of-pocket childcare costs for a two-child dual-earner family as a proportion (%) of disposable family income, by family income level, European countries, 2012**



Source: OECD, 2016b. Note: gross fees less childcare benefits/rebates and tax deductions for full-time care in a typical childcare centre.

### 3.5 Quality

Whereas the focus in the past was on increasing enrolment levels (amongst other via reducing costs), in recent years in the EU it has also been on securing high quality of care. This change reflects the shift in political focus from increasing parents' and in particular mother's employment to ensuring that the child benefits in its social, emotional and cognitive development. It is generally recognised that in order for children to benefit from childcare it has to be an early and high-quality investment. High-quality ECEC services may in this way enhance children's immediate and later life cognitive and non-cognitive skills and competences but may even have a detrimental effect on children's learning and development if they are of a low quality<sup>4</sup>.

The question is how to operationalize and measure quality? Procedural indicators such as the involvement of the child or the quality of the interaction between children and staff are recommended e.g. in the EU ECEC Quality Framework in the recommendation to acknowledge the children's views, but have often been excluded due to the difficulty in how to measure this. In addition, the contribution of the different pedagogical logics can be difficult to assess, although various measures of process-oriented self-evaluation instruments have proven to be successful in recent years (Klinkhammer et al, 2017).

#### Adult-child ratios

Often, it is the measurable structural indicators which are accounted for, such as adult-child ratios, available for instance in the OECD Family Database. There is substantial evidence that the quality of childcare increases with a higher adult-child ratio, as this increases the adults' interaction with the child and their sensitivity to the needs of the child (for an overview see Christoffersen et al., 2014). However, so far there is no consistent evidence for a correlation with child development and learning, as such link seems to be highly dependent on the institutional model of ECEC being provided (OECD, 2018a).

<sup>4</sup> For an overview of effects on children's development and inclusion as well as for female labour force participation and gender equality, see e.g. European Commission, 2018b.

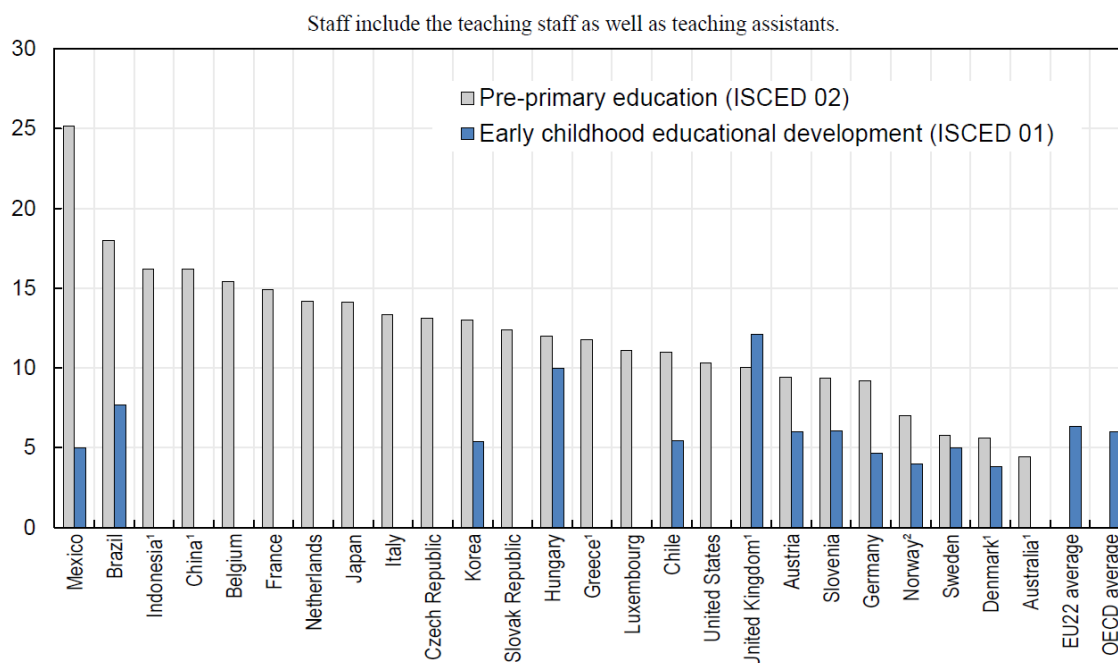
Nevertheless, there is a clear policy trend identified among OECD countries of increasing adult-child ratios so that there are fewer children per adult (*Ibid*). The value of having a small number of children to number of staff is recognised in the QF Indicator 10a - The average ratio of children to all staff working directly with children, although this is not among the ten core indicators recommended.

Regulatory frameworks that prescribe the adult-child ratios are in place in some countries, but mainly for the provisions of children aged three and over as this is more often part of pre-school education (OECD, 2006; León, 2017). The OECD quotes the ratio to be the 'most consistent predictor of high-quality learning environments' (OECD, n.d., p. 3). However, the EU does not give any concrete recommendations on the adult-child ratio as this, along with other quality issues, is left to the various countries to decide.

Adult-child ratios vary substantially across countries, but a common element is that the maximum number of children allowed per adult typically doubles when the child reaches three years of age. As an example, Malta applies, along with Ireland and Lithuania, the tightest regulations, with one staff member to two children under the age of two. As is also the case in e.g. France and Germany, the maximum number doubles in Malta when the child turns three (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat, 2014).

Figure 5 shows the latest data on adult-child ratios, comparing early childhood education development (ISCED 01) and pre-primary education (ISCED 02) across a number of OECD countries, including Denmark and Germany. As is apparent the number of children per adult increases significantly for the pre-primary group, especially for Germany. For more country level data on adult-child ratios, see Annex C, Figure C2.

**Figure 5. Adult-child ratios in Early Childhood Education and Care (ISCED 0), 2014**



Source: OECD, 2018a.

Adult-child ratios may come under pressure with the political ambition to expand childcare and encompass more children. Even in countries with relatively high investments and enrolment rates, we may note this tendency. In Denmark, in 2000 there were on average 5.2 children per adult in nursery care for the zero to two year-olds and 9.7 children per adult in kindergartens for the three and above age group. By 2014, the adult-child ratio was 6.5 for nurseries and 11.8 for kindergartens



(Bureau2000, various years). Referring to the low adult-child ratio, one in three employees now report lack of time each day for solving conflicts, comforting the child and interfering in disturbing behaviour (Bureau2000, 2018).

### **Contact time with the child**

Lack of time may actually be the result of a higher focus on the learning environment, which means that staff must spend more time on developing curriculum and evaluate the child's development. E.g. in Denmark, staff criticize the increasing time they have to set aside for documenting effective practice and monitoring the child's progress (Bureau2000, 2018). Not having time for the child obviously puts at risk the multiple purpose of providing high-quality childcare to stimulate the development of the child and facilitating parental employment. Interestingly, the indicators of the EU ECEC QF does not recognise this. The only indicator related to having enough time is *Indicator 11 - The percentage of time assigned to staff for preparation and reflection i.e. when they are not working directly with children*. Here, having 'non-contact' time is seen as a positive outcome, and the one indicator reflecting the use of data, *Indicator 19 - The percentage of ECEC settings which use administrative and pedagogic data to improve the quality of their provision*, does not acknowledge that collecting such data is time-consuming and may result in less time being available for direct contact with the child.

### **Group sizes**

The number of children per child group may be another quality indicator to highlight. As with the adult-child ratio, the number of children per group also increases with age, although group sizes vary across the EU. On average, the maximum group size for five years old is between 20 and 30 children. Group sizes for young children are usually smaller, for instance in Bulgaria where the maximum number of children in childcare for children under the age of two, is 16, increasing to 22 from the age of three and up (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat, 2014). For more country level data on group sizes, see Annex C, figure C2.

### **Curriculum**

Another approach to monitor quality is to investigate the curriculum framework as this may ensure a more standardised provision of services across regions within a country as well as ensuring explicit and co-ordinated learning goals. Having a curriculum framework may also contribute to facilitate for the child the transition from one setting to another (Kaga et al, 2010). However, the tendency to introduce a curriculum in ECEC, as a means to emphasise the creation of a developmental and learning environment, has also been criticised for having 'schoolification' effect, forgetting the unique qualities of in particular free play (OECD, 2001; Moss, 2018). Perhaps as a comment to this criticism, the EU ECEC QF emphasises learning through child-led and child-initiated play. However, the importance of free play is not explicitly emphasised in all of the four QF indicators on curriculum<sup>5</sup>.

There is a wide spread tendency to apply a curriculum in ECEC and especially for children three years old and over. Nearly all of the 24 countries participating in a 2014 OECD survey had developed a curriculum or learning standards from age three until compulsory schooling. Most often, the curriculum framework covers children from the age of two and a half/three year old to compulsory age only, but more than half of the countries applied a common curriculum across the ages one to five years old. The

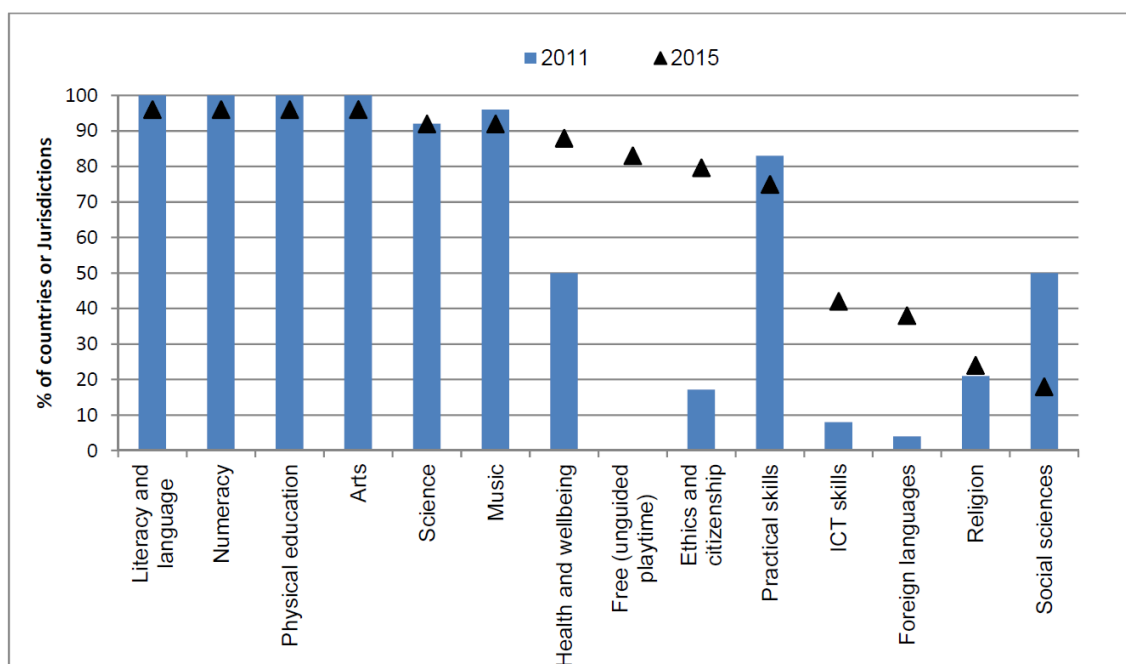
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<sup>5</sup> Indicator 12 – There is an official, approved or mandatory curriculum framework for ECEC, Indicator 13 - The percentage of settings whose work with children is based on an ECEC curriculum framework, Indicator 14 – The curriculum or other guiding documents requires staff to use feedback from children, parents and colleagues to systematically improve their practice, and Indicator 15 - The percentage of primary schools which are required to use a curriculum which builds on children's experiences of learning in ECEC.

common curriculum was mainly found in countries with a unitary system of ECEC (OECD, 2017).

Research evidence suggests that a balance between play, self-regulation and pre-academic activities is most beneficial for a high-quality staff-child interaction (Slot et al, in OECD 2017). As Figure 6 shows, most countries place weight on arts, literacy, music, numeracy, physical education and science. In the period 2011-2015, there has been a development especially towards including ICT skills as well as foreign languages (*Ibid*).

**Figure 6. Content areas included in early childhood education and care curriculum, average across 24 OECD countries, 2011 and 2015**



Note: The figures are reported in percentage of total number of answers. 24 countries. Source: OECD, 2017.

### **Flexibility**

Providing flexibility in the provision of childcare can also be considered a quality dimension. According to the QF, provision needs to offer flexibility in relation to opening hours and the content of the programme in order to respond to parental circumstances and encourage all families to use ECEC services (European Commission, 2014). This entails providing non-standard opening hours, as well as providing a curriculum, which is adapted to the needs of the individual child. The QF also mentions inflexibility in regards to bureaucratic enrolment procedures such as waiting lists, monolingual information leaflets and bureaucratic procedures for enrolment etc., which may deter especially minority ethnic families or marginalised groups.

Focussing here on the flexibility in opening hours, this may allow for better reconciliation of work and family life, whilst ensuring that child care is responsive to the needs of the child. Providing a choice between part-time and full-time may be one way to ensure that the child can attend childcare according to its needs. Flexibility in opening hours may also entail providing childcare outside standard hours or for long or extended hours, as this benefits parents with inflexible workforce constraints.

The evidence on the association between the number of childcare hours and child development is inconclusive, compared to the established evidence of a longer period

of participation in childcare, but on the other hand closely correlated with the numbers of mothers' weekly work hours (OECD, 2017).

Often the legal right to a place encompasses part-time participation only, and especially for the younger children under the age of three. This is the case for instance in Luxembourg, where the child's entitlement to a place in childcare is up to 26 h. a week, whereas in Denmark the right to a place in childcare from 26 weeks includes full-time care (*Ibid*).

#### **4 Existing evidence on the effectiveness of measures**

This Thematic Paper has identified and presented a number of policy measures and indicators to monitor these, which may be effective in ensuring equal and affordable access to high-quality childcare. Developments in ECEC system have for instance included a move towards unitary systems, which may favour a smoother process of transition between different childcare settings for the child (as well as for parents). It may also favour the integration of curricula across institutional settings and may ensure some equality between regions in provision of services, thus facilitating a more equal participation in ECEC.

Another well-known measure is to make the necessary economic investments into childcare, which is also recognised in one of the ten highlighted QF indicators. Most countries, apart from the Nordic countries and France, however are some way from the recommended 1% of GDP. Important to remember is also that the proportions of GDP invested in childcare cannot stand alone as an indicator, as there is substantial variation in GDP levels across countries, and since such an indicator cannot take account of fluctuations in GDP levels such as was witnessed during the financial crisis in the late 2000s. Such an indicator therefore needs to be supplemented with investments measured also in the same currency calculated as Purchasing Power Standards (PPS) and controlled for inflation. And regardless of the unit of comparison, it remains important to remember that similar levels of expenditure can mask a variety of different policy choices, such as choices over the childcare fees, involvement of (relatively) higher paid teachers compared to pedagogical staff, group sizes, adult-child ratios, etc.

An equally well-known and often applied indicator is the enrolment rate, as also recommended in one of the core ten QF indicators. As reported, most countries have managed to meet the EU Barcelona targets for the children between three years old and school age, whereas there is still some way to go in order to meet the target for the zero to two year olds. One shortcoming of the enrolment rates for the young children is that this does not take into account the variation in the length of parental leave and thus in the different cultural and political understandings of what is the best care setting for young children. In terms of ensuring equal access an efficient policy measure (and indicator) seems to be the introduction of a legal right to services and regardless of the parent's employment situation – if this right is followed up by sufficient (high-quality) provision, and across regions. Provision of childcare services also needs to be flexible in hours of service (providing part-time as well as full-time, and provision outside normal hours if needed) as well as being provided close to the home of the family – neither of which are recognized in the QF indicators. The QF indicators do not reflect either that targeting may be an effective policy measure when aimed at those children who are considered particularly disadvantaged, as this can prove effective in order to ensure that they participate in childcare.

One of the most efficient policy measures to increase participation in childcare – as also reflected in one of the core ten QF indicator – is to reduce the costs for ECEC, and especially for low-income families. This may be via subsidies for providers or regulated fees, or a mix. Fees can also be tied to family incomes, or costs can be directly

refunded through cash benefits or more indirectly through tax credits, the latter being less favourable for low-income families though. In general, means-testing also needs to be practised carefully, as too close targeting can risk producing incentives for reducing take up of work for low- and middle-income families, and especially for the second earner in the family (OECD, 2016b).

In regards to quality of childcare, there is no universal standard for how to conceptualize or measure this. Present quality indicators are often standardised and objective, giving no or little voice to the children and their parents. Regardless that the QF emphasises the need for a child-centred approach, this is not overly reflected in the indicators. Indicators include instead quantifiable indicators such as adult-child ratios, and could very well be supplemented with more procedural and qualitative indicators, based on semi-structured interviews which record the perspectives of children, parents and staff on quality (Lazzari, 2017). The QF indicators have also overlooked the problematic issue of the New Public Management related procedures that prescribe that staff must spend (substantial) time on documentation - which leaves less time for direct contact with the child.

Overall, EU ECEC QF have identified a number of widely accepted effective model elements of ECEC and has managed to put emphasis on which are the ten most essential indicators. In some countries, the EU ECEC QF has acted as a catalyst of change in that it has been disseminated and discussed or even triggered reforms or guided policy consultation and advocacy processes in existing reforms. In France and Germany, the QF framework has explicitly informed and stimulated a national debate on quality of childcare whereas in France in addition this was done more specifically by influencing the national consultation process on ECEC for under-three years old. In Germany, the aforementioned binding political process to improve the quality and financing of Germany's ECEC system can also be attributed to the QF, as can the 2016 declaration about greater future financial support by the federal state for quality improvements (Lazzari, 2017). However, the greatest impact of the QF seems to be its demonstration of the ability to increase the participation of stakeholders. In most cases the EU QF has so far not led to substantial (changes in) ECEC reforms and seems overall to have had least impact in regards to monitoring and evaluation as well as mechanism for governance and funding (Lazzari, 2017).

## **5 Conclusions**

Childcare has in the institutional response from the EU (as well as the OECD) served as an increasingly central policy instrument, initially to facilitate maternal employment and in recent years has shifted towards (also) considering it essential for developing children's current and future capacities as citizens and workers. From the perspective of social investment, childcare is today seen as an effective policy instrument in a knowledge-based society where the main problem is considered to be how to increase productivity.

It is assumed that there is a common interest across cultures and contexts in promoting childcare as a universal element in the life of the child, and with specific outcomes in mind. This has included setting quantitative targets for enrolment and producing comparable indicators that may document effective practice. This turn to evidence-based policy may be criticized for assuming the global application of a standardized idea of childcare and for depoliticizing the issue, seeing childcare only as a means to an end and rendering it as a mere technical issue of how to implement the institutional features that have been identified as successful and effective.

The turn in focus to quality of care holds the promise of encompassing a child-centred perspective of childcare, where the individual child is recognised in itself and where it is emphasised that learning and development is to take place through child-led and child-initiated play. The QF and the further development of indicators reflect this new focus, and has acted as a catalyst of change in some countries by stimulating the

debate and focus on quality – although more focus is needed on especially how to include the voice of children, parents and staff in the evaluation of quality.

A development of indicators will always reflect what is pragmatically possible to collect in terms of data as well as what needs to be the compromises when accommodating different stakeholders and conflicting agendas. Nevertheless, it is important in this process of change in the perspective of the function of childcare not to lose sight of the individual child and of the national contextual specificities in order to avoid an instrumentalization of childcare and its outcomes.

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## 7 Annexes

### **Annex A. 'Quality framework for early childhood education and care', as presented in the Annex to the Recommendation.**

- 1) Access to early childhood education and care
  - Provision that is available and affordable to all families and their children.
  - Provision that encourages participation, strengthens social inclusion and embraces diversity.
- 2) The early childhood education and care workforce
  - Well-qualified staff whose initial and continuing training enables them to fulfil their professional role
  - Supportive working conditions including professional leadership which creates opportunities for observation, reflection, planning, teamwork and cooperation with parents.
- 3) Curriculum
  - A curriculum based on pedagogic goals, values and approaches which enable children to reach their full potential in a holistic way.
  - A curriculum which requires staff to collaborate with children, colleagues and parents and to reflect on their own practice.
- 4) Monitoring and evaluation
  - Monitoring and evaluating produces information at the relevant local, regional and/or national level to support continuing improvements in the quality of policy and practice.
  - Monitoring and evaluation which is in the best interest of the child

Achieving these statements is easier if the following governance arrangements are in place:

- Stakeholders in the early childhood education and care system have a clear and shared understanding of their role and responsibilities, and know that they are expected to collaborate with partner organisations.
- Legislation, regulation and/or funding supports progress towards a universal legal entitlement to publicly subsidised or funded early childhood education and care, and progress is regularly reported to all stakeholders.

Source: European Commission, Thematic Working Group on Early Childhood Education and Care, 2014.

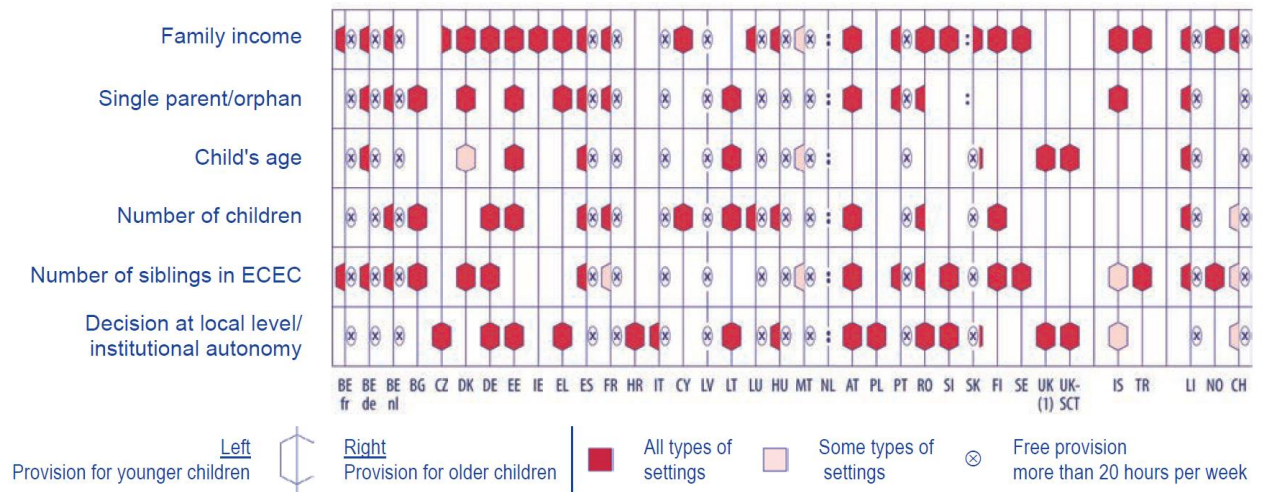
## **Annex B. The ten core quality indicators**

- *Indicator 1* - The percentage of children who have publicly funded subsidised access to ECEC.
- *Indicator 4* - The percentage of children who attend ECEC regularly.
- *Indicator 5* - The percentage of staff working directly with children who have completed professional education relevant to their role in an ECEC setting.
- *Indicator 9* - The average salary of ECEC staff employed in the public sector (with similar qualifications to primary school teachers) as a percentage of the average salary of a primary school teacher.
- *Indicator 13* - The percentage of settings whose work with children is based on an ECEC curriculum framework.
- *Indicator 14* - The curriculum or other guiding documents requires staff to use feedback from children, parents and colleagues to systematically improve their practice.
- *Indicator 16* - Information on the quality of the ECEC system is used as the basis for improvement.
- *Indicator 19* - The percentage of ECEC settings which use administrative and pedagogic data to improve the quality of their provision.
- *Indicator 20* - A formal set of arrangements enables parents and partner organisations to work with ECEC settings.
- *Indicator 22* - The percentage of gross domestic product spent on ECEC.

Source: European Commission, 2018a

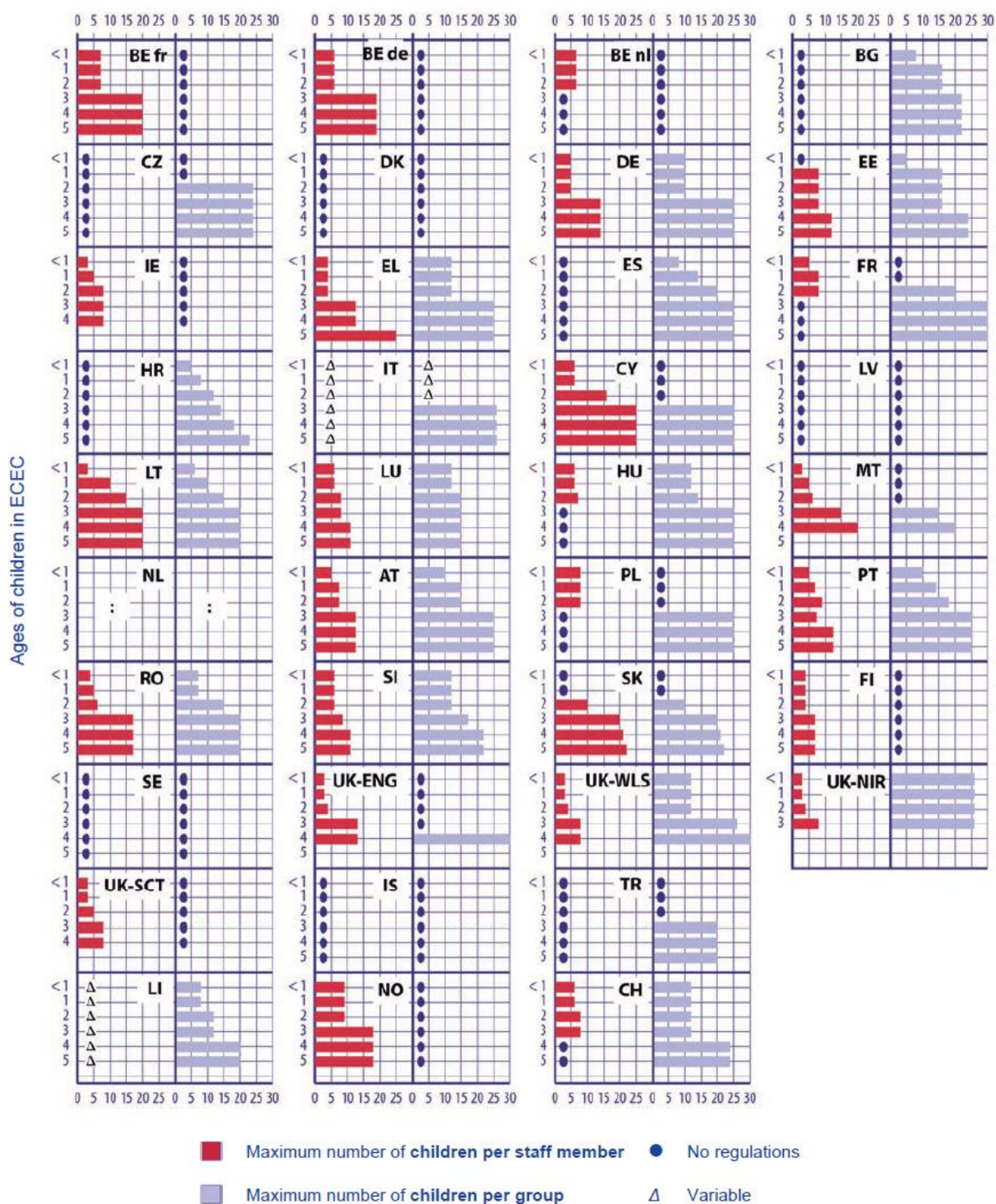
**Annex C.**

**Figure C1. Factors taken into account when offering fee reductions or exemptions in ECEC, 2012/13**



Source: Eurodice, quoted in European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat, 2014. Note: UK (1) = UK-ENG/WLS/NIR

**Figure C2. Maximum number of children per staff member and/or per group in centre-based ECEC settings, 2012/13**



Source: Eurodice, quoted in European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat, 2014.

