



CONSOLIDATED PRELIMINARY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS REPORT

For the project

Supporting the expansion and strategic
development of Early Childhood
Education and Care in Cyprus

2024

This Project was funded by the European Union via the Recovery and Resilience Fund. It was implemented by UNICEF in cooperation with the European Commission through the Technical Support Instrument.



Republic of Cyprus
DEPUTY MINISTRY OF
SOCIAL WELFARE, SOCIAL
WELFARE SERVICES

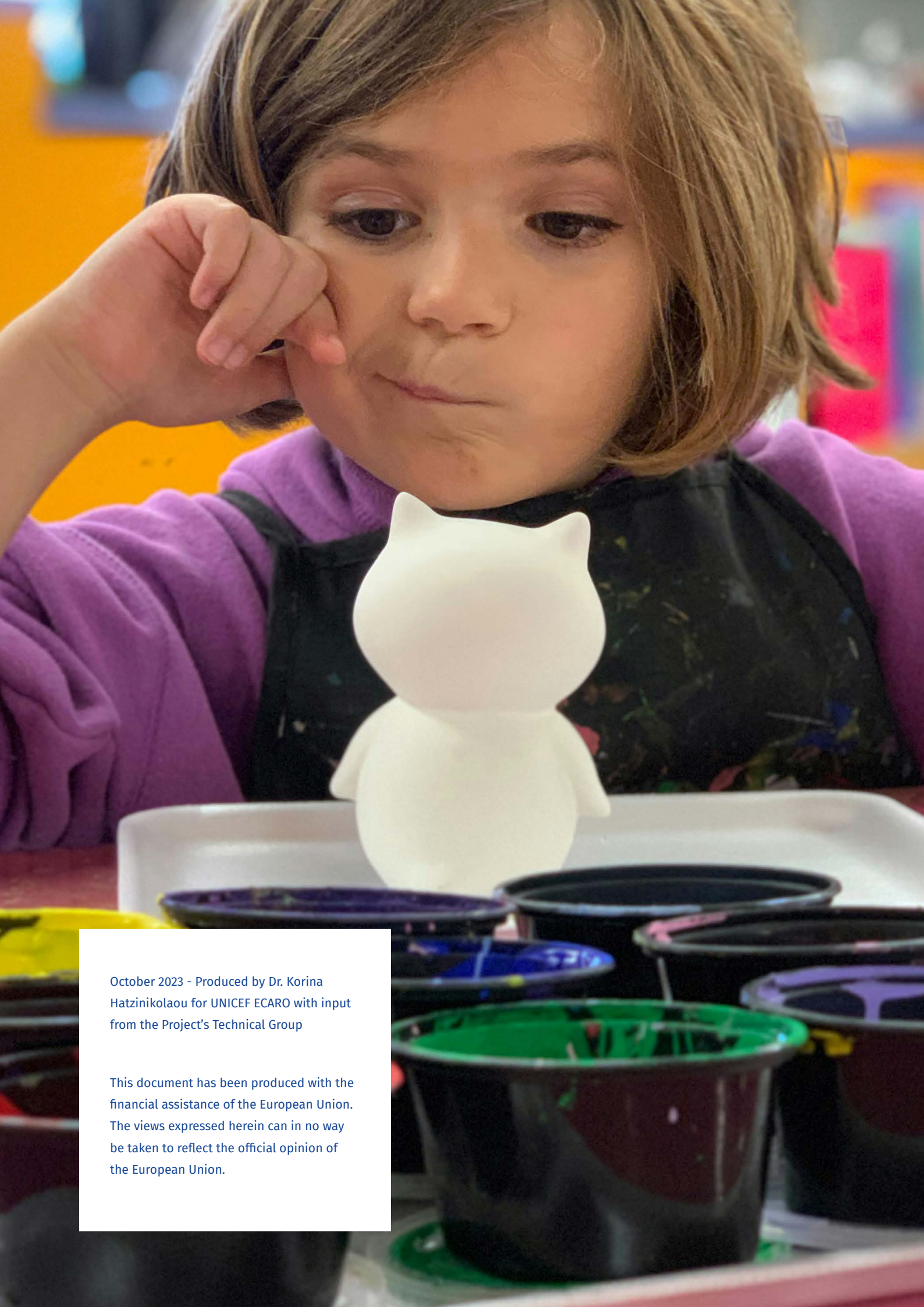


Republic of Cyprus
MINISTRY OF EDUCATION,
SPORT AND YOUTH



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Cyprus tomorrow
RECOVERY AND RESILIENCE PLAN



October 2023 - Produced by Dr. Korina Hatzinikolaou for UNICEF ECARO with input from the Project's Technical Group

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1. Introduction and background

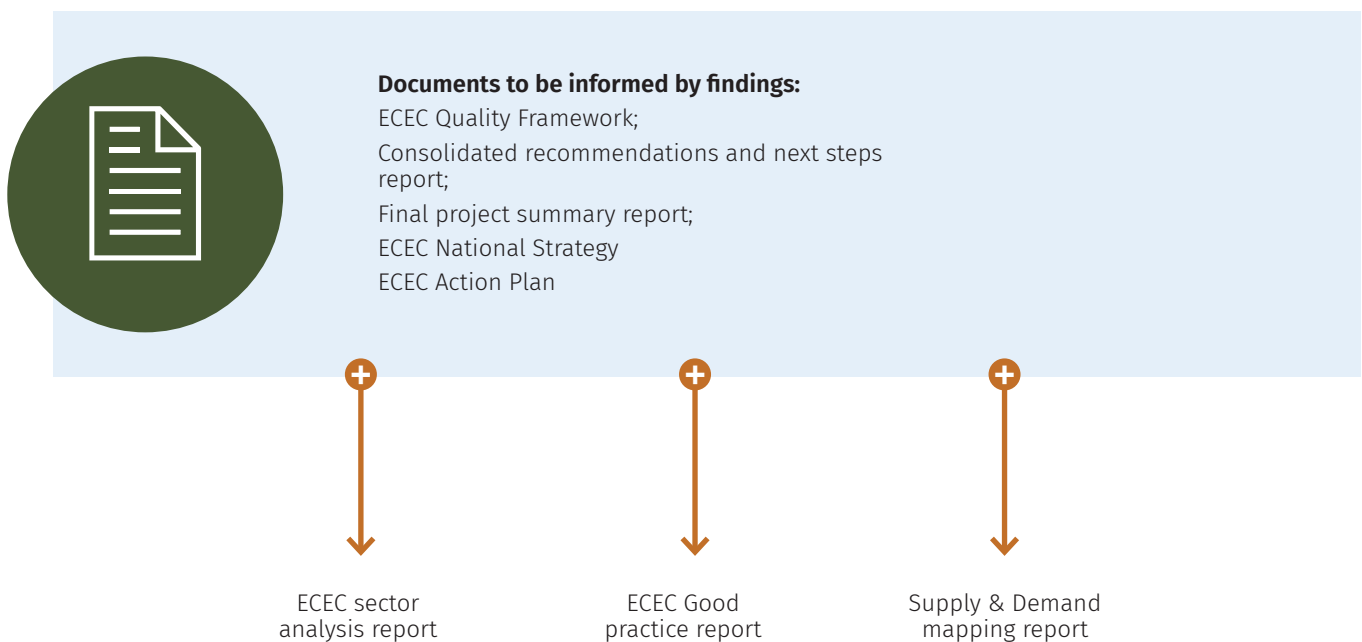
This report has been produced in the context of a two-year project “Supporting the Expansion and Strategic Development of Early Childhood Education and Care in Cyprus” which is funded by the European Union via the Recovery and Resilience Fund, and implemented by UNICEF, in cooperation with the European Commission, through the Technical Support Instrument.

The project is based on a request from the Cypriot authorities and led by Deputy Ministry of Social Welfare (Social Welfare Services - DMSW/SWS) and the Ministry of Education, Sport and Youth (MOESY).

The report (Output 8) summarizes and consolidates the findings from the evidence generation phase of the project (Outcome 1), to support the development of a National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in Cyprus (Outcome 2), and inform the development of the first National Strategy on ECEC, and an accompanying Action Plan (Outcome 3), to be adopted by the Cypriot authorities by the end of 2024.

During the evidence generation phase, the following reports were produced: a) a Mapping of Supply and Demand in the ECEC sector in Cyprus, which gathered data from providers of ECEC, relevant stakeholders and parents/guardians (Output 5); b) a report on European good practice, which examined comparable European ECEC systems and good practice with transferability potentials for Cyprus in relation to ECEC quality and quality frameworks (Output 6); and c) a report on the analysis of the ECEC sector in Cyprus carried out by a Working Group of experts and stakeholders, holding different professional positions in the ECEC sector (Output 7).

Figure 1. Sources of the consolidated findings report and documents that will be informed by the report's findings.



This Project aims to support Cyprus in raising the quality, affordability, accessibility, and inclusiveness of ECEC, by guiding investments and reforms in the sector as outlined in the national RRP for 2021-2026. The specific objectives of the project will be achieved through the following outcomes:

1.

Outcome 1:

The Cypriot authorities have gained extensive knowledge of the current status of the ECEC sector through: 1) a mapping of existing services including supply and demand 2) a comprehensive analysis of status of the ECEC sub-sector, and 3) analysis of good practice from EU Member States/other European countries, and a set of recommendations, which enables them to conduct the relevant investments and reforms outlined in the national Recovery and Resilience Plan;

2.

Outcome 2:

Cyprus adopts a National Quality Framework for ECEC, together with a set of related indicators reflecting the data collected and quality needs across the split system, which have been created jointly with all relevant authorities and stakeholders and validated by the DMSW/SWS and by the MOESY;

3.

Outcome 3:

The Cypriot authorities adopt a comprehensive National Strategy for ECEC and accompanying Action Plan, based on recommendations developed with the help of the mapping, sub-sector analysis and European Good Practice and the Quality Framework development process.

The process of strengthening the ECEC sector in Cyprus was inspired and guided by the European ECEC Quality Framework presented by the European Commission in 2019¹. The European ECEC Quality Framework underlines five major areas of importance when Member States intend to strengthen their ECEC systems: Access; Staff; Curriculum; Evaluation and Monitoring; and Governance and Funding. Thus, the current report and the presentation of the consolidated findings produced during the evidence generation phase of the project are organized around these five ECEC priority areas.

¹ Council of the European Union (2019). Council Recommendation of 22 May 2019 on High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems. ST/9014/2019/INIT. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32019H0605%2801%29&qid=1627470989089>

2. Organisation of the consolidated findings' presentation

The presentation of the consolidated findings is organized around the five ECEC priority areas that make up the EU Quality Framework; namely, Access; Staff; Curriculum; Evaluation and Monitoring; and Governance and Funding. Thus, key findings are presented for each of these ECEC areas.

Figure 2. *The EU ECEC Quality Framework*



Each key finding includes a brief description of an ECEC challenge identified during the evidence generation phase of the project, which is accompanied by suggested actions to address the challenge. In addition, for each key finding, the source(s) for the identified challenge and the suggested actions is/are also indicated.

3. Consolidated findings per ECEC priority area

The five ECEC priority areas for further development and support that were indicated by the EU Quality Framework are: Access; Staff; Curriculum; Evaluation and Monitoring; and Governance and Funding.

3.1 Governance and Funding

According to the EU Education Ministers (2019)², “governance and funding are crucial to enable early childhood education and care provision to play its role in the personal development and learning of children and in reducing the attainment gap and fostering social cohesion. Quality results from comprehensive and coherent public policies that link early childhood education and care to other services concerned with the welfare of young children and their families” (p. c189/13). In addition, UNICEF (2020)³ has specified four main goals to be targeted by countries that intend to strengthen ECEC planning and governance, including the allocation of funding to the ECEC sector: a) development of an evidence-based and equitable plan for the delivery of quality ECEC services, b) identification of budget needs and financing mechanisms, c) establishment of clear governance and accountability structures for the implementation of the ECEC plan, and d) establishment of monitoring mechanisms to accompany the plan’s implementation.

Key finding 1:

Need for coordinated governance among the mandated Ministries, and a whole-of-system approach towards early childhood education and care.

Institutional leadership and effective governance are paramount for strengthening the ECEC sector. In what concerns Cyprus, the ECEC sector analysis indicated that there is a need for a National whole-of-system approach towards ECEC and a single comprehensive National Strategy for the whole ECEC sector. Moreover, the report on European Good Practice found that either a unified system, or a well-coordinated governance system is paramount for the development of high-quality ECEC services provision. Thus, Cyprus could either move towards a unified ECEC system or, considering the split system of governing ECEC in Cyprus with two competent national authorities (MOESY and DMSW/SWS) being involved, establish institutionalized forms of effective coordination and collaboration, as well as mechanisms to monitor the implementation of reforms, to gather systematically supply and demand data, and to support the development of policy making and budgeting. Furthermore, all sources underlined the need for increased funding as a condition for successful reforms and developments of the ECEC sector.

Suggested Actions:

- Adopt a long-term systemic approach for ECEC in Cyprus, through the development of a single and comprehensive National Strategy for the whole spectrum of ECEC (zero to six years old), enshrined in legislation and an officially recognized Quality Framework adequately funded to support its implementation.
- Establish institutionalized forms of effective coordination and collaboration between the competent National Authorities (MOESY and DMSW/SWS), which include common frameworks, common curricula or pedagogical activities, common data collection mechanisms and systems.

² Council of the European Union (2019). Council Recommendation of 22 May 2019 on High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems. ST/9014/2019/INIT.

³ United Nations Children’s Fund (February 2020). Build to Last: A framework in support of universal quality pre-primary education. New York: UNICEF.

- Review policies, procedures and minimum standards for the registration and operation, including inspections of ECEC settings (e.g., public, community, private) and consider aligning them for the whole ECEC sector, including home-based services.
- Increase funding for coordination, monitoring, evaluation, workforce development, accessibility, and inclusion in ECEC settings.
- Expand the collaboration between the ECEC sector, the Ministry of Health and other relevant State bodies, to support all children's healthy development and promote early identification of developmental problems and early intervention.

3.2 Access

The European ECEC Quality Framework (2019)⁴ underlines that “access to quality early childhood education and care services for all children contributes to their healthy development and educational success, helps reducing social inequalities and narrows the competence gap between children with different socioeconomic backgrounds. Equitable access is also essential to ensure that parents, especially women, have flexibility to (re)integrate in the labour market” (p. c189/11).

Key finding 2:

Need to increase access to early childhood education and care through geographically well-distributed, sufficient in numbers and well-resourced services.

The research on supply and demand identified geographical areas that need more ECEC services and settings in order to ensure sufficient places to ECEC settings for all children. Specifically, the research showed that the distribution of ECEC services does not fully respond to the local demands and changing demographics, and that there are not sufficient ECEC services to cover the needs of children, especially in what concerns the ages from zero to three years old. Special attention is needed to the urban areas which have seen an increase in inward migration from rural areas, as well as to the remote rural areas where small number of children would impact profitability of ECEC services. In addition, it is necessary to ensure that ECEC settings and services appropriately respond to the needs of children with distinct educational needs. Although this key finding is closely related to Access, it has been also included in the Governance and Funding area (see 3.1), as it is strongly depended upon the central planning in what concerns the establishment of new ECEC settings, as well as on increased funding for the development of the ECEC sector.

Suggested Actions:

- Establish ECEC settings in areas of high demand and low supply, especially for children from zero to three years of age.
- Ensure that all ECEC settings have appropriate physical space, materials and equipment, and human resources to provide high-quality ECEC services, including to children with special educational needs and children with migrant biography.

⁴ Council of the European Union (2019). Council Recommendation of 22 May 2019 on High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems. ST/9014/2019/INIT. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32019H0605%2801%29&qid=1627470989089>

Key finding 3:

Need to increase accessibility and affordability of early childhood education and care for vulnerable groups of children, especially below 3 years of age.

The research on supply and demand showed that ECEC services for children from zero to three years are limited and not always affordable for families of low socioeconomic status or disadvantaged families; however, in June 2023 the Childcare Services Grant Scheme was expanded to cover 10.500 children from zero to four years. The same report demonstrated that only 16% of the children below four years of age attending ECEC are two years or younger. Accordingly, only half of the ECEC settings in Cyprus offer services for this age group. In addition, the research on supply and demand carried out in the context of the present project found that from the ECEC settings attending children from 1 to 4.8/12 years old which participated in the research, only 15% provide services to children with special educational needs (SEND), 2,1% to children with disabilities, and 11,77% to children with migrant background. The report on European good practice showed that system-level initiatives which support the participation of vulnerable groups in ECEC through financial measures are generally successful.

Suggested Actions:

- Ensure that more ECEC settings provide services for the age group 0 to 2 years.
- Expand the Childcare Services Grant Scheme to support children from four years to four years and eight months.
- Subsidize the employment of school assistants for children with SEND enrolled in private ECEC settings.
- Provide incentives to ECEC providers expand their operating hours, to offer services during holiday season, including summer holidays.
- Expand existing measures of the pre-primary education system to support the education of children with migrant and refugee background, including the DRA.S.E. programme and the development of a curriculum for teaching Greek as a second language.
- Intensify efforts for promoting intercultural communication and dialogue between local and migrant children and families.

3.3 Curriculum

The Council of the European Union (2019)⁵ has pointed out that the ECEC “curriculum is a powerful tool to improve well-being, development and learning of children. A broad pedagogical framework sets out the principles for sustaining children's development and learning through educational and care practices that meet children's interests, needs and potentialities” (p. c189/12). Similarly, UNICEF (2020)⁶ has outlined three key goals in reference to the development of ECEC curricula: a) provide a clear definition for a context-appropriate early learning (0 to 6 years) curriculum framework and develop its content; b) disseminate the curriculum widely and ensure its implementation; c) review regularly the curriculum's content and the curriculum's implementation and use.

5 Council of the European Union (2019). Council Recommendation of 22 May 2019 on High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems. ST/9014/2019/INIT. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32019H0605%2801%29&qid=1627470989089>

6 United Nations Children's Fund (February 2020). Build to Last: A framework in support of universal quality pre-primary education. New York: UNICEF.



Key finding 4:

Need for a unified pedagogical framework for the whole sector of early childhood education and care (0-6 years)

All evidence gathered through the project pointed to the lack of a common pedagogical framework for the whole ECEC sector (zero to six years). The lack of a common pedagogical framework prevents the development of a whole-system approach towards ECEC, creates barriers to governance and policy-making, and puts limitations on cohesion and continuity of ECEC policies produced by the two competent national authorities (MOESY and DMSW/SWS). It was also noted that the successful implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of a common pedagogical framework for the whole ECEC sector may require re-distribution of roles among the two competent authorities.

Suggested Actions:

- Develop a unified pedagogical framework for the whole ECEC sector (zero to six years)
- Establish a mechanism for the development, monitoring, evaluation, and revision of the common ECEC pedagogical framework.
- Institutionalize regular trainings on the pedagogical framework across the ECEC sector.

Key finding 5:

Need to develop pedagogical guidelines/curriculum for children from 0 to 3 years.

Although there is a curriculum for children from three to six years of age attending ECEC settings registered and inspected by the MOESY, the ECEC sector analysis noted the lack of pedagogical guidelines/curriculum for children from zero to three years of age, and children from three to four years and eight months of age who attend nurseries registered and inspected by the SWS of the DMSW; this lack hinders the promotion of early development, learning and care, and creates barriers to cohesion and continuity of ECEC approaches, pedagogical practices and contents among nurseries and kindergartens. The same research exercise found that there is a need to enhance and widely disseminate pedagogical approaches that support the development and learning of children with distinct needs and characteristics, such as children with SEND, children with disabilities, bilingual children, children with migrant background, among others. In addition, the ECEC sector analysis and the good practice report found that the coordination between the two mandated authorities is important in what concerns the ECEC curricula (e.g., to facilitate transitions); the expansion of training on the implementation of ECEC curricula, particularly for staff in the private sector and, generally, staff working with children from zero to three years of age. In addition, it was noted that there is not specialized university or other professional training in the provision of ECEC for children from zero to three years of age.

Suggested Actions:

- Develop pedagogical guidelines/curriculum for children from zero to 4. 8/12 years of age who attend ECEC settings registered by the SWS of the DMSW.
- Establish a mechanism for the development, monitoring of their implementation, evaluation, and revision of ECEC curricula.
- Institutionalize regular trainings on the philosophy and the implementation of the ECEC curricula for the ECEC staff, including the staff working in the private sector.
- Institutionalize regular collaboration between the two competent authorities on the development, evaluation, and revision of ECEC curricula, and on smooth transitions from home to nursery, from nursery to kindergarten, and from kindergarten to primary school.
- Collaborate with universities and other accredited bodies to provide specialized training on the provision of ECEC services for zero to three-year-olds.
- Promote pedagogical approaches that can respond to the development and learning of children with distinct needs and characteristics, such as children with SEND, children with disabilities, bilingual children, children with migrant background, among others.

3.4 Staff

According to the European ECEC Quality Framework (Council of the European Union, 2019)⁷, “staff is the most significant factor for children’s well-being, learning and developmental outcomes. Therefore, staff working conditions and professional development are seen as essential components of quality” (p. c189/12). Complementarily, UNICEF (2020)⁸ has recognized four key goals associated with workforce development in the ECEC sector: a) establishment of a strategy for recruiting ECEC staff, including clearly defined qualification requirements and competency profiles; b) implementation of effective and flexible pre-service training programmes, including alternative pathways to qualification and initial training; c) implementation of evidence-based programmes for continuing professional development (CPD); and d) promotion of continuous workforce improvement and staff retention.

Key finding 6:

Need to ensure sufficient human resources in key ECEC-related departments, institutions and ECEC settings.

⁷ Council of the European Union (2019). Council Recommendation of 22 May 2019 on High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems. ST/9014/2019/INIT. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32019H0605%2801%29&qid=1627470989089>

⁸ United Nations Children’s Fund (February 2020). Build to Last: A framework in support of universal quality pre-primary education. New York: UNICEF.

The evidence generation phase of the project indicated that to promote and implement future reforms and developments in the ECEC sector, key departments of the two national authorities (MOESY, DMSW/SWS), the Pedagogical Institute, and the public and private ECEC settings need to employ more, and adequately qualified, staff. Indicatively, the SWS of the DMSW which are responsible for the ECEC settings that provide ECEC services to children from zero to four years and eight months does not employ staff with background in ECEC and the SWS officers' responsible for the inspection of ECEC settings are simultaneously in charge of other duties. The MOESY employs only three inspectors nationwide to monitor and evaluate ECEC settings for children three to six years old, under their responsibility. The ECEC sector analysis, also, found that special attention in terms of staffing is needed for those ECEC settings that provide services to groups of children with distinct educational needs (e.g., children with disability, bilingual children, children with migrant and refugee biography). Serious shortage of ECEC staff in the private sector has been reported.

Suggested Actions:

- Carry out a human resources analysis in both competent national authorities and the Pedagogical Institute, to assess possible needs for further staffing at central/local level, with relevant scientific background and experience in the educational sector.
- Strengthen the number of staff in the public ECEC settings (e.g., additional teaching and administration staff, school assistants, directors), review and/or develop clear job descriptions for all ECEC positions, including the minimum qualifications and experience for each post.
- Ensure that all ECEC services provided to children from zero to six years are planned, monitored, inspected, and evaluated by staff with relevant scientific background and adequate training.
- Revise the institution of school chaperones assisting children with SEND by establishing duties, qualifications, working conditions, recruitment procedure and provision of training on childcare and safety. Recruit chaperones according to individual needs of children.
- Consider policies and strategies to support the staffing and staff retention in the private ECEC sector.
- Include indicators about the composition of the ECEC staff (discipline, level of specialization, etc.) in relevant ECEC databases.

Key finding 7:

Need for improvements of the working conditions in early childhood education and care, especially in the private sector.

The research indicated that improvements of the working conditions in ECEC are necessary, especially in what concerns the private sector. Specifically, it was found that there are wide deviations in the salaries of ECEC staff in the public and private sector, for equivalent positions; Career development procedures for teaching assistants in the public sector and for professionals working in the ECEC private sector are not clearly defined; There is a low level of education and training among the support staff working in ECEC. There is a need to expand the availability of ECEC Continuous Professional Development (CPD) programmes (mandatory and non-mandatory) offered by the Pedagogical Institute to ECEC non-teaching staff of the public sector and to employees of the private sector, generally.

Suggested Actions:

- Provide a holistic plan for the professionalization of the ECEC sector, the working conditions, the necessary trainings, and remunerations in the sector.
- Ensure improvements in working conditions in the ECEC sector, especially in the private sector (e.g., working hours, compensation, career development).
- Improve and expand CPD programmes and create incentives for the professional development of ECEC professionals.
- Establish a feedback channel from professionals to the Pedagogical Institute to contribute to the strategic planning of the CPD programmes.
- Develop a comprehensive incentive programme to support the private ECEC providers through direct and indirect funding, for staff recruitment and quality working conditions. Also, examine the establishment of a collective labour agreement for the sector.

3.5 Monitoring and Evaluation

The Council of the European Union (2019)⁹ has underlined that “monitoring and evaluation sustain (ECEC) quality. [...] [P]ointing to strengths and weaknesses [...] can provide support to stakeholders and policy makers in undertaking initiatives that respond to the needs of children, parents, and local communities” (p. C189/13). Similarly, UNICEF (2020)¹⁰ has indicated four key targets towards ensuring quality in the ECEC sector: a) establishment of comprehensive standards for service quality; b) establishment of functional quality assurance mechanisms; c) strengthen capacity across the Sector to monitor quality; and d) ensure that quality monitoring supports quality improvements.

Key finding 8:

Need for a single quality framework for the whole early childhood education and care sector (0-6 years), including indicators for structural and process quality.

⁹ Council of the European Union (2019). Council Recommendation of 22 May 2019 on High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems. ST/9014/2019/INIT. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32019H0605%2801%29&qid=1627470989089>

¹⁰ United Nations Children's Fund (February 2020). Build to Last: A framework in support of universal quality pre-primary education. New York: UNICEF.

The ECEC sector analysis found that there is the need for a single National ECEC quality framework for the whole ECEC sector (zero to six years). Such a framework would support the development and promotion of a whole-of-system approach to the ECEC. Also, it would support targeted future reforms and developments in the ECEC sector. As the Good Practice report found, it is important that an ECEC quality framework includes both, indicators for structural and for process quality.

Suggested Actions:

- Develop, in consultation with stakeholders, and implement a single ECEC quality framework for the sector across the zero to six age groups.
- Indicate an institutional body to bear the responsibility for overseeing the monitoring and the evaluation of the ECEC quality framework's implementation, analyzing the data from monitoring and evaluation, and disseminate the results to policy-making bodies.
- Describe the mission of the institutional body which will bear the responsibility to oversee the monitoring and evaluation of the ECEC sector, including a description of the professional profiles of its staff. Recruit and train the staff of this institutional body.
- Develop a national quality assurance database for the entire ECEC sector (zero to six years).

Key finding 9:

Need to enhance the culture of evaluation in the sector of early childhood education and care, and to strengthen capacity across the sector to monitor quality.

The ECEC sector analysis indicated the need for promoting the evaluation culture across the ECEC sector. Specifically, at central level, it is paramount to develop the mechanisms to support the ECEC evaluation and to ensure the capacity of the staff overseeing the evaluation of the sector. Accordingly, it is also necessary to disseminate effectively the ECEC quality framework to all other stakeholders, including ECEC-setting directors, teaching and non-teaching staff and the families. The dissemination methodology should take into consideration the different needs and characteristics of each group of stakeholders. It is also important to develop evaluation tools and train all parties involved in applying them, including self-evaluation tools.

Suggested Actions:

- Develop and systematically review ECEC quality standards through a participatory process with all stakeholders, including the development and/or update of evaluation tools, relevant training and information modules with a focus on process quality, and with embedding a culture of self-reflection and self-evaluation.
- Develop and implement dissemination mechanisms to transfer information and knowledge in relation to the evaluation of the ECEC sector (e.g., new policies, evaluation tools, etc.) effectively to all stakeholders.
- Develop and implement feedback mechanisms to facilitate communication from bottom upwards.
- Institutionalize training on the implementation of the ECEC quality framework and the use of ECEC evaluation tools, including self-evaluation tools, across the sector.

4. Final considerations and steps forward

The present report and the National ECEC Quality Framework will support the Cyprus Government to develop a national ECEC strategy and its Action Plan and adopt by the end of 2024. The Action Plan will include specific recommendations to support the realization of targeted priorities specified in the National Strategy.

Cyprus has already made important steps towards enhancing the quality, accessibility, affordability, and inclusivity of ECEC, and the development of the National ECEC strategy is expected to provide the bases for the implementation of further reforms and developments to ensure the development and learning and the wellbeing of all children in the country.



