



# CONSOLIDATED RECOMMENDATION REPORT

For the project *“Improving staff working conditions for better quality in early childhood education and care in Austria”*.

**2023**

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## Introduction and Background

The Consolidated Recommendation Report is one of the work results of the project "**Improving staff working conditions for better quality in early childhood education and care in Austria**", which concluded the first phase of the project focusing on evidence generation and consolidation of information that will feed into the framework for the employment conditions of ECEC staff and the related strategy.

As Austria is facing major challenges in the ECEC sector, including a low participation rate of children under three years and a massive shortage of staff, the project focuses on improving the working conditions of ECEC staff in order to make the profession more attractive for ambitious and well-qualified professionals, who will in turn contribute to a better quality of ECEC in Austria. Therefore, the working conditions were investigated in detail in the first phase of the project using various methods: evidence was gathered through (1) a Desk Review of ECEC workforce conditions in Austria, (2) a Report on European Good Practice on strengthening ECEC workforce conditions, and (3) a Sector Analysis of the ECEC workforce situation in Austria using UNICEF's ECEC diagnostic tool, conducted with a multi-stakeholder working group<sup>1</sup> in a series of workshops. The evidence generation phase aimed to gain a general understanding of the relevant criticalities, and to develop a basis in terms of policy and practice-related knowledge in order to formulate (and ideally implement) recommendations.

The purpose of this report is to create a bridge between the information gathering phase and the strategy development phase, in particular:

1. to produce a synthesis of the findings obtained in phase 1 of the project;
2. to present a list of consolidated recommendations based on the analyses carried out in phase 1;
3. to develop recommendations for the next phase of the strategy development process, which will focus on the elaboration of a model framework for quality and working conditions for ECEC staff. This will then be followed by the drafting of a well-designed Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) Framework, which will constitute the technical and logistical underpinning of the strategy and its national action plan.

The Desk Review and Sector Analysis aimed to identify relevant challenges in the Austrian ECEC system that impact employees as well as staff policy and practice, whereas the comparative analysis served as a complement to these studies to identify international good practices in the areas that are currently challenging in Austria. Figure 1 portrays the specificities of each document developed during the evidence generation phase of the TSI project, while also showing the correlation and complementarity between all documents. These three reports, whose key findings will be highlighted in the present document will influence the strategy development phase indirectly through this report, as well as directly as they provide quantitative, qualitative and conceptual support for the solutions and strategies to be developed. Another important factor in the evidence generation phase is the collaboration and synergies in the working group that were established in phase 1 of the project.

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<sup>1</sup> As part of the TSI project, a working group was established which was entrusted by the Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research to serve as the main advisory body for the Sector Analysis and the subsequent elaboration of the quality framework and strategy development. The working group included representatives of the respective ECEC departments of the Länder, science and research institutions, social partners and other partners, the Federal Chancellery, ECEC teachers, advocacy groups, representatives of the Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research, UNICEF and the European Commission, as well as the Charlotte Bühler Institute.

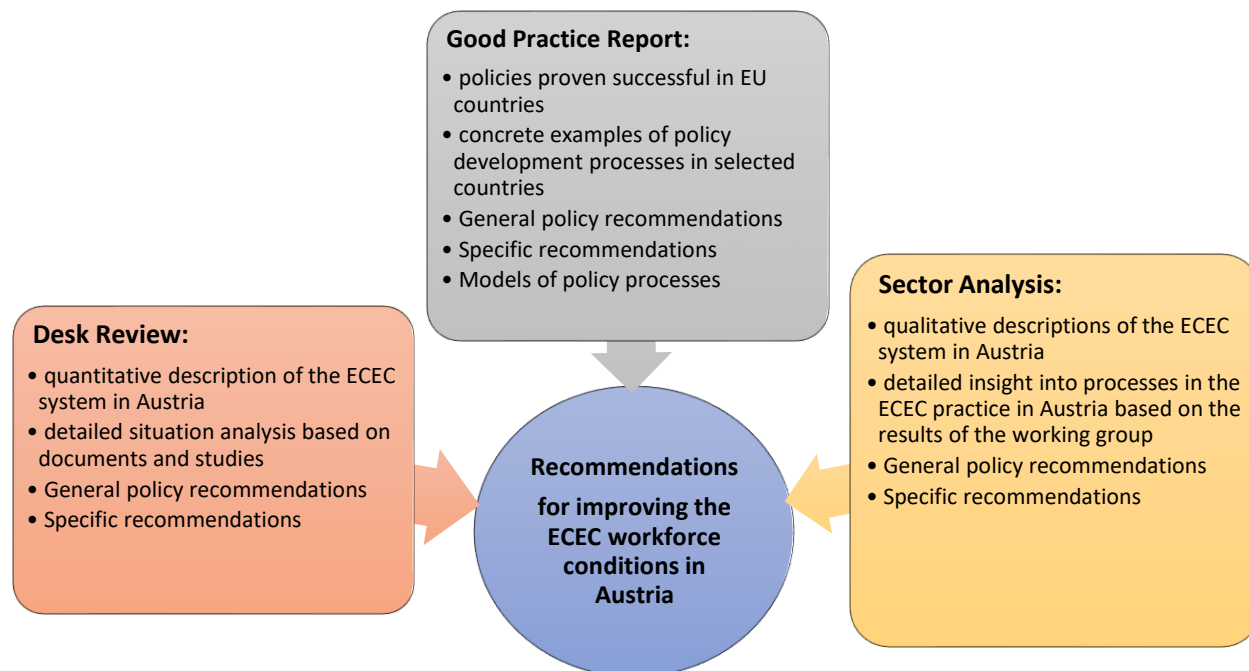


Figure 1. Specific aspects of the three source documents for the evidence generation phase of the TSI project.

## Summary of Challenges and Recommendations

This report will incorporate all recommendations from each of the three documents mentioned. The recommendations will be organised according to the Staff Value Proposition (SVP) model. The SVP model is designed to serve as the main guide for the upcoming policy process, in particular for the future quality framework and staff working conditions. It is described in more detail in the next section.

### Staff Value Proposition (SVP)

The *Staff Value Proposition (SVP)*, also known as the *Employee Value Proposition (EVP)*, was derived from the broader concept of the value proposition in marketing. In marketing, value proposition refers to the unique combination of benefits, advantages and value that a product or service offers to its target customers<sup>2</sup>. It is the promise or proposition that sets a product or service apart from competitors and demonstrates why customers should choose it.

When it comes to ECEC, *Staff Value Proposition* refers to the unique combination of benefits, opportunities, fulfilment and support that educational institutions/education employers offer to their staff members in exchange for their skills, expertise and dedication<sup>3</sup>. In the education sector, the staff value proposition is designed to attract and retain talented educators by providing competitive compensation, professional development opportunities, a supportive work environment, recognition for their

<sup>2</sup> Pawar, A., & Charak, K. (2015). Essentials of Employee Value Proposition for operating talent management as a business strategy. *International Journal of Research in Economics and Social Sciences*, 5(12), 168-181.

<sup>3</sup> Raj, A. B. (2020). Impact of employee value proposition on employees' intention to stay: moderating role of psychological contract and social identity. *South Asian Journal of Business Studies*, 10(2), 203-226.

contributions, work-life balance, opportunities for growth and advancement, and a sense of purpose and fulfilment<sup>4</sup>. Having an SVP has been found to contribute to the retention of staff and increased workforce satisfaction.

The SVP model integrates the EU ECEC Quality Framework and the UNICEF Build to Last Framework with models used in other sectors, including economics, to attract, retain and develop highly qualified staff. Developed by Damborsky<sup>5</sup> as part of the Report on European Good Practices, produced as part of the TSI project, the SVP model draws in part on the elaboration of models and reflections on Employee Value Propositions (e.g. by Pawar and Charak<sup>6</sup> or Mortensen and Edmundson<sup>7</sup>), but has been adapted to fit the ECEC context. Since improving the staff working conditions for better quality in early childhood education and care is at the core of the TSI project, it seems an appropriate and pragmatic approach to focus on policy areas that play a crucial role in attracting, retaining and developing ECEC staff, without losing sight of children's development and well-being. The same model is used as a framework to shape the quality and staff working conditions.

The model consists of seven elements and describes the quality of staff in a holistic way.

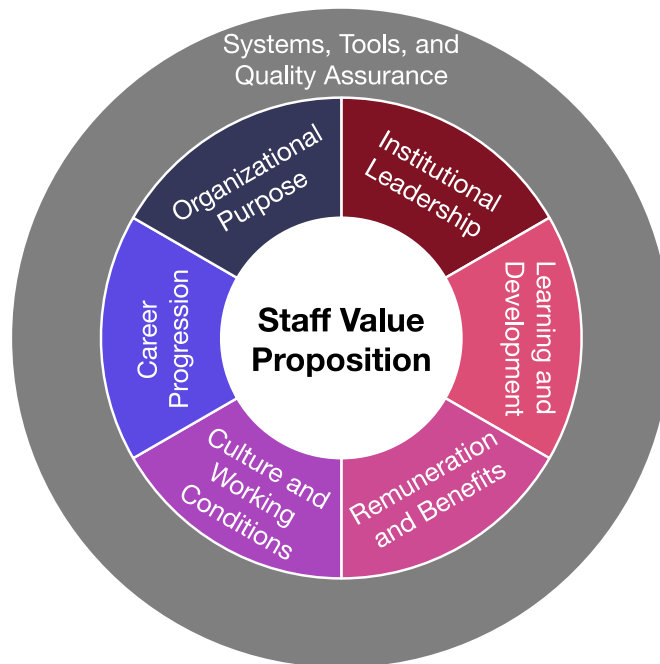


Figure 1. Staff Value Proposition (SVP); Source: Report on European Good Practice on strengthening ECEC workforce conditions

<sup>4</sup> Saurombe, M., Barkhuizen, N., & Schutte, N. (2017). Management perspectives on a talent value proposition for academic staff in a South African Higher Education Institution. *READINGS BOOK*, 886.

<sup>5</sup> Damborsky, M. (2023). *Report on European Good Practice on strengthening ECEC workforce conditions*

<sup>6</sup> Pawar, A., & Charak, K. S. (2014). *A Study and Review of Employee Value Proposition: A Tool of Human Resource Management*.

<sup>7</sup> Mortensen, M., & Edmondson, A. C. (2023). Rethink Your Employee Value Proposition: Offer Your People More Than Just Flexibility. *Harvard Business Review* 101(1), 45-49.

The outer ring, *Systems, Tools, and Quality Assurance* defines central-level systems, policies and procedures, which affect the functioning and attractiveness of the sector to staff, as a whole, and as such sets the limits for the other six elements of the SVP Framework. It also addresses quality standards, monitoring policy adherence and data-policy loops. The other six elements of the model each focus on a critical area. *Institutional Leadership* focuses on the institution's management style, and the ways that leadership provides oversight of staff performance, growth, and overall recruitment strategy, and an inspiring vision and mission for all staff. *Learning and Development* focuses on requirements for pre-service education, training and qualifications, as well as characteristics of continuous professional development. *Remuneration and Benefits* sets the benchmarks for overall salary and benefits and looks into comparisons with other sectors as well as links between performance and reward. The element *Culture and Working Conditions* focuses on the overall working experience of staff, and highlights social and physical working conditions (such as staff-child ratio, group size, working hours) and looks into other aspects and factors influencing staff wellbeing and affecting performance. *Career Progression* focuses on discerning career pathways and promotion opportunities, while *Organizational Purpose* zooms out and links staff to the purpose of the sector and the ECEC institution, creating a sense of belonging and purpose.

The recommendations that emerged from the three analytical studies are presented in the SVP model below.

## Recommendations



### Recommendations on Systems, Tools and Quality Assurance

In order to ensure well-functioning and supportive central-level systems, policies and procedures, which affect the functioning and attractiveness of the entire ECEC sector, a number of essential changes are needed:

- There is a need for a comprehensive ECEC workforce policy, including working conditions, remuneration, training requirements, career progression, learning and development, available support systems for staff and a comprehensive quality assurance system. In order for such a policy to be developed and implemented in the context of a fragmented system between federal provinces and between diverse providers, several prerequisites and synergies will need to be ensured:
  - developing research capacity in areas where ECEC workforce needs to be supported;
  - stakeholder representation (with a particular focus on ECEC teachers, parents/guardians/families and providers) and consensus building processes need to be strengthened;
  - coordination across and between countries and providers needs to be improved;
  - data collection and monitoring capacities and information processing channels need to be set up.

- A fully-fledged quality assurance system needs to be built, which encompasses:
  - mutually agreeable and empirically anchored quality indicators for both structural and process quality that will be used throughout the country
  - instruments that can be used as self-evaluation tools and as a tool to generate province and nation-wide evidence
  - data collection and reporting procedures, such as regular reports on the quality of ECEC at federal level and appropriate mechanisms to feed the results into further quality development

This quality assurance system needs institutional support, possibly through the creation of a new coordination structure, as well as further development of the capacity of staff involved in quality assurance and reporting.
- To support the policy development, implementation and monitoring process, it will be useful for Austria to participate in international comparative studies such as the International Early Learning and Child Well-being Study<sup>8</sup> or TALIS<sup>9</sup> for ECEC.



### Recommendations on Institutional Leadership

Institutional leadership, including the responsibility to select and retain staff, to ensure that they receive feedback, help and development opportunities, and to care for their well-being, is a key factor for successful implementation. Existing ECEC leadership models in Austria should be reviewed and restructured where necessary. A diverse, participative and effective leadership structure should be created. This concerns several areas, so various steps will be necessary for satisfactory results. The most important steps are as follows:

- Developing models of distributed and shared leadership, which:
  - differentiate the existing leadership functions and can serve as career steps for ECEC teachers
  - reduce the current heavy burden on leaders
- Supporting leadership development through nationwide accepted and accredited higher education programmes, induction and targeted CPD for a diversity of roles, including pedagogical supervision, pedagogical

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.oecd.org/education/school/the-international-early-learning-and-child-well-being-study-the-study.htm>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.oecd.org/education/school/oecd-starting-strong-teaching-and-learning-international-survey.htm>



advice, quality assurance, cooperation with community, partnership with parents, guardians and families, etc.

- Ensuring appropriate remuneration for leaders
- Setting step-by-step targets for the development of the leaders of ECEC institutions



### Recommendations on Learning and Development

The current required qualifications of the workforce in Austria do not necessarily match contemporary expectations for high-quality ECEC that provides children with rich learning opportunities in key developmental areas, including cognitive, emotional and affective development. According to the latest research, high quality ECEC is essential for children's well-being and should be provided to all children, regardless of their health conditions, social, ethnic and linguistic background. In order to improve the qualifications and competences of staff, medium and long-term priorities must be set - not only because educational processes take a lot of time, but also because comprehensive changes are necessary. The most important steps on this path are as follows:

- Developing a competency framework of skills, knowledge and values for ECEC staff and progressively align all initial education, further education, CPD and career development criteria to this competency framework
- Setting targets for higher qualifications of workforce in ECEC in a staged way:
  - percentage of ECEC teachers with Bachelor's/Master's degrees in ECEC institutions
  - increase in the percentage of assistants with ISCED-level 3
- Creating sufficient and well-structured opportunities for ECEC staff to acquire higher qualifications while on the job, combining work and study
- Creating institutional links between Training Institutes for Early Childhood Education (BAfEP) and the universities in order to improve the curricula of the BAfEP and the quality of their teachers on the one hand and to use the experiences of the BAfEP in organizing teacher-student practice at the universities on the other hand
- Supporting staff development at higher education level, including new doctorates and professorships



- Reviewing and improving the qualifications of teachers and other ECEC staff
- Reviewing the CPD provision, including funding, participation and selection criteria, and develop the following new mechanisms:
  - tracking attendance
  - conducting regular needs assessment and designing CPD provision according to the needs of the ECEC staff
  - reflecting on the implementation of new skills and knowledge in the practice
  - evaluating effectiveness and impact
  - establishing a feedback mechanism for evidence-based improvement of the CPD system
  - linking CPD with opportunities for career progression
  - focusing on internal and peer learning opportunities and linking them to the development of ECEC institutions
- Developing mentoring systems for student practice in ECEC institutions, for induction of novice teachers and as support for reflexive practice of ECEC staff, including designing and implementing training for prospective mentors



### Recommendations on Remuneration and Benefits

Financing of the sector is below average compared to other EU countries, which contributes significantly to the difficult working conditions. The financial constraints are reflected, for example, in group sizes, comparatively low salaries, training requirements and levels, lack of career advancement benefits, and lack of supportive measures such as mentoring and coaching. These factors weaken the attractiveness of the profession, which contributes to staff attrition and exemplifies shortages. Action in this area requires extensive negotiation between representatives of different funding sources, which can take some time. However:

- Financing for ECEC needs to be increased to enable salary increases, additional benefits for staff career progression and higher qualifications, as well as to ensure additional support measures that are lacking in the system. This can be realised through:
  - the progressive setting of periodic or annual targets at federal, provincial and municipal level

- exploring additional innovative funding opportunities (e.g. by companies for the children of their employees)

and include:

- a detailed analysis of financial flows
- benchmarks for periodic salary increases
- targets for staff expansion, with costing scenarios
- targets for financing support services
- targets for financial benefits for career advancement



### Recommendations on Culture and Working Conditions

All the analytical reports as well as the experts' opinions and views highlight the challenging working conditions of ECEC staff. These conditions affect well-being, loyalty, integrity and many other "soft" performance factors of staff and leaders. This limits the quality of interactions between ECEC teachers and children and between colleagues, which in turn jeopardises the quality of education and development in all aspects of ECEC institutions, ultimately calling into question the potential benefits of the whole sector. Therefore, the aim of this project is to improve the staff working conditions (and thus also the conditions for the children) in ECEC institutions.

- Setting annual targets and minimum standards for working conditions:
  - decrease group sizes
  - improve the staff-child ratio
  - structure working hours attuned to reflective practice of staff, i.e. allow time for planning and reflection, child-free hours, etc.
- Redesigning the overall working experience and working conditions in the sector (career paths, feedback, support, administrative tasks, teamwork, mentoring of novice staff and of practicing students, etc.) in a way that takes into account and promotes the development and well-being of children
- Strengthening and expanding the nationwide data collection system. Data should be easily retrievable, transparent and connected to regular monitoring.
- Strengthening functional and independent mechanisms for reporting, processing and resolving complaints from both staff and parents/guardians/families.



### Recommendations on Career Progression

Career progression possibilities are an important incentive to attract and retain ambitious and striving staff interested in developing their competences and performing well. Currently, they are not shown clearly enough in Austria. At the moment, the career path of ECEC teachers mostly leads only to the management of an institution, in some cases also away from practice, towards professional supervision and inspection or teacher education. In addition, there are no nationwide remuneration or other benefits for excellence and CPD. To mitigate this lack, the federal provinces and individual providers grant different, sometimes ad hoc, benefits without a clear career progression scheme. As this makes working in ECEC less attractive and contributes to staff attrition, the introduction of a career advancement scheme is recommended. The steps should include:

- Defining clear career paths and equally accessible development and promotion opportunities, which in turn define the competitiveness of the sector or institution
- Negotiating remuneration and other benefits associated with career advancement
- Defining how the competences can be capitalized upon within the wider sector (during inspections, in providing CPD, etc.)



### Recommendations on Organizational Purpose

The public perception of ECEC is often still shaped by traditional views and does not reflect how important it is as a basis for the cognitive, emotional and social development of all children. ECEC is often seen only as a childcare service for working parents/caregivers. Often the focus is on teaching school-preparatory skills and emphasising the importance of ECEC to ensure a good entry into school, without taking into account the great extent of development that precedes the last year of preschool. Accordingly, the role of parents/guardians/families in ECEC as partners is not understood to its full potential. Although they are involved in communications about the child, they are not involved in the assessment of the institution or in decision-making processes about necessary modifications.

It will be a long process to change the public attitude regarding the importance of ECEC, and a more open partnership with parents/guardians/families and parents' associations will be needed along the way.

The recommendations already mentioned (especially better salaries, working conditions and career opportunities) will also help to make the professional field more attractive and the purpose and importance of the ECEC sector more visible.

In addition, stronger networking should also be created within the institutions as well as between the different areas of the sector. Therefore, the following is recommended:

- Launching an information and communication campaign to better understand the role and benefits of ECEC in the society and to improve the public perception of those working in this field.
- Establishing cooperation with local communities as well as with cultural, art and musical events
- Reviewing and strengthening the partnership with parents/guardians/families
- Regularly assessing the attitude of parents/guardians/families towards ECEC
- Increasing teamwork and peer learning both within the institution and with other institutions

## Moving from recommendations to action

Formulating recommendations is only a first step in a process, and the path from recommendations to action is a long and complex one. Important milestones, which are also targeted by the TSI project, are the development of a Framework for ECEC Staff Quality and Conditions, in which the recommendations are transformed into statements describing the desired future system, followed by the development of a Monitoring and Evaluation Framework to observe policy adherence and implementation, and a strategy describing the concrete steps, responsible persons, time frame and success indicators, combined with a national action plan to implement the changes.

Although this may seem like a straightforward approach, social change is not a linear process, even if it is limited to just one sector. Planning and implementing change in ECEC always requires the involvement of many representatives with different perspectives, and the process is always a step-by-step endeavour. Inevitably, an important part of strategy development involves consideration of alternative scenarios, projections of possible positive and negative impacts of educational change, and analyses of the impact of any old and any new barrier that may arise. This complex process can be supported by the use of different tools. Analytical or strategic planning tools, such as SWOT analysis, scenario planning or gap planning, can be helpful and used in subsequent processes during, after and beyond the present report.

Due to the depth and breadth of the challenges identified by the three analytical studies and the numerous complex recommendations for change, an exciting, probably also exhausting, but satisfying process of

designing the necessary changes will follow, which will benefit all ECEC staff in Austria and thus also all children from the first to the sixth year of life. The TSI project has chosen a participatory, open-ended, multi-perspective and inclusive approach to this process, which will certainly help to achieve this goal.