EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Abstract:
This study examines policy developments throughout Europe on the issue of early childhood education and care (ECEC). Recent EU policy developments are developed to offer a structure and context for policy developments on the national level. Bundling together existing data from diverse sources and conducting additional in-depth country studies, this study proposes constitutive pillars for quality ECEC. In addition, based on an in-depth investigation of good-practices throughout the EU, this document provides suggestions and recommendations for developing quality ECEC throughout the EU.
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

**ECEC**  Early Childhood Education and Care

**EU**  European Union

**GDP**  Gross Domestic Product

**NRW**  North Rhine-Westphalia

**OMC**  Open Method of Coordination

**OECD**  Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development

**PISA**  Programme for International Student Assessment
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Background

Every single EU member state, without exception, offers some form of early childhood education and care (ECEC) to children under the compulsory schooling age. These provisions were traditionally developed as incentives for women to enter the labour market. Increasingly, EU member states are not only concerned with providing sufficient capacity for all children, but are also concerned about the level of quality of ECEC providers. ECEC is more and more considered as an important first step in a child’s future educational development. Essentially, the quality of children’s lives before starting compulsory education influences the kind of learners that they will be. The quality of education in EU member states is crucial for developing EU economic competitiveness, and schools work with the children that come to them. The European Commission also considers early childhood education and care as an essential foundation for successful lifelong learning, social integration, personal development and later employability. This study serves to provide perspectives on the status of the provision of quality ECEC throughout the EU, also in the light of the on-going OMC (Open Method of Coordination) process at the European level, and identify recent policy developments in member states that may serve as exemplary measures aimed at improving the provision of quality ECEC.

The major priorities identified by the European Commission and Parliament serve as the basis of the analytical framework of this study. These priorities confirm the components of quality as identified by the international research literature and may be divided in (1) access/participation, (2) political, legal, and financial structures, (3) staff, (4) curriculum, and (5) involvement of parents. This study identifies ongoing themes and developments in these constitutive elements of quality. Finally, this study proposes some guidelines that should be taken into account for a successful OMC process, which at this moment is the focal point of the policy developments at the EU-level.

Participation

In a European context, common targets have been set for participation rates of young children in ECEC. For children aged between four years old and the national compulsory school age, member states aim to reach at least 95% of the entire target group with ECEC provision. For younger children (under 3 years old), a participation of 33% should be reached. When considering these targets, the concepts of ‘access’ and ‘participation’ must be distinguished; even though policies may ensure universal access by raising the number of day-care places, universal participation is in fact dependent on the actual demand for ECEC. ‘Simply’ adding day-care places will not necessarily raise the participation rates of children in every member state.

At this moment, practically all member states are developing policies towards reaching the Europe 2020 goal of 95% participation in ECEC of children aged four and older; a clear upwards trend in participation rates, now closing in on 95%, is observed. Also for the youngest children, a positive trend is clearly discernible. This study more specifically describes the efforts of increasing ECEC capacity by Germany’s most populous state North-Rhine Westphalia (NRW), where a specific taskforce was founded to assist in overcoming the more practical hurdles of cooperation between different levels of government.

1 European Commission, Early Childhood and Care: Providing all our children with the best start for the world of tomorrow, COM (2011)66.
However, the current economic and financial crisis is likely to have a considerable suppressing effect on participation rates in the future years. Especially in view of the effects of the crisis, it is crucial that member states not only focus on increasing participation of young children, but also focus on widening participation. Groups that are hardest to reach are often the children with disadvantaged backgrounds or from specific (disadvantaged) regions. These children need additional support through the early intervention of quality ECEC provision to prevent developmental problems later in life. As a best-practice, this study refers to Finland, which is currently mapping the population that is not reached with its pre-school programme. Widening participation also means that member states pay additional attention to regional differences in participation in ECEC; equal opportunities should also be ensured for children in more rural parts of EU countries.

**Political / Legal / Financial systems**

Increasingly, member states are working towards integrating governance structures for ECEC provision of all age groups. This is a positive development in light of the international consensus that integrated systems for ECEC provision deliver better results than split or separated systems. A holistic approach to children’s development within policies and by providers is found to lead to better educational outcomes. It is therefore recommended that policymakers responsible for the youngest children work together closely with their colleagues developing policies for older children.

Systems are also often divided between different levels of government, with varying levels of autonomy for local authorities. National or local quality requirements for ECEC centres generally only set lower limits for quality. As such, ECEC are not given any incentives to further develop quality. Especially under tighter budgets, providers are likely to stick to the minimal quality requirements instead of further developing quality. An interesting quality framework has been introduced in Ireland (Síolta), which aims to continuously create incentives for staff to reflect on their work and thereby develop the levels of quality of ECEC provision. However, for this initiative, sufficient funding also remains the crucial requirement in order to reach its beneficial effects.

Even though the competence for ECEC policies may be divided between different levels of government, the national level often has at least some competence to decide on spending in the field of ECEC. When investigating the spending levels on ECEC as percentage of the GDP, the data show large differences between member states. Even though spending money on ECEC by itself will not automatically improve quality, there is a clear positive relation between member states that spend significantly more on ECEC and their educational results in international tests, like PISA. The current global economic and the financial crisis are therefore enormous challenges to take into consideration as they have a significant impact on budgets. However, a strong financial commitment is crucial for developing quality in all quality elements.

**Staff**

Competent staff is a crucial factor in delivering quality ECEC. However, practically no common standard exists in the EU in terms of policies regarding staff quality. A large variety of different minimal qualification requirements for ECEC staff exists across the EU, ranging from no requirements at all, to the requirement of university-level degrees. Generally, it is concluded that an entire ECEC workforce with higher education qualifications is not necessary, since supporting work can be executed by staff with vocational
qualifications. Some minimal qualification guidelines for ECEC practitioners are however necessary in order be able to ensure a basic quality level.

Most member states attempt to professionalise the ECEC workforce. Considerable differences exist in the extent to which these goals are designed or backed up financially. This is particularly relevant for the more informal types of family day-care, who care for children in their own home and are therefore exempted from most regulations. However, continuing professional development is also important for quality of the ‘regular’ ECEC workforce. As a best-practice of such professionalisation efforts, this study points to the role of Family Centres in Germany’s North-Rhine Westphalia (NRW), where childminders are offered a platform to exchange experiences or follow additional courses.

Working conditions, such as work environment, salary and work benefits are also of crucial importance for the system relating to the quality of staff. These serve as ways to attract higher educated staff and thereby influence quality. These broader working conditions influence job satisfaction, which also impacts the quality of provided ECEC. This study for instance, identifies large differences in salary expenditures and modest differences in staff-child ratios between member states.

**Curriculum**

Generally, researchers and policymakers agree that it is important for young children to not only develop the necessary cognitive aspects that are important for entering primary education, but to also develop non-cognitive elements. Both elements are considered equally important in laying the foundation for lifelong learning. Even though this balance is generally kept, there is large variation across the EU in terms of how detailed national curricular guidelines are formulated. Several member states recently introduced pre-school programmes for children near the compulsory schooling age as preparation for entering primary education for children. Across the EU, ECEC programmes are increasingly concentrating on enhancing more educational aspects, such as numeracy and literacy. As an example of such newly introduced programmes this study takes a closer look at Romania, where a pre-school year was introduced in 2012.

In all member states, policy initiatives are developed to reach children at risk and include them in the existing curricular activities for young children. Nevertheless, the aim and consequently the results of such outreach activities are often very different among individual providers, and between different regions. More evidence is required to make sensible and informed policy choices about the success of these attempts in the future. This study shows that the role of highly trained ECEC professionals is crucial in successfully reaching out to children at risk.

**Parental involvement**

Involving the parents is an absolute necessity for high quality ECEC provision; they are the key stakeholders in the development of children. Though always important, involvement of parents is even more crucial for minority groups or children with disadvantaged backgrounds. This helps reducing the differences between the home and the school environments and may thereby enhance children’s educational achievements and reduce drop-out rates later in school. Even though parental involvement may receive some attention in laws, rules and regulation, generally parental involvement is left to individual providers across the EU.
This study distinguishes between child-focused and centre-focused parental involvement, since both have different underlying goals. Child-focused involvement of parents serves to contribute to the development of the child, whereas centre-focused involvement focuses more on the possibility for parents to discuss activities with ECEC providers. Even though the extent to which parents are involved may depend highly on the cultural context, several child-focused good-practices are identified in Finland, Ireland and the Netherlands, where very concrete outreach strategies were developed to engage parents and children of disadvantaged groups. In combination with existing quality standards set by the government, centre-focused parental involvement can be an effective quality assurance tool. When critical parents behave like constructive consumers, they have a possibility of influencing the quality of ECEC providers. Well-trained ECEC professionals therefore have an important role in effectively interacting with parents, both with a focus on the child and a focus on the ECEC center.

**Challenges in providing quality ECEC**

Some challenges and recommendations for quality in ECEC are broader than these specific elements of quality, and are relevant for policymakers at the national and European level. These broader challenges for the EU in the development of quality in ECEC are identified and this study subsequently proposes a recommendation to overcome the challenge. First of all, the lack of empirical evidence to support new developments and policy initiatives is a problem for policymakers. At this moment, policy initiatives are taken, generally without the backing of empirical evidence that these actually contribute to positive outcomes, such as lower early school leaving rates, or better educational performances on international comparative assessments, such as PISA. The OECD has consistently called for the need for evidence-based policy making in all its ECEC studies, and that priority is repeated in this study, both for the EU and for individual member states.

Secondly, a constant dilemma for national (or local) governments is finding ways to ensure quality on each of the constitutive elements for quality ECEC. Minimal requirements generally do not give ECEC providers any incentives to develop the level of quality. Still, most member states set such minimal requirements, on which inspections subsequently monitor compliance. A main challenge when improving quality is therefore to design effective evaluative systems that provide clear incentives for providers not just to do the absolute minimum, but to try to excel in their provision of quality ECEC.

Thirdly, it is essential that policymakers follow a consistent line in policy, backed up by the required funding, but also supported by other relevant authorities. All member states have numerous policy documents and proposals on raising participation, integrating services, raising staff qualifications, balancing curricula or involving parents. Besides such plans, however, it is important to draw in all key stakeholders involved and ensure that the proposed policies can actually be executed.

Finally, the economic and financial crisis exerts a significant impact on ECEC policies throughout the EU. Various examples in the study show how ambitious national quality targets or national quality frameworks were established and introduced for participation, staff, curriculum or parental involvement, only to be side-tracked by the first round of budget-cuts. Even though the ambitions usually remain, national governments simply do not assign sufficient funds to execute their ambitions. At the same time, citizens can contribute less to day-care services, due to more unemployment. Those citizens without jobs have neither the direct need to send their children to day-care, nor the often required financial means to do so. As such, these children risk being left behind and not receiving
the essential developmental basis that they specifically may need. In these times, it is important for national governments not just to maintain spending levels on ECEC in order to ensure quality ECEC provision on all different elements of quality. It is even more important that initiatives are developed to ensure that the groups that need ECEC the most are reached by ECEC initiatives so as to offer equal chances for all children. ECEC should be included on the wider educational agenda; quality ECEC provides the firm foundation for education later in life, and is an important tool to reduce present and future social inequalities between children with different backgrounds.

**Recommendations**

**EU level recommendations: supporting the OMC process**

This study identified the developments on the European level and in individual member states. At this moment, the development of a quality framework for ECEC at the EU-level of the EU is still in a premature stage; it is therefore much too early for a full evaluation. Currently, the process of defining a quality framework for ECEC has been initiated by the Commission, through the Thematic Working Group that started its work in 2012, as part of the ongoing process of Open Method of Coordination (OMC).

Because it is still too early for an evaluation of the process, this study identified some recommendations for the European Parliament, the European Commission and individual member states that can support the ongoing work towards developing a European quality framework in early childhood education and care.

- **Preparatory political involvement should be stimulated** to ensure that sufficient awareness is given to the policy area, now and in the near future; if quality ECEC is of no concern to citizens or national stakeholders, the OMC process is not likely to succeed. The development of a quality framework in ECEC should be more than developing a technical checking box. The process also has a clear political component, which requires sufficient political involvement to be successful.

- Secondly, a **common concern should be raised among member states** about the importance of developing quality in ECEC. If member states do not see the added value of working together towards common goals, the OMC is very unlikely to be successful. In order to make sure that the quality framework for ECEC will be fully supported, member states should depart together from common goals.

- Thirdly, it is important that **institutional structures** are used to support the OMC process, as the Commission has now done with the founding of the thematic working group and the stakeholder group.

- **Availability of objectives, benchmarks and indicators** is also an important component for a successful OMC process. These are currently being developed by the thematic working group and are essential to compare progress on the quality framework for ECEC. Clear and comparable objectives, benchmarks and indicators are needed on all the individual elements that are identified in this study: (1) participation / access, (2) political, legal, and financial structures, (3) staff, (4) curriculum, and (5) involvement of parents. Such comparable data is essential to create incentives for member states to work towards the common goal. New, EU-wide empirical studies are required for further developing such evidence-based objectives or benchmarks and must therefore also be supported.

- European policymakers should make sure to involve stakeholders and build meaningful cooperation with them. This is crucial for the success of the OMC process, as it is a bottom-up process. Development of a quality framework for ECEC should be more
than a high-level policy project, but must instead be clearly rooted in actual ECEC practices. This is especially important for a quality framework in ECEC, since ECEC policies are often delegated to the lower levels of government and smaller providers.

- Finally, **conflicting positions** (in terms of policy directions or ideology) between member states generally help the OMC process forward, and should therefore not necessarily be prevented by European policymakers. When this is the case, member states with a clear agenda will try to persuade reluctant member states to work towards the common goal; since the initiative has to come from member states, this condition is very relevant for the success of the OMC process.

**Member state recommendations: developing quality in ECEC**

In addition to policy coordination in the OMC process, member states are primarily responsible for raising quality. This study underlines the importance the issue of quality ECEC is put on the wider educational agenda, as quality ECEC provides the firm basis for future education and lifelong learning. As such, it is an integral part of broader policies on equal chances and citizenship and should also be treated as such. This study described and analysed good practices in different institutional contexts across the EU, and its observations serve to inform policymakers on issues of quality ECEC, which were defined as participation, governance systems, staff, curriculum, and parental involvement. Here, the main lessons learnt from these good practices are summarised for national policymakers.

- **Evidence-based policymaking:** It is absolutely vital that policymakers base new policy initiatives on substantial empirical foundations. Too often, policy developments are initiated and defended without any justification of empirical evidence. **Therefore, more attention is needed for the empirics of “what works” in ECEC**, for instance through supporting longitudinal cohort studies in an EU context.

- **Participation:** Instead of only increasing participation, more focus is required on widening participation. Member states should pay additional attention to participation of specific groups and regional differences in participation in ECEC, which can signify problems of access. It should be made a priority to widen the participation in ECEC also beyond metropolitan areas, and also provide equal opportunities for parents and their children in more rural parts of the country.

- **Integrating systems:** It is recommended that policymakers responsible for the youngest children work closely together with their colleagues developing policies for older children; integrating ECEC into the wider education systems helps creating a fertile ground for ECEC providers on the ground to also have unified approach to children’s development.

- **Staff:** Member states should have at least some minimal qualification guidelines for all ECEC staff on the national level to be able to ensure a basic quality level.

- **Curriculum:** Given the empirical evidence that calls for balanced curricula, it is relevant to make sure the balance between cognitive and non-cognitive aspects is kept in approaching children under the compulsory schooling age, even if educational goals, such as numeracy and literacy, are put more central in the content of curricula.

- **Parental involvement:** Even though relatively little regulation exists for involving parents in ECEC this study further underlines its importance. It is recommended that member states further assist ECEC providers in encouraging meaningful involvement of parents, while paying respect to cultural differences that may exist in different regions or for different groups.
• **ECEC expenditure level**: The current global economic and financial crisis is therefore an enormous challenge to take into consideration as it has a significant impact on budgets. However, a **strong financial commitment is crucial** for developing quality on the aforementioned elements. In order to ensure this financial commitment, it is recommended that **member states work together to make national expenditure on ECEC policies more comparable** across different member states so that performance may be compared across the EU.