



## Improving Access to Quality Early Education in Romania

Participating in high quality Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) during the first years of a child's life can positively affect their learning and development over the long term (OECD, 2017<sup>[1]</sup>). ECEC attendance also has wider benefits for society and the economy, in particular by facilitating women's participation in the work force. This understanding has encouraged OECD countries to significantly expand ECEC coverage in recent decades. Countries are increasingly focused not just on improving access but ensuring that ECEC provision is high quality, which is essential if it is to positively impact children's learning and development.

Historically, ECEC attendance in Romania was high, similar to many other countries in the region. Provision was predominantly public and based on a centralised model. Reforms in the early 1990s saw much of the public infrastructure dismantled and provision declined significantly (UNICEF, 2015<sup>[2]</sup>). Aware of the importance of ECEC attendance for improving learning outcomes, and in particular addressing inequities, Romania is seeking to improve access to modern, high-quality ECEC. While discussions about adopting a multi-sectoral strategy have been on-going for years, no such strategy is in place yet (World Bank, forthcoming<sup>[3]</sup>).

In 2016, the *Educated Romania* project began a multi-year national consultation led by the President of Romania, Klaus Iohannis, to discuss key challenges for education in the country and identify objectives for 2030. To support the improvements to ECEC, the *Educated Romania* report put forward a set of goals:

- Develop provision for children aged 0-3 years, with the goal that 30% of 0-3 year-olds participate in ECEC by 2030.
- Expand ECEC participation among children aged 4-6 years, with the goal that 95% of children in this age group participate in ECEC by 2030.
- Develop a quality framework for ECEC.
- Ensure the quality of initial and continuous education for ECEC staff.
- Review and adapt the ECEC curriculum to reflect new pedagogical approaches (*Educated Romania*, 2018<sup>[4]</sup>).

The mission of the Structural Reform Support Service (SRSS) of the European Commission is to provide support for the preparation and implementation of growth-enhancing administrative and structural reforms by mobilising EU funds and technical expertise. Romania has requested support from the European Commission under Regulation (EU) 2017/825 on the establishment of the Structural Reform Support Programme ("SRSP Regulation"). The request has been analysed by the Commission in accordance with the criteria and principles referred to in Article 7(2) of the SRSP Regulation, following which the European Commission has agreed to provide technical support to Romania in the area of education, with the purpose of supporting the objectives of the *Educated Romania* project. The SRSS has awarded a grant agreement to the OECD in order to assist the Presidential Administration and the President of Romania with preparing a set of policy briefs in four thematic areas of the *Educated Romania* project. This policy brief focuses on ECEC. It draws on international evidence and examples to suggest ways in which Romania could work towards achieving the above goals related to improving access to quality ECEC.

# Improving Access to Quality Early Education in Romania

Participation in high quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) during the first years of a child's life can positively affect their learning and development over the long-term. In support of the **Educated Romania - project of the President of**

**Romania, Klaus Iohannis**, a policy brief on this topic was funded by the European Union and implemented by OECD in cooperation with the European Commission's Structural Reform Support Service.

Children below school starting age enrolled in pre-primary education \*

**95%**  
EU



**88%**  
Romania

ECEC Spending 2015 \*\*



## International Advice



## Advice for Romania



### ◀ ACCESS ▶

Ensure sufficient funding.

Address participation barriers, legal entitlements may help.

Offer flexible provision.



Increase the ECEC budget.

Raise awareness about ECEC among parents and consider a legal entitlement.

Ensure opening hours and settings meet parents' needs.

Define responsibilities for non-education actors, especially in health and social services.

### ◀ CURRICULUM ▶

Balance curricula with pre-academic skills and socio-emotional development.  
Support the transition into primary school.



Support ECEC staff with clear examples of how to implement the new balanced curriculum.

Periodically review curriculum's alignment with first years of primary school.

### ◀ STAFF ▶

Set occupational standards.  
Establish coherent initial education.  
Offer continuous professional development.



Develop competency profiles for all levels of ECEC staff.

Consider quality assurance mechanisms (like accreditation).

Focus on developing the most essential competencies.

\* Eurostat (2017), Education and Training (database), <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/education-and-training/data/main-tables>

\*\* Ibid.; OECD (2017), Education at a Glance 2017: OECD Indicators, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/eag-2017-en>.

# Policy priority 1. Improving access to early childhood education and care

Driven by the recognition that ECEC provides crucial foundations for future learning, enrolment at this level has increased significantly in recent decades. Across Europe, participation in pre-primary or pre-school education (International Standard Classification of Education, ISCED 02), which covers children from age three to the start of primary school, is now almost universal. In 2016, the average rate of participation among children aged between age four and the starting age of compulsory primary education across the European Union (EU) was 95.3%, just above the EU 2020 target of 95% (Eurostat, 2017<sup>[5]</sup>).

Over the same period, enrolment among children under three years old (ISCED 01) has also increased, but remains significantly lower. Historically across most countries, children of this age have been cared for in private or informal arrangements. In recent decades, however, many countries have made a concerted effort to expand provision for this age group, and by 2016, on average around one-third of children under age three were enrolled in ECEC programmes across the OECD (OECD, 2018<sup>[6]</sup>). In Romania, these programmes are referred to as ante pre-school education. However, in most countries demand continues to outstrip supply (OECD, 2001<sup>[7]</sup>). This remains the case even in countries with relatively long and supportive parental leave arrangements, such as Romania. In general, it is only in those countries that have a long history of publicly funded ECEC and strong gender equity policies, such as Denmark (57% enrolment) and Norway (53% enrolment), that high levels of participation among this age group are seen (OECD, 2018<sup>[6]</sup>).

While enrolment rates in Romania have increased over the same period, in particular for the pre-school age population, they remain below EU averages and the country's objectives. In 2016, 88.2% of children between four and school starting age were enrolled in pre-primary education (Eurostat, 2017<sup>[5]</sup>). The average however, masks significant variations. Children in rural areas are less likely to be enrolled – data from 2016-2017 shows that 97.4% of this age group were enrolled in urban areas compared with 85% in rural areas (European Commission, 2019<sup>[8]</sup>). Children from the Roma population are also much less likely to attend pre-primary education. In 2016, 38% of Roma children between age three and the school starting age were enrolled in ECEC compared to 88 % for non-Roma children (FRA, 2018<sup>[9]</sup>).

In Romania, the participation of children under age three in ante pre-school education is very low. In 2017, only 15.7% of children aged 0 to 3 years were enrolled at this level (European Commission, 2019<sup>[8]</sup>). Disparities in enrolment among the under threes are even more pronounced. More than 90% of nursery places for this age group are located in urban areas, with only 27 nurseries in the country in rural areas. In 2014, 89% of children enrolled at this level were Romanian, compared to just 3% from the Roma community (UNICEF, 2015<sup>[2]</sup>).

To help the country achieve the goals set out in the Educated Romania report (30% of 0-3 year-old children enrolled in ante pre-school by 2030 and 95 % of 4-6 year-olds enrolled in pre-school by 2030), the country has asked for advice on:

- What approaches can help develop provision for children from birth to age three?
- What approaches can help ensure more equal provision for children between ages three and compulsory school?

## Potential impact

Expanding ECEC enrolment in Romania is likely to improve learning and educational outcomes, as well as having broader social and economic benefits. There is a significant body of evidence that high-quality ECEC has a greater impact on children’s academic success and their emotional and social well-being than any other phase of education (Whitebread, Kvalja and O’Conne, 2015<sup>[10]</sup>). Data from the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) shows that whether a child attends pre-primary education and for how long affects their learning outcomes at age 15. In 2015, students across OECD countries who had attended between two and three years of pre-primary school scored 35 points higher than students who did not attend and 50 score points higher than students who had attended less than one year, on average (OECD, 2016<sup>[11]</sup>).

However, the impact on learning outcomes falls significantly once a student’s socio-economic background is taken into account. One factor shaping this is the fact that children from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to attend pre-primary education, and if they do, are more likely to attend for a shorter period of time or access services of lower quality. Children who spend less than one year in pre-primary education tend to have lower achievement than their peers who did not attend at all, or attended for longer than a year (OECD, 2016<sup>[11]</sup>). This suggests that in order to benefit fully from the expansion of ECEC, countries need to ensure that children attend for one year or more. In 2012, Romania introduced a preparatory grade (grade 0) into compulsory education. This is having a positive impact on reducing dropout rates in the first school years and helping reduce disparities among students (World Bank, forthcoming<sup>[3]</sup>). As such, the Romanian Parliament is discussing the possibility of extending compulsory pre-school by two additional years so that by 2030, which will require children to attend 3 years of pre-school education.

Data from PISA also reveals that disadvantaged students are more likely to have spent less time – if any time at all – in pre-primary school (OECD, 2016<sup>[11]</sup>). This means that countries should take steps to target children from more disadvantaged communities who tend to be harder to reach. Since 2015, Romania’s “Every child in Kindergarten!” programme grants monthly food coupons to low-income families conditional on the child’s daily attendance in pre-school (World Bank, forthcoming<sup>[3]</sup>). This is one way to target vulnerable children (see policy brief on equity). While the programme has contributed to increased enrolment rates, it has not reached the participation target of having around one in five children in kindergarten and enrolments remain below the European 2020 benchmark of 95% (European Commission, 2018<sup>[12]</sup>). Only a few of the children enrolled in the programme have not been to kindergarten before, suggesting its overall impact has been marginal.

Children who have participated in ECEC are also likely to have easier transitions to primary school, better grade progression, and lower participation in special education. Beyond better learning outcomes, other longer-term benefits of ECEC include better mental and physical health for children and their families, fewer at-risk behaviours, and lower rates of criminality (OECD, 2006<sup>[13]</sup>). Improving ECEC attendance is likely to help Romania achieve its goals for reducing early school leaving and improving children’s functional literacy (see policy brief on equity).

Increasing the enrolment rate of children in ECEC in Romania would also have wider social and economic benefits. Internationally, the recent increase in ECEC participation, in particular among the under threes, has helped to expand female participation in the work force (OECD, 2018<sup>[6]</sup>). In Romania, greater female employment would support the country’s progress against its EU 2020 target for poverty reduction. In 2017, 35.7% of the country’s population was at risk of poverty or social exclusion, over 10 percentage points higher than the EU average (Eurostat, 2017<sup>[5]</sup>). In particular, increasing employment of working mothers would help to reduce the high share of children in the country that are currently living in poverty.

## International evidence and examples

The section below discusses possible levers to increasing ECEC enrolment.

### ***Ensuring adequate spending on ECEC***

In 2015, Romania spent 0.36% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) on ECEC (ISCED 01 and 02) (Eurostat, 2017<sup>[5]</sup>). This is significantly lower than most OECD and EU countries, which respectively spent on average 0.8% and 0.59% (Eurostat, 2018<sup>[14]</sup>) of GDP on ECEC in the same year (OECD, 2018<sup>[6]</sup>; Eurostat, 2017<sup>[5]</sup>). Average spending masks significant variations across countries. Countries with the highest levels of ECEC participation, such as Iceland, Norway and Sweden spend close to 2% of GDP on ECEC (OECD, 2018<sup>[6]</sup>).

One of the strategies countries have used to increase ECEC coverage is to expand the range of private providers. While Romania has a very low share of private provision that can clearly be expanded - less than 1% in 2011 (UNICEF, 2015<sup>[2]</sup>) – it should be noted that the experience of OECD countries suggests the expansion of high quality services requires significant public investment (OECD, 2006<sup>[13]</sup>). Limited public investment can lead to a shortage of good quality programmes, unequal access, and segregation of children according to income (also see policy brief on Improving Educational Equity in Romania) (OECD, 2001<sup>[7]</sup>). Consequently, policies to increase ECEC enrolment in many countries have included significantly increasing public expenditure to address equity concerns by using different fee levels and structures to ensure that all families can afford to enrol their children in ECEC. Increased public spending can indeed partly explain the rise on ECEC access across OECD countries. Most of these countries offer free access to ECEC to all children for at least the last year before starting primary education (OECD, 2017<sup>[15]</sup>). In Portugal for example, a government commitment to achieve universal enrolment for children aged 3–6 years was matched by a doubling of the ECEC budget between 1996 and 2001 (OECD, 2006<sup>[13]</sup>). This facilitated major investment in the pre-school network to overcome traditional inequities in access. Between 1996 and 1999, pre-primary enrolment increased dramatically, from 57 % to 72% (OECD, 2001<sup>[7]</sup>).

To avoid the development of a two-tiered system (should Romania decide to expand private provision of ECEC), the OECD recommends that countries consider allocating public funding to private services, as long as they meet or exceed the standards set for public provision. In terms of financing mechanisms, it seems that without government regulation and planning, demand-side subsidies are insufficient to ensure equitable access and an even supply of quality services across regions and across income groups (OECD, 2001<sup>[7]</sup>).

In Romania, the vast majority ECEC spending is directed towards pre-school provision (ISCED 02). Across OECD countries, around three-quarters of ECEC spending is focused on this level of provision (OECD, 2018<sup>[6]</sup>). In Romania, this share is even higher, at over 90% of overall ECEC spending (Eurostat, 2017<sup>[5]</sup>). Part of Romania's efforts to expand ECEC enrolment clearly needs to include considering increasing the overall ECEC budget, with particular focus on ensuring that funding for ISCED 01 is sufficient.

### ***Introducing a legal entitlement***

One lever to increase ECEC enrolment rates across OECD countries has been the introduction of legal entitlements to an ECEC place (OECD, 2015<sup>[16]</sup>). Across countries, legal entitlements vary in terms of whether they are universal or targeted to specific families, the age range that is covered, number of hours that the entitlement covers and whether the entitlement provides places that are free of charge.

Romania might consider introducing a legal entitlement that would serve to galvanise the ministry and ECEC providers to expand provision, while also raising awareness of the importance of ECEC attendance among parents. The entitlement might also be targeted to help increase attendance among families where participation tends to be lower but such efforts would also need to address other barriers that may be preventing these groups from participating. Options to consider in the design of such an entitlement include:

- *The age group that is covered:* some OECD systems have an entitlement that covers almost the whole ECEC age group. For example, in Norway and Germany the legal entitlement covers children aged 1-5 years old. In Estonia, children aged 1.5 to 7 years old are guaranteed ECEC (OECD, 2017<sup>[15]</sup>). Other countries, like Chile, have different entitlements for different age



groups, while in the Czech Republic the entitlement only covers the final year of pre-primary education (OECD, 2015<sup>[16]</sup>).

Romania should review the current trends in ECEC attendance for all of ISCED 0, and then consider developing a targeted approach based on current participation across different ages and national objectives. European Social Funds could also help support these efforts. The country should also bear in mind the evidence shows that the longer a child remains in ECEC, the greater the long-term benefits (see policy brief on equity) (OECD, 2016<sup>[11]</sup>). Since the country is aiming to achieve near universal attendance in ISCED 02 by 2030, a universal entitlement might be introduced for this age group. Given the objectives for enrolment in ISCED 01 are much lower (30% by 2030), a more targeted entitlement might be introduced to cover a subsection of this age group. For example, England (United Kingdom) has a specific entitlement for 2 year-olds (OECD, 2015<sup>[16]</sup>).

- *Targeting specific groups:* most OECD systems with available data provide some form of universal entitlement for certain groups of children. A universal legal entitlement refers to a statutory duty for ECEC providers to provide a publicly subsidized ECEC place for all children within a catchment area. In around half of OECD systems, the universal entitlement includes unconditional access to a free place. This arrangement is most common for older children attending ISCED 02. In contrast, in a number of countries the legal entitlement is conditional on different factors linked to family background. For example, in Chile and Japan, the legal entitlement to free access is conditional on parents' income (OECD, 2015<sup>[16]</sup>).

Given Romania's limited public investment in ECEC at present, the country might consider developing a targeted entitlement or providing free access that is conditional on family background. This might include an entitlement that is targeted to families that tend to participate in ECEC less, such as families with a disadvantaged background and the Roma population. However, such efforts would be unlikely to have the desired impact if they are not matched with efforts to tackle broader issues around participation. For example, Romania will likely need additional outreach efforts to overcome socio-cultural factors and raise awareness about the benefits of ECEC. Moreover, while ECEC facilities in urban areas are often overcrowded, nearly 59% of kindergartens in rural areas of Romania have excess capacities but these may be located far from the children's homes, making distance and transportation potential barriers to participation (European Commission, 2019<sup>[8]</sup>).

- *The number of hours the entitlement covers.* The time per week covered by the entitlements across OECD systems differs greatly. For example, Norway grants universal access to 41 hours of ECEC (for 1-5 year-olds), in France, the entitlement covers 24 hours of pre-primary education (ISCED 02), while Scotland (United Kingdom) provides just 16 hours for 3-4 year-olds (OECD, 2015<sup>[16]</sup>).

While Romania's ultimate goal might be that all children can access a full-time place if their parents wish, the country's current ECEC infrastructure is unlikely to support this goal for a number of years to come. In the future, Romania could possibly benefit from EU funding to improve the infrastructure of ECEC since the European Commission identified this as a high priority for investment (European Commission, 2019<sup>[8]</sup>). Meanwhile, Romania could introduce an entitlement that progressively increases, in line with national infrastructure. This approach would also enable the government to progressively educate parents about the benefits of ECEC attendance. One of the factors driving low enrolment of Roma children are traditional patterns to childcare and lack of awareness about the potential benefits of ECEC (UNICEF, 2015<sup>[2]</sup>).

### ***Taking an integrated approach to ECEC for different age groups***

In Romania, as in many OECD countries, ECEC has traditionally been conceptualised as “child care” for the under threes and “pre-primary education” for the 3-6 year-olds. One impact of this bifurcated approach is that the educational dimension of childcare for the under threes has been less developed. Services also tend to be more expensive, making them inaccessible for families with lower incomes and staff tend to have low qualifications. This contrasts with pre-primary provision, which is often linked to the school network. Staff for this age group are frequently tertiary educated and services may be free to parents (OECD, 2006<sup>[13]</sup>).

In recent years, most OECD countries have moved towards providing integrated ECEC that covers both care and education (OECD, 2015<sup>[16]</sup>). The first step towards achieving this in many countries has been the integration of leadership of ECEC under a single ministry. This is already the case in Romania, although the Education Ministry has a more limited oversight of *ante* pre-school compared to other levels of education and integrated service delivery is not systematic (World Bank, forthcoming<sup>[17]</sup>). Other measures that Romania might consider include how the curriculum is structured to ensure continuity in content and pedagogy across ISCED 01 and ISCED 02 (see policy priority 2). Another measure is ensuring greater convergence and equivalency in pay and staff qualifications across the different levels of ECEC (see policy priority 3). Box 1 discusses how some of these approaches have been combined in the United Kingdom in the past.

The above needs to be supported by a systematic approach to ensuring integration. This might include efforts to encourage cooperation across ministries (such as health and social policies) and across different levels of government, since ECEC delivery is often more decentralised than other levels of education. A national quality assurance framework is also important to ensure a consistent approach across different providers, notably the private sector.

#### **Box 1. Developing a more integrated approach to children’s services in the United Kingdom**

The United Kingdom’s *Sure Start Unit* (Department for Education and Skills/Department of Work and Pensions) and local authorities have strengthened the integration of early childhood education and care services. *Sure Start* has the remit to work across government and achieve more integrated services for children and families. To counter the traditional split between childcare and early education, plans are underway to generate a new educator profile to cover the whole age group, 1 to 6 years. The Childcare Bill 2005 allows for a single coherent phase of development for all young children, as announced in the ten-year strategy for childcare “Choice for parents, the best start for children” (HM Treasury, 2004). The new framework will take an integrated approach to care and education, reflecting the reality of the way childcare services operate. A large private sector exists, but the intention is to impose a common inspection process for all regulated services – including schools – that cater for children under 8 years.

Source: (OECD, 2006<sup>[13]</sup>), *Starting strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264035461-en>.

### ***Developing diversity of provision***

In most OECD countries, a wide range of different settings provide ECEC, especially for ISCED 01. This includes public and private centre-based provision, home-based provision, the non-governmental sector and more informal types of provision such as drop-in centres (OECD, 2015<sup>[16]</sup>). In Romania however, there is little diversity in the provision of ECEC offered for all age groups and settings are mostly formal publically funded institutions (UNICEF, 2015<sup>[2]</sup>). For example, only around 4% of pre-schools (serving children age three to six) are private (World Bank, forthcoming<sup>[17]</sup>). Romania might consider trying to diversify the range of ECEC provision by:

- Providing more flexible types of provision. OECD countries are increasingly providing more flexible services to support both working and non-working parents. These include full-time and part-time places, and drop-in centres and playgroups (OECD, 2006<sup>[13]</sup>). For example, the Erasmus+ programme, *TOY for Inclusion*, has successfully developed “play hubs” in Belgium, Croatia, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Slovakia and Slovenia that bring together Roma and non-Roma families to combat exclusion, introduce parents to the benefits of ECEC and develop trust in this approach (TOY, n.d.<sup>[18]</sup>). The programme also includes a how-to guide to support local policy makers in developing similar initiatives.
- Expanding home-based care. Across the OECD, almost all countries provide some formal centre-based and home-based ECEC provision, especially for the under threes (ISCED 01). While home-based care enrolls only a minority of children under three in some countries, it plays a far greater role in others. For example, in France, 57% of the available ECEC places for children under three are covered by home-based provision, while in Germany, Belgium and the United Kingdom, the existence of regulated home-based care is also significant (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019<sup>[19]</sup>).

A challenge of home-based care or family day care is that providers risk being isolated from opportunities to update their knowledge and skills and learn from other professionals. In France and Germany, professional networks have been developed for family care providers to address some of these challenges (see Box 2).

### Box 2. Networks for family day care providers in France and Germany

In **France** and **Germany**, groups of family day care providers have been organised into networks, supervised and supported by a local professional centre or specialised agency. A weekly or fortnightly session at the local pedagogical or childcare centre enables family day carers to benefit from professional development and reduce their isolation. This is important as many family day carers can leave the profession because of an insufficient support and contact with other professionals. (Other reasons include inadequate work conditions, remuneration and social protection). These kinds of networks also help family day carers feel a sense of belonging to a profession, and can help to provide service replacements whenever a family day carer is unwell or unavailable for some days.

Source: (OECD, 2006<sup>[13]</sup>), *Starting strong II: early childhood education and care*, OECD Publishing, Paris; (OECD, 2017<sup>[20]</sup>) *Education at a Glance 2017: OECD Indicators*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/eag-2017-en>.

- Supplementing pre-primary, school-based provision. As well as simply expanding access, countries need to ensure that provision is appropriate for the needs of parents and young children. In particular, the kinds of school-based setting that are common for pre-primary provision may not be adapted to parents’ needs, such as provision that only covers half a day or during term time only may not meet parents’ needs (OECD, 2006<sup>[13]</sup>). Countries can supplement this kind of provision with more flexible services like after school care or other wrap around services. Box 3 discusses country approaches to increase out of school provision.



### Box 3. Country approaches to expanding out-of-school provision

In **France**, *écoles maternelles* that provide pre-primary education have traditionally operated for eight hours a day (except Wednesdays) from 8.30 to 16.30. To meet the demand for out-of-school time provision, the country has established a network of accredited support services around the *école maternelle*. *Centres de loisirs* (leisure-time centres) run by non-profit associations or the communes operate on Wednesdays, after school and during the shorter holiday breaks; and *garderies périscolaires* (out-of-school child care), run by municipalities and parents' associations operate before and after school hours generally on school premises. French children also go to the homes of accredited or informal family day carers for after-school care.

In **Austria** and **Germany**, kindergartens that traditionally covered half-day provision only are being extended towards full-day provision. Although at first raising fears of educational pressure on young children, classes are still confined to the morning period, while afternoons are reserved for relaxation, leisure, social and learning activities including sports, music, arts and crafts. Both parents and non-statutory bodies are involved – the latter often as operators of programmes. New in-service training has been introduced in some *Länder*, bringing teachers, leisure-time educators and sports instructors together. Costs to parents are generally very reasonable, ranging from EUR 30-50 per month in publicly subsidised services.

Source: (OECD, 2006<sup>[13]</sup>), *Starting strong II: early childhood education and care*.

### ***Developing comprehensive services to meet the needs of children from disadvantaged backgrounds***

One challenge to increasing ECEC (ISCED 0) attendance in Romania is expanding participation among disadvantaged groups, such as children from lower socio-economic groups and ethnic minorities, in particular the Roma community. Raising ECEC participation among children from these groups early on is important to ensure that they have the best start in life. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to be exposed to rich, stimulating home environments which is especially important for early language development, and the child's development overall. Families from less advantaged backgrounds may also be less well equipped to meet children's health and nutritional needs (Isaacs, 2012<sup>[21]</sup>).

Many OECD countries have developed comprehensive ECEC services to help address the barriers that prevent children from less advantaged backgrounds and their families accessing ECEC services. These services might provide an adapted pedagogy, improved staff resources and outreach to families and their communities.

## **Effective implementation and capacity building**

### ***Determining national needs***

Decisions on where to situate ECEC centres should be based on national analysis of changing demographics and population profile. Given the current disparities in access, expansion of coverage in areas with poor access such as rural areas, or to target the needs of the Roma community are particularly important. In mapping national needs, the country might also draw on national household surveys to match supply and demand. Box 4 provides an example of a national survey on the use and availability of ECEC provision in the United States.

#### Box 4. National Survey of Early Care and Education (NSECE) in the United States

In 2012, the National Survey of Early Care and Education (NSECE) in the United States included a set of four integrated, nationally representative surveys to target:

- households with children under age 13
- home-based providers of ECEC (both formal and informal home-based care)
- centre-based providers of ECEC
- centre-based provider workforce, with one staff-member identified to participate in the interview.

Data for each component were gathered through interviews. The study used a provider-cluster approach for sampling all four surveys from the same small geographic areas. This approach allowed the survey to document the interaction of the supply of and demand for early care and education where it occurs in local communities, while simultaneously capturing data that efficiently construct national estimates. Because the experiences of low-income families are of special interest in public policy addressing ECEC and school-age care, the NSECE oversampled low-income areas.

Source: (NORC, n.d.<sup>[22]</sup>), *National Survey of Early Care and Education* | NORC.org, University of Chicago, [www.norc.org/Research/Projects/Pages/national-survey-of-early-care-and-education.aspx](http://www.norc.org/Research/Projects/Pages/national-survey-of-early-care-and-education.aspx).

#### ***Establishing satisfactory standards for ECEC infrastructure***

As Romania starts to expand ECEC provision, it will need to define clear standards for the physical space to ensure that ECEC settings meet satisfactory standards. Well-designed ECEC centres support children's health and safety, as well as their learning experiences. ECEC centres should take into account the size, density, privacy, defined activity areas, modified open-plans, technical design features and the quality of outdoor play spaces. The country might also look to the examples of other countries that have sought to rapidly expand high-quality ECEC provision without major costs (see Box 5). As well as establishing standards for physical infrastructure, Romania will need to establish minimum standards for the quality of care and education.

#### Box 5. Rapidly expanding ECEC infrastructure in Russia

The region of Yakutia in **Russia** made plans to update its ECEC system, with the aim of ensuring high quality learning environments and raising enrolment levels. The government reviewed designs from exemplary systems around the world that would maximise pedagogical needs, while also minimising costs. In the early stages of the project, six different sized designs were identified, which could be adapted to needs and construction site conditions (in both urban and rural environments, and for an overall capacity of 25 to 250 children). The facilities could also be individualised through the use of colour and final layout. Designs for multi-use centres were also identified

Source: (Kotnik and Shmis, 2011<sup>[23]</sup>), "Enhancing the Early Childhood Development System in Yakutia (Russia): Meeting the Challenges", *CELE Exchange*, Centre for Effective Learning Environments, No. 2011/12.

## Policy priority 2: Developing curriculum for ECEC settings

In recent decades, there has been a change internationally in the perceived function of ECEC. The traditional focus on “care” to ensure a child’s safety and encouraging routine and order has moved towards supporting children’s broader social, emotional and cognitive development as well. This change reflects the understanding that high-quality curricula and effective pedagogy support children to develop their language and social skills, logical reasoning, ability to self-regulate and interact with others (Whitebread, Kuvajla and O’Conneo, 2015<sup>[10]</sup>). In line with these changes, OECD countries have developed national curricula that promote continuity in learning and development across the full age range of ECEC and into primary school.

Romania developed and approved key reference standards for early learning and development for children from birth to age six in 2018. These reference standards provide the basis for the development of an “early pre-school curriculum” (i.e. ISCED 01) and a pre-primary (ISCED 02) curriculum. The span of the reference standards and curricula, as well as the introduction of a compulsory preparation class at age five, help to encourage a smooth transition into primary education. National stakeholders report that the pre-primary curriculum incorporates many modern concepts for early childhood learning such as individualisation and focusing on the development of the whole child. However, they also acknowledge that guidance documents could better support practical implementation. (UNICEF, 2015<sup>[2]</sup>).

As part of the country’s efforts to continually develop and improve ECEC curricula, Educated Romania asked for advice on:

- How have other countries developed curricula for the early years?
- What competencies are important at this age, and to support the successful transition to compulsory schooling?
- How do curricula differ for 0-3 year-olds and age three until school age?

### Potential impact

Well-designed ECEC curricula promote content and pedagogical practices that engage children and support their socio-emotional development. The latter encourages engaged and confident young learners who are likely to make a successful transition to primary education. Ensuring that children’s first experiences of learning are positive will also help to develop children’s confidence in their own abilities and encourage positive attitudes towards learning. This is particularly important in Romania, given the high levels of early school leaving. Non-cognitive skills like confidence, motivation and perseverance and attitudes towards learning play a key role in how effectively students learn (Chernyshenko, Kankaraš and Drasgow, 2018<sup>[24]</sup>). Over the longer-term, they also play an important role in keeping students engaged and attending school.

Well-designed ECEC curricula in Romania can also help to tackle the challenges of low functional literacy (see policy brief on equity). Children and students who do not develop baseline proficiency in core learning areas like literacy and numeracy often move through school accumulating major gaps in their knowledge and skills. While there is a large degree of consensus on the broad developmental domains of ECEC, significant differences exist in how much attention is given to academic learning (Laevers, 2005<sup>[25]</sup>). In some countries, ECEC curricula tends to focus on emerging literacy and numeracy skills, in order to

prepare young children for school. However, the European Quality Framework for ECEC suggests that a broader holistic approach is more appropriate for fulfilling children's learning potential and well-being (European Commission, 2014<sub>[26]</sub>). Indeed, learning environments which engage children in developmentally appropriate, stimulating and language-rich activities that offer opportunities for play, use of language and higher order thinking and for social interactions are essential to the provision of quality ECEC (European Commission, 2014<sub>[26]</sub>; OECD, 2017<sub>[1]</sub>).

## International evidence and examples

The following section discusses different aspects of curricula development for ECEC that are important for Romania to consider:

### ***Balancing pre-academic skills and social-emotional development***

Historically, ECEC curricula have been categorised into academic and comprehensive models. An academic approach is defined by a staff-initiated curriculum that focuses on children's cognitive development in preparation for compulsory schooling. In contrast, a comprehensive approach focuses more broadly on the development of the whole child and their general well-being (OECD, 2006<sub>[13]</sub>). Research suggests that the most effective ECEC curricula balance cognitive and social development (OECD, 2012<sub>[27]</sub>). This kind of balanced curriculum gives equal weight to pre-academic activities, play and self-regulation:

- ***Pre-academic skills.*** There is strong evidence that high-quality pre-academic programmes with explicit teaching can positively influence children's literacy and mathematics skills, which are strong predictors of later achievement (Pianta et al., 2009<sub>[28]</sub>) (Duncan et al., 2007<sub>[29]</sub>).
- ***Play.*** Evidence suggests that a combination of indoor and outdoor play, for example involving role-play, drawing and puppets, provides children with high quality development opportunities (Aasen, Grindheim and Waters, 2009<sub>[30]</sub>).
- ***Choice and self-determination.*** Children should have the choice to engage in a range of learning areas. Curricula can encourage this through cross-disciplinary learning activities that stimulate children's curiosity, for example by focusing on themes that they find interesting or draw on aspects of their own lives (OECD, 2012<sub>[27]</sub>).

Romania's new integrated ECEC curricula for children from birth to age six appears to encourage this kind of balanced approach. For example, it is based on a holistic view of child development, including physical development, health, personal care, socio-emotional development, cognitive development, and language development and communication (European Commission, 2019<sub>[31]</sub>). It aims to cover both pre-academic skills in preparation for school but also socio-emotional development such as working with others, and physical development such as health and gross motor skills (European Commission, 2019<sub>[31]</sub>).

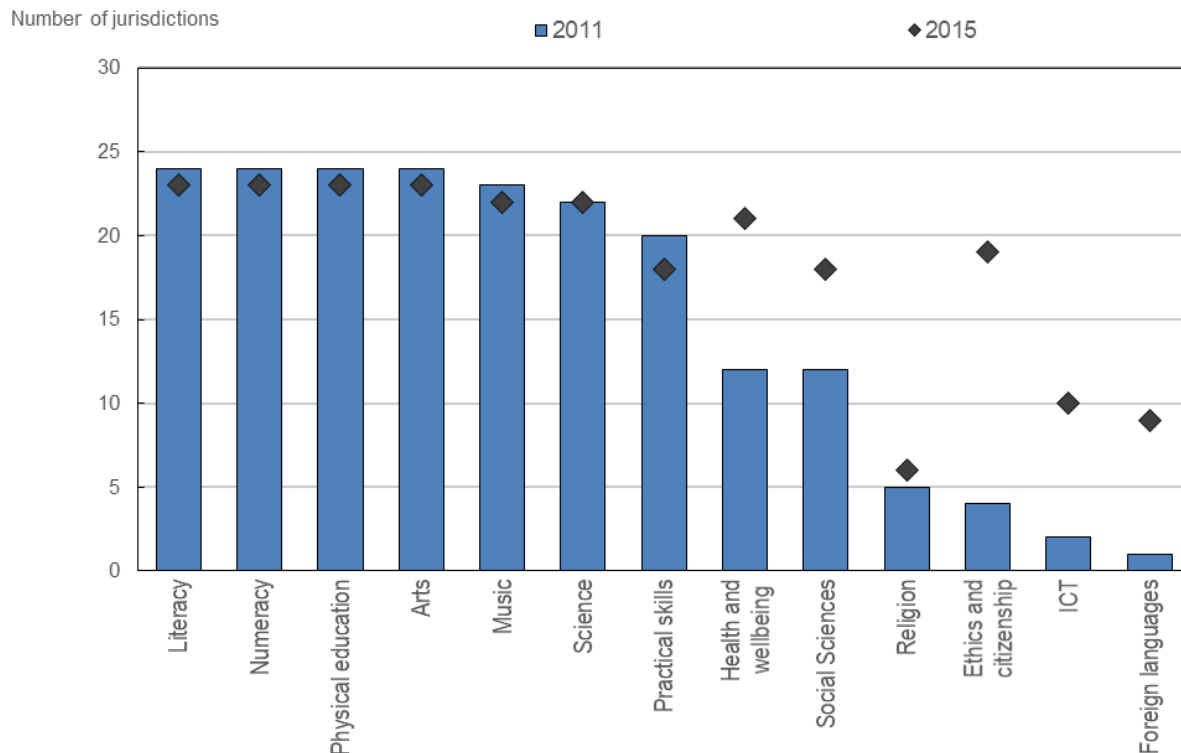
Differences in curriculum-focus tend to overlap with different pedagogical approaches – between an adult or more child-initiated approach. Both approaches have their merits - an adult-initiated approach can reduce knowledge gaps in literacy and numeracy, while child-initiated activities can support learning by keeping children engaged (OECD, 2012<sub>[27]</sub>). While there is no clear evidence that one approach is better for children's overall learning and development, when staff capacity is relatively low a more prescriptive approach to learning and pedagogy can help to create a more meaningful learning experience. Given some of the challenges with implementing the current ECEC curricula, and the low levels of ECEC staff qualifications in Romania, the country might develop curricula documents to provide more prescriptive guidance to support consistent implementation.

### ***Identifying key learning areas***

A review of countries' ECEC curricula frameworks suggests that there has been a general tendency to broaden the range of learning areas in recent years (see Figure 1). Literacy, numeracy, physical education,

science, arts, music and practical skills - learning areas that have traditionally been highlighted by ECEC curricula continue to be prominent. In addition, new areas like health and well-being, social sciences, ethics and citizenship, information communicate technology skills and foreign languages are increasingly part of ECEC curricula frameworks. This development suggests that more and more countries are aiming towards comprehensive, rather than purely academic curricula (OECD, 2017<sup>[1]</sup>). These learning areas are also in line with the 2018 European Commission’s recommendation on key competencies for lifelong learning (The Council of European Union, 2018<sup>[32]</sup>).

**Figure 1. Content areas in pre-primary curricula are increasing (2011 and 2015)**



Note: Information on content areas of the curriculum is based on information from 24 countries and jurisdictions that reported this information both in 2011 and in 2015. Jurisdictions are ranked in descending order for the number of content areas included in their ECEC curriculum framework in 2011. Respondents could list more than one content category.

Belgium (Flemish Community): data for 2015 reflect the contents stated in the Developmental Objectives for 2.5 to 6-year-olds.

Luxembourg: data for 2015 consist of the curriculum contents in two parallel curricula in place (*Bildungsrahmenplan für non-formale Bildung im Kindes und Jugendalter [0–12]* and *Plan d'Etudes de l'enseignement fondamental*).

New Zealand: for 2015, curricula for the last year of ECEC are considered (The New Zealand Curriculum and *Te Marautanga o Aotearoa*).

Poland: In 2015 foreign languages are obligatory only for 5-year-old children.

Portugal: In 2015 kindergartens can provide foreign language (last year of ECEC).

Slovenia: In 2015 settings can organise foreign languages.

Source: OECD Network on Early Childhood Education and Care’s “Survey for the Quality Toolbox and ECEC Portal”, June 2011 and 2015.



### **Structuring ECEC curricula for different age groups**

While all the OECD systems with available data have a pre-primary curriculum, countries take different approaches to how they organise curricula across the six years of ECEC. In structuring their curricula, countries need to consider how they will meet the different needs for the ECEC age groups and levels – ISCED 01 and 02, while ensuring continuity. A further consideration is how ECEC curricula interacts with the subsequent level – primary education. Curricula alignment refers to the coherence and continuity between ECEC and primary school curricula in terms of content, pedagogy and/or development goals and promotes a smooth transition for the last year of ECEC to the first year of primary school. This kind of continuity in curricula between ECEC and primary school is found to have a positive impact on children’s later experiences and development (OECD, 2017<sup>[1]</sup>). The different approaches can be categorised as:

- Several curriculum documents for ECEC and primary education, one of which covers the transition from ECEC to primary school. This is the most common arrangement across OECD systems, in 25 of the 63 jurisdictions. For example, in Thuringen (Germany), a general educational plan exists from birth to age 18, covering all of ECEC (ISCED 01 and 02) and primary education (ISCED 1). There is also separate curriculum for primary school (from age six onwards) in place alongside this.
- One single curriculum document covers at least the last year of ECEC and the first year of primary education. This arrangement exists in nine OECD systems including the Netherlands, New Zealand and Sweden.
- Integrated curriculum (in 18 systems). In these systems, care and education curricula cover ECEC (ISCED 01 and 02) but there is a separate curriculum for primary education. This is typical in Nordic countries (Denmark, Norway and Finland), as well as in France and Austria. This approach provides a clearly structured approach to ensure continuity as children develop and mature throughout ECEC.
- Two different curricula for the stages from birth to age three and age three until school age. In six systems, there are different curricula for the two different age groups that ECEC covers. For example, in Korea, *The Standardised Childcare Curriculum* covers birth to three years, followed by a separate early childhood education and care curriculum (*Nuri Curriculum*) for 3 to 6 year-olds to prepare their transition to primary education.
- No curriculum for children aged under three. A minority (6 systems) do not have curricula for children under three years (ISCED 01) (OECD, 2017<sup>[1]</sup>).

These arrangements show that in most OECD systems, there are explicit efforts to ensure alignment in the year when children transition to primary education. Countries do this by developing a single framework that covers at least the last year of ECEC and the first year of primary. In Wales (United Kingdom) for example, the integrated curriculum covers children aged 3-7 years. The curriculum pays particular attention to curricula community for school entry and preparing children for teaching and learning once they enter primary education (see Box 6).

Another approach is to establish guidelines and common content structures and themes across separate curricula for ECEC and primary. This approach exists in around half of OECD systems. For example, in Slovenia, while there are different curricula documents for ECEC and primary, there is alignment in terms of how learning content areas are structured and the curricula include an explicit statement on the need for vertical and horizontal alignment across the two curricula (see Box 6) (OECD, 2017<sup>[1]</sup>). Only in minority of OECD systems is there no alignment or integration between ECEC and primary curriculum. In these countries, there are separate curriculum documents for ECEC and primary education, with goals, guidelines or content structures that do not explicitly consider transition from ECEC to primary education (OECD, 2017<sup>[1]</sup>).

Overall, there is no single approach to structuring a curriculum that is best and the key is to ensure effective integration and continuity across all curricula. Romania recently adopted an integrated curriculum for ECEC. Ensuring this is based on common reference standards that also span the first years of primary

education can help provide the structure needed to promote continuity across ECEC and into primary education. The country will need to ensure that the continuity in reference standards is well-reflected in the different curricula and pedagogical practices in reality.

### Box 6. Different approaches to ensuring curricula alignment

In **Wales (United Kingdom)**, children transfer from ECEC to primary school at the age of five under the guidance of a single curriculum - the 2009 Foundation Phase curriculum. The Foundation Phase curriculum is planned as a progressive framework to meet the diverse needs of all children, including those at an earlier stage of development and those who are more capable. The Foundation Phase curriculum is flexible, with a broad range of activities, learning and development skills set out for the following areas of learning that support the development of children and their skills:

1. personal and social development, well-being and cultural diversity
2. language, literacy and communication skills
3. mathematical development
4. welsh language development
5. knowledge and understanding of the world
6. physical development
7. creative development.

During the curriculum's implementation, support was provided by a national training programme and training modules. Teachers can now access guidance a range of guidance documents and other resources on specific Areas of Learning and delivery of the Foundation Phase curriculum.

In **Slovenia**, *kindergarten* and primary education are both considered part of the education system and are under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport. The ECEC and the primary school curricular frameworks are two separate documents and are not integrated. However, they are aligned. In the Framework of Curriculum Reform (1996), it is explicitly stated that education programmes and curricula have to be consistent and aligned vertically and horizontally. The kindergarten curriculum is an open and flexible national document with specified principles, goals and examples of activities. It contains six activity areas (movement, language, art, society, nature and mathematics) and goals and objectives for each of them. The curriculum stipulates the principle of continuity (vertical connectedness) to primary school, but at the same time clearly emphasises that kindergarten should not become "schoolified". The primary school curriculum on the other hand lays down the syllabi for compulsory and elective subjects. Compulsory subjects in the first year are Slovenian language, mathematics, music art, fine art, sport, and environmental education

Source: (OECD, 2017<sup>[1]</sup>), Starting Strong V: Transitions from Early Childhood Education and Care to Primary Education, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264276253-en>.

### Effective implementation and capacity development

Romania appears to currently have well-developed curricula that cover the different levels of ECEC and promote continuity with the first years of primary education. However, stakeholders acknowledge some challenges with regard to comprehensive and coherent implementation (UNICEF, 2015<sup>[2]</sup>). One way to address this is by ensuring that curricula documentation is sufficiently clear and detailed, so that ECEC staff understand what is expected of them. Curricula also need to be well-integrated with the initial education and continuing professional development of ECEC staff (see policy priority 3). Providers of initial and continuing education for ECEC staff should be expected to regularly update their programmes in line with curricula changes and this should be reflected in accreditation standards. The country also needs to ensure that the curriculum is well-understood and implemented across all ECEC settings.

To ensure that the country's ECEC curriculum continues to develop and adapt, in line with research about early learning and child development, Romania might consider developing a periodic review process. A national committee of ECEC experts might be asked to periodically review the curricula, and drawing on research and international practices, make suggestions for improvements or changes. Given the importance of curricula continuity and the long period of time that it takes for full curricula implementation, changes or adaptations should only be introduced when the system is ready to integrate them (e.g. every five years).

This work should also draw on student outcomes in the first years of primary. This might include teacher observations and results from the Grade 2 national assessments to understand if there are particular areas where children are stronger or weaker in the early years of school. The *Educated Romania* project considers the use of formative assessment in the early years of a child's education but this could be developed further. Romania should not be limited to academic areas but cover children's overall development such as understanding of health and well-being, the world around them and how to cooperate with others.

## Policy priority 3: Developing the competencies and qualifications of ECEC professionals

Staff competencies are directly related to the quality of ECEC, and staff qualifications play an important role in signalling the competencies that staff have developed and orienting training. Highly qualified ECEC staff are better able to create stimulating learning environments and to provide high quality pedagogy that supports children's learning and well-being. Research shows that staff with well-developed competencies positively impact children's language and reasoning, staff-parent relationships, the quality of children's activities, interactions and programme structure (OECD, 2017<sup>[11]</sup>). Once ECEC professionals are in post, continuous professional development plays a critical role in helping staff to develop their competencies and acquire new skills. In countries where not all ECEC staff have received full initial preparation, such as Romania, in-service professional development is essential to address gaps in staff knowledge and skills.

Romania does not yet have a coherent and comprehensive approach to support the country's ECEC staff to develop essential competencies before they enter the profession, and to continue developing their professional competence once in post. However, the country may benefit in the future from a proposal for a recommendation on high-quality ECEC that is being developed by the European Commission. The proposal highlights the importance of well-qualified staff with initial and continuing training that enables them to fulfil their professional role (European Commission, 2018<sup>[33]</sup>).

Aware of the need to develop a more unified and comprehensive approach to ECEC professionals' initial and continuous preparation, Educated Romania asked for advice on:

- What competencies are considered essential for ECEC professionals?
- What initial qualifications are required for ECEC professionals?
- What kinds of on-going professional development is important for ECEC professionals?

### Potential impact

In Romania, there are a number of challenges regarding the initial and continuing education of ECEC staff. One is the wide variation in possible routes into the profession. This is especially the case for *ante* pre-school professionals (ISCED 01) where preparation can be acquired through a variety of routes including pedagogical high schools (4-5 years), post-secondary schools (2 years), pedagogical institutes (3 years) and university faculties of psychology and educational sciences with a specialisation on pre-school and primary education pedagogy (3 years) (Ciolan et al., 2017<sup>[34]</sup>).

Second is the gap between professional competencies and the content of initial education programmes. In the past, Romania developed professional competencies for pre-primary and primary professionals. While providers of initial education for ECEC staff are expected to use these profiles to develop their programmes, implementation is reported to be mixed. A challenge regarding the latter is that providers of initial education are not evaluated on how far they support candidates to develop the country's professional competencies (University of East London and University of Ghent, 2011<sup>[35]</sup>).

Third is the absence of clear professional qualification requirements for staff working with children under three (ISCED 01). While pre-primary staff share the same professional standards and initial education programmes as primary teachers, there are no professional or training competencies for professionals

working with children in nursery settings, leaving many *ante* pre-school providers with a limited amount of qualified staff (Ciolan et al., 2017<sup>[34]</sup>). Furthermore, while pedagogical high schools provide initial preparation for the *Educatori-puericultori* (educators – early years) who work with children in nurseries, some of the pathways into the profession do not include training on child development since they previously operated under medical service models that did not address holistic development and early stimulation (Ciolan et al., 2017<sup>[34]</sup>; World Bank, forthcoming<sup>[17]</sup>). A final issue is the lack of consistency in the provision for professional development and low levels of participation among ECEC staff (Educated Romania, 2018<sup>[4]</sup>).

Since staff are the most important factor in creating high-quality ECEC, addressing these challenges could have a major impact on the quality of ECEC in Romania. Initial education that enables aspiring ECEC professionals to develop core competencies will help to raise the quality across the country's ECEC settings and promote better outcomes for children. There is a clear link between staff competencies, qualifications, training and children's developmental outcomes. In particular, research has found that higher qualifications for ECEC staff relates to higher-quality staff-child interactions, one of the primary drivers for child development (OECD, 2018<sup>[36]</sup>).

While strengthening the initial preparation of ECEC staff is important, the most impactful measure in the short term is likely to be strengthening continuous professional development for staff at this level. This is because a large share of existing ECEC staff in Romania have not received any initial preparation. OECD (2018<sup>[37]</sup>) research has found that professional development is positively related to children's emerging academic, behavioural or social skills. Helping these staff develop essential competencies on-the-job would have a significant and immediate impact on ECEC quality and support the country's objective to reduce the high share of students with low functional literacy (see policy brief on equity).

## International evidence and examples

Before discussing the competencies and training for ECEC staff, it is helpful to set out the variety of individuals that work in ECEC settings and their roles across OECD and EU countries and economies:

Teachers, pedagogues, educators, childcare practitioners or pedagogical staff. This group of staff have the greatest responsibility for children in ECEC. The information in this brief focuses primarily on this group of professionals, since they are the most important factor associated with raising the quality of children's development outcomes.

- Assistants who support the work of the first group of professionals. Assistants frequently have lower qualifications than the first group of ECEC professionals. In most EU countries, there are no formal requirements for the professional development of these staff (University of East London and University of Ghent, 2011<sup>[35]</sup>).
- Staff for individual children, such as children with special educational needs or with a different mother tongue to the national language.
- Advisors or counsellors provide additional guidance and support for children or teachers (OECD, 2017<sup>[1]</sup>).

A report prepared by the researchers from the University of Bucharest, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, outlines the different profiles of staff working in both *ante* pre-school and pre-school provision in Romania (Ciolan et al., 2017<sup>[34]</sup>), which aligns with different roles outlines above.

### **Identifying competencies of ECEC professionals**

To support the country's objectives to professionalise and improve the quality of ECEC, *Educated Romania* set out the need to develop training and occupational standards for ECEC staff (Educated Romania, 2018<sup>[4]</sup>). This is particularly important for the main professionals working with children under three years, as Romania does not currently have professional or training competencies for staff at this level. Competence requirements or standards can help to encourage consistency in the expectations on, and



preparation for, ECEC professionals. In particular for a country like Romania, where there is significant variation in the initial preparation of ECEC staff, they can help ensure that initial and continuous training covers a consistent set of knowledge and skills to prepare staff to follow the needs of young children and more actively support their development. Such training opportunities can benefit all ECEC staff members, including assistants and auxiliary staff (European Commission, 2018<sup>[33]</sup>) and may cover necessary elements of child development, psychology and protection.

The increasing role of competencies in defining what ECEC professionals should know and be able to do reflects the understanding that well-trained, educated professionals are the most important factor for providing high-quality ECEC provision (OECD, 2012<sup>[27]</sup>). Across the 15 EU countries with available information, there is a combination of:

- nationally/regionally valid competence profiles exist both for the profession and for professional education/training
- nationally/regionally valid competence profiles exist only for the profession but not for professional education/training
- required nationally/regionally competence profiles exist only for professional education/training but not for the profession
- no nationally/regionally valid competence profiles exist, either for the profession or for professional education/training (University of East London and University of Ghent, 2011<sup>[35]</sup>).

Across the same countries, it is far less common to have professional competencies for assistants or family day carers. Only three EU countries – France, the Netherlands and Slovenia – have professional and training profiles for ECEC assistants, and only two countries have professional and training profiles for family day carers (University of East London and University of Ghent, 2011<sup>[35]</sup>).

#### *Core competencies for ECEC staff*

There are broad variations in the professional competencies for ECEC staff across OECD and EU countries - reflecting in part different traditions and views of ECEC. However, a review of country practices and research highlights some core competencies that are important for all ECEC staff:

- understanding of child development
- the ability to create stimulating learning environments
- ability to praise, comfort and be responsive to children
- cooperation with parents
- responsibility for pursuing professional development (OECD, 2012<sup>[27]</sup>).

In addition to knowledge of child development and pedagogy in the list above, other types of knowledge frequently included in competency profiles include knowledge of different teaching subjects (i.e. academic knowledge), knowledge of children's rights, knowledge of the ECEC system and regulations, and knowledge of children's hygiene, health, nutrition and safety. Also in addition to the above list, as well as staff's to ability to create high-quality interactions with children and respond to their needs, competency profiles often include interactions with other ECEC staff i.e. teamwork and cooperation. Some countries also highlight an ECEC professional's role within society, for example in terms of promoting certain values. For example in Sweden, ECEC staff are expected to promote respect for human rights, democratic values and the environment.

#### *Prescriptive vs. general approach*

As well as content areas, competencies for ECEC staff also differ in how they are constructed and articulated across countries. One key difference is in how prescriptive competencies are in terms of the tasks and functions that ECEC staff are expected to demonstrate. Some countries, like Belgium, France, Slovenia and the United Kingdom have taken a prescriptive, technical approach. In the United Kingdom

for example, the *Early Years Foundation stage Framework* that sets out the competence requirements of ECEC staff working with children from birth to age five provides indicators that can be used to evaluate the work of ECEC professionals (England Department for Education, 2017<sup>[37]</sup>). In contrast, other countries like Croatia, Italy, Poland and Spain describe more general tasks.

A more prescriptive, task-based approach can be useful when general staff capacity and qualifications are comparatively low (one of the factors behind creating such a prescriptive approach in the United Kingdom was to compensate for the relatively low educational requirements to enter the profession). In general however, being very prescriptive is seen to limit the work of professionals and perceptions of the profession in general (Cameron and Moss, 2007<sup>[38]</sup>).

### ***Developing a more unified approach to initial education for ECEC professionals***

In seeking to develop a more unified, coherent approach to the initial preparation of ECEC professionals, Romania might consider the following the points:

#### *Linking professional competencies and the initial education of ECEC staff*

In most countries with competencies profiles for ECEC staff, there is the expectation that they directly inform the content of initial teacher education. Providers have autonomy to develop course content but are expected to follow national competence requirements. This approach supports national consistency and coherence, while providing some space for innovation and local adaptation. For example, in England (United Kingdom), providers of initial education are required to demonstrate how they meet the requirements set out in professional competencies (University of East London and University of Ghent, 2011<sup>[35]</sup>).

Romania might consider how quality assurance mechanisms for initial education providers of ECEC staff can be used to ensure that programme content matches national competency requirements. As is the case for initial teacher education in the school system, accreditation requirements should require providers to explicitly demonstrate how new ECEC staff will develop the competencies set out in the national competency profiles.

#### *Developing coherence in initial preparation for pre-primary staff (ISCED 02)*

Rather than numerous different pathways to qualifications for pre-primary staff, Romania should consider consolidating the requirements to enter the profession. The country has reportedly developed a new Masters for pre-primary teachers but this is yet to be implemented (Educated Romania, 2018<sup>[4]</sup>). As Romania takes steps to develop a more coherent approach to the initial education of ECEC staff, the following points will be important to consider (the below data refers to pre-school (ISCED 02) staff):

- **Level:** research suggests that pre-primary staff should be required to have a tertiary-level qualification (OECD, 2017<sup>[1]</sup>). A qualification at this level provides new staff with a strong educational and practical foundation to support child development. In line with this finding, most OECD countries and economies (24) require pre-primary staff to have a bachelors or sometimes a master's degree (OECD, 2014<sup>[39]</sup>). The latter also reflects increasing convergence with the requirements for primary teachers, in line with the general trend towards professionalising the ECEC workforce.
- **Duration:** a study of ten countries found that the duration of ECEC staff's pre-service education was strongly associated with children's language scores at age seven (Montie, Xiang Z. and Schweinhart, 2006<sup>[40]</sup>). The quality of ECEC settings also seems to be higher when educators have at least a four-year long university degree (Early et al., 2007<sup>[41]</sup>; Howes, Whitebook and Phillips, 1992<sup>[42]</sup>).

On average across OECD countries, the initial education for pre-primary staff lasts for 3.8 years. However, there is wide variation, from two years for basic certification in Japan to five years in Austria, Chile, France, Iceland and Italy (OECD, 2014<sub>[39]</sub>).

- Content: across OECD countries, the content of initial preparation reflects the competency areas that research highlights to be most important for professionals working at this level. Pedagogical studies and didactics, and educational sciences are therefore the most common areas of study and are mandatory in the vast majority of countries. This is followed by child development studies, which are mandatory in 22 countries and at the discretion of institutions in 9 countries. Academic content is slightly less common, and is only mandatory in 18 countries and at the discretion of institutions in eight OECD countries (OECD, 2014<sub>[39]</sub>).

A key issue beyond content areas is how the learning of student-teachers is organised and structured. Research suggests that instructional approaches where teacher-students are organised in small groups facilitates interactions among students, encourages collective reflection and can provide a useful setting for teacher-students to reflect on what they have learned during the practicum (see below) (University of East London and University of Ghent, 2011<sub>[35]</sub>).

- Practicum: the vast majority of OECD countries include a teaching practicum in the initial preparation of pre-primary teachers (mandatory in 29 countries and at the discretion of institutions in 4 countries) (OECD, 2014<sub>[39]</sub>). The European Commission's proposal for a recommendation on high-quality ECEC also highlights the importance of proving a good balance between theory and practice for new ECEC professionals (European Commission, 2018<sub>[33]</sub>). However, there continues to be wide variations in how countries organise the practicum, which impacts the opportunities that new pre-primary teachers have to put the theoretical content that they have acquired into practice. While the length of the practicum is only one aspect, a very short practicum, such as 20 days in Japan can only provide very limited opportunities for practical learning compared to a much more extended period, such as 300 days in Denmark.

#### *Developing initial preparation for professionals working with children under three (ISCED 01)*

The split in terms of competencies and initial requirements for staff working in *ante* pre-school and pre-school that is present in Romania, is common in many OECD and EU countries. This is especially the case in countries where provision across these two levels is split, rather than integrated (i.e. there is a single curriculum that covers the full ECEC age group) (OECD, 2012<sub>[27]</sub>). One of Romania's objectives is to develop a more integrated approach across ECEC, where all settings regardless of the target age group focus on both care and education (see policy priority 1). To support this approach, the country might consider how the initial preparation of *ante* pre-school staff can be brought into line with the requirements for pre-school staff. Research suggests that integrated systems, where all ECEC practitioners have to meet the same requirements in terms of education and training, supports child development across the duration of ECEC (i.e. all of ISCED 0) and promotes greater staff professionalism (OECD, 2012<sub>[27]</sub>).

It should be noted that there is less international data about the initial preparation of staff that work with children from birth to age three, reflecting significant variations in the initial education of staff working at this level. However, Romania can be guided by the professional and training competencies that many EU countries have already developed for this level and by insights from the OECD *Starting Strong Teaching and Learning International Survey*, which will publish its results in 2019. The latter collected data on early childhood staff and centre leaders from nine countries, four of which (Denmark, Germany, Israel and Norway) also provided information on staff working with children under the age of three (OECD, 2019<sub>[43]</sub>).

### ***Setting standards to enter the ECEC profession***

In order for future pre-primary staff to develop the complex knowledge and skills that are necessary to support children's development, foundational academic and socio-emotional skills, as well as motivation to enter the profession, are important. Setting high standards for entry to initial preparation also plays an important role in raising the status of the profession.

Most OECD countries now set similar standards to enter initial preparation for pre-primary teachers, requiring that pre-primary staff have completed upper secondary education (ISCED 3). Only in two countries – Austria and the Slovak Republic – is it possible to enter with lower initial qualifications (ISCED 2). In most countries, this is the same requirement that aspirant primary teachers must meet and reflects the general convergence in standards and expectations across pre-primary and primary levels. In addition to this requirement, most OECD countries (21) also have some form of selection criteria to enter initial education. Most frequently this is based on a candidate's average marks from school, followed by interviews and competitive examinations (OECD, 2014<sup>[39]</sup>). As it moves towards unifying and professionalising the ECEC workforce, Romania should also consider what requirements should be set for ECEC professionals working at both ISCED 01 and 02.

### ***Establishing on-going professional development for ECEC professionals***

As at other levels in the education system, there are two main types of professional development for ECEC staff. One is job-embedded and takes place in the professionals' workplace. This type might include supervised practices and mentoring, or staff coming together for group training or workshops to share experiences and practices. The second takes place away from a professional's place of work and is provided by external providers like education faculties or training colleges.

Both types of professional development are important. In particular, given the variations in initial preparation of ECEC staff in many countries in general and in Romania in particular, it can provide a critical role to fill in knowledge or skills gaps. Professional development is also important to update teachers' practices, for example, linked to curricula updates or to help them integrate new pedagogical approaches (OECD, 2012<sup>[27]</sup>). ECEC professional development is linked to higher-quality staff skills and greater child well-being and development. These benefits are present, regardless of the educational background of staff (OECD, 2017<sup>[1]</sup>).

In Romania, continuous professional development is mandatory under the Education Law but offers remain limited. To support the shift from a medicalised care model to one that promotes holistic child development and early stimulation, ECEC staff require sufficient training and support, especially for those who enter the profession with training that has nothing to do with child development (World Bank, forthcoming<sup>[17]</sup>). Currently, Romania does not have a structured system for the continuous professional development of staff, which creates variations and inconsistent provision across the country (Educated Romania, 2018<sup>[4]</sup>). As the country takes steps to develop a more coherent and comprehensive approach to professional development for ECEC staff, the following points will be important to consider.

#### *Considering characteristics of effective professional development for ECEC staff*

Research suggests that effective in-service training for ECEC professionals include: active workshops; a curriculum model providing both theory and application; multiple workshop sessions; classroom visits with observations; and feedback and opportunities for teachers to reflect upon learning and shared experiences (Whitebread, Kvalja and O'Conneo, 2015<sup>[10]</sup>). The following section sets out some of the most important characteristics for developing effective professional development for ECEC staff. It also suggests how Romania can integrate them when designing professional development in the future:

- Content targeting staff needs. To create a useful learning experience and support positive outcomes in ECEC settings professional development should closely target staff needs (Mitchell and Cubey, 2003<sup>[44]</sup>).

In Romania in the short term, given the small numbers of ECEC staff - especially those working with children under three - who have received full initial ECEC preparation, an immediate staff need is to fill in the knowledge and skill gaps for staff working at this level. Romania might review its new competencies for ECEC staff and target those that are essential for creating a high-quality ECEC setting. For example, knowledge of child development and pedagogy and the socio-emotional skills to encourage quality interactions with children (see above).

Romania should also ensure that professional development is available when there are changes in the ECEC framework. For example, when the country introduces curricula updates all staff should receive training that educates them about the changes and how it will affect their practice (see policy priority 2). In the longer term, feedback from quality monitoring and staff surveys can be used to better understand staff needs.

- **Specific.** One example of specific training is by focusing on specific pre-academic skills or learning areas. For example, in France, targeted, well-defined and intensive pedagogical training for pre-primary staff has had important effects on children's short-term reading outcomes and specialised workshops have raised language scores (OECD, 2017<sup>[11]</sup>).
- **On-the-job support.** Research suggests that in-service training is only effective when it is accompanied by on-the-job support, such as team meetings, supervision or other forms of coaching and on-the-job support (University of East London and University of Ghent, 2011<sup>[35]</sup>). In particular, staff consultations based on observations of practice and feedback are found to be very effective in helping ECEC staff to develop their practices (OECD, 2012<sup>[27]</sup>).
- **Collaborative:** professional development is found to be more effective when it creates opportunities for professionals across a centre to come together and collaborate (OECD, 2017<sup>[11]</sup>). A simple way that Romania could facilitate staff collaboration is by providing professional development within ECEC centres so that all staff can participate at the same time. Providing some time for collective discussion and reflection on the content, perhaps at the end of a training session, would also help to encourage collaboration. Over the longer term, the country could think about how ECEC centre leaders can be encouraged to create a more collaborative learning culture.
- **Sustained.** ECECs staff need to be able to engage in professional development regularly, over a long period of time (OECD, 2012<sup>[27]</sup>). Some research suggests that professional development needs to be undertaken for at least 20 hours per year in order to positively influence quality (University of East London and University of Ghent, 2011<sup>[35]</sup>). Despite this finding, international data shows that few countries specify a minimum number of hours of professional development for ECEC staff. However, some countries have introduced the same requirements for primary and pre-primary staff, for example, 40 hours in Slovenia and 120 hours over seven years in Hungary. In other countries, ECEC professionals have an entitlement to a set number of hours. For example, this is set at 104 hours for pre-primary teachers in Sweden (OECD, 2017<sup>[11]</sup>).

## Effective implementation and capacity building

Romania's first step will be to develop professional competencies for all ECEC staff. The new competencies should be developed with relevant stakeholders including education and training bodies for ECEC, government ministries and representatives of ECEC staff. In Belgium (Flemish Community) the involvement of ECEC education bodies and ECEC staff reportedly helped to encourage interaction between theoretical knowledge on competencies and the realities of professionals in the field. This interaction also helped to stimulate many of training and education bodies to innovate their programmes (University of East London and University of Ghent, 2011<sup>[35]</sup>). Involving key stakeholders also helps to ensure that they engage with the new competencies, and are more likely to support them once they are introduced.

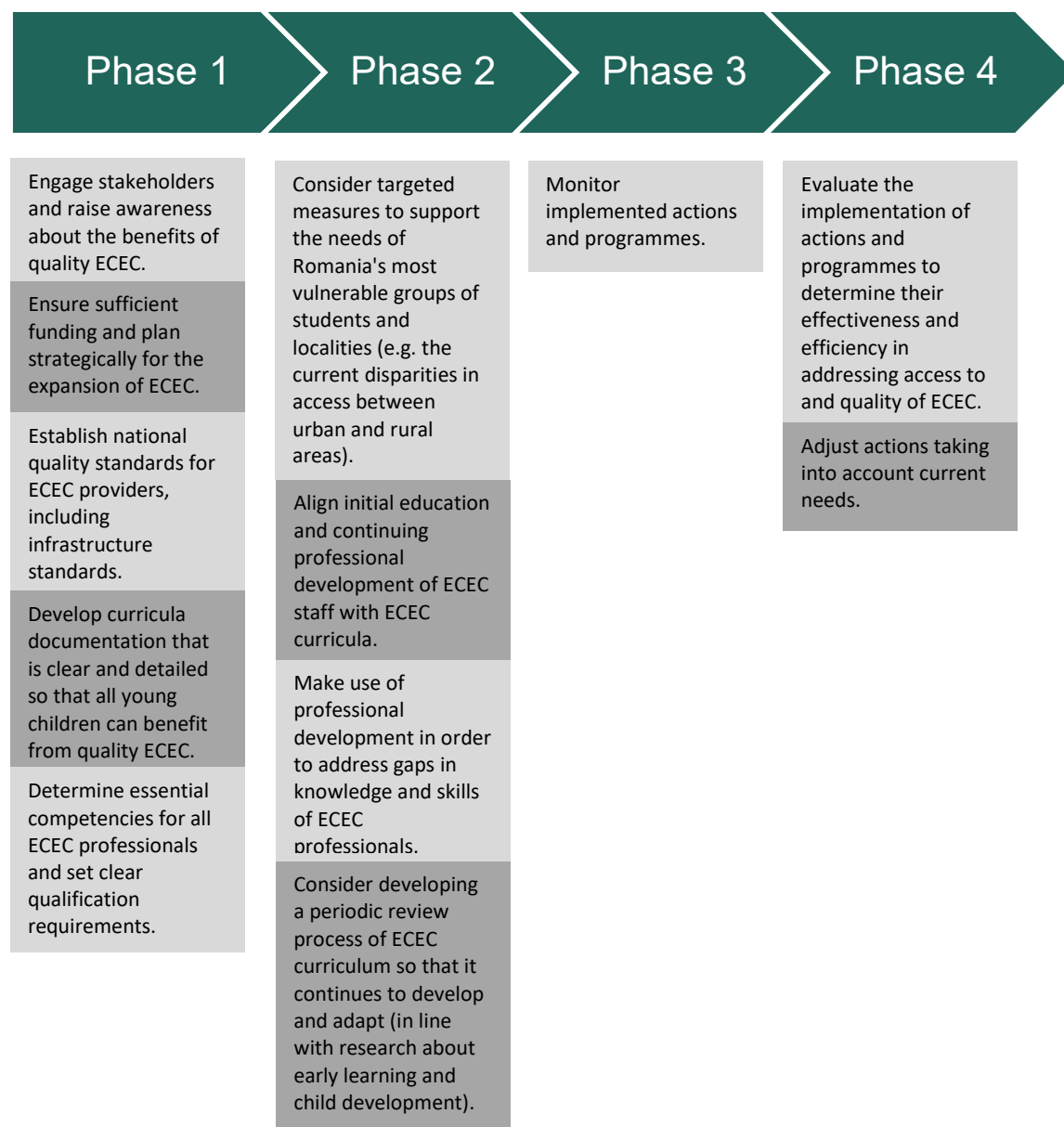


Once developed, the new standards should be used to guide the development of new initial education and professional development programmes. Education and training providers should be explicitly required to demonstrate how their programmes will support ECEC professionals to develop the new competencies. Romania can ensure that the latter occurs by using the new competencies to inform the accreditation of ECEC programmes.

However, establishing new initial education programmes and providing the time for a first generation of new staff to graduate may take up to a decade. Given the country's objective to expand access to ECEC quickly with a limited budget, Romania may need to consider some degree of flexibility around initial qualifications. In the short term, this could mean investing in continuous professional development to address knowledge gaps and perhaps providing existing staff with ways to reach equivalent qualifications as the new initial education programmes will provide in the future. For example, existing ECEC staff might be provided with mentors or coaches and online material to help them follow essential content to obtain recognised qualifications.

### **Sequencing reforms to support early childhood education and care**

As Romania works to expand ECEC coverage, efforts to improve access must be matched with efforts to ensure that provision is of high-quality. This is essential if ECEC is to positively impact children's learning and development. Figure 2 sets out a suggested sequence for introduction of reforms to improve access to modern, high quality ECEC.

**Figure 2. Sequence of reforms to improve access to quality ECEC in Romania**

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