



## FINAL PROJECT REPORT

For the project

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

**2024**

*This project is funded by the European Union via the Technical Support Instrument and implemented by UNICEF in co-operation with the European Commission.*

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### i. List of acronyms

BMBWF	Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research (DE: Acronym)
CBI	Charlotte Bühler Institute
ECEC	Early Childhood Education and Care
EC	European Commission
EU	European Union
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
TSI	Technical Support Instrument
UNICEF	United Nations Childrens Fund

2024

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## 1. Overview of the project

The objective of this project has been to support Austria in a reform to improve staff working conditions as a key lever for improving the quality of early childhood education and care (ECEC) across the country.

Based on a request by Austria's Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research (BMBWF) the project is funded by the European Union through the Technical Support Instrument and implemented by UNICEF in co-operation with the European Commission.

The European Pillar of Social Rights states that children have the right to affordable early childhood education and care of good quality, and to protection from poverty (Principle 11). Children from disadvantaged backgrounds have the right to specific measures to enhance equal opportunities. The updated Barcelona Targets (2022) also continue to call for the expansion of ECEC access, but with this going hand-in-hand with quality.

The working conditions of staff in ECEC vary greatly across Austria. Due to the constitutional distribution of competences in Austria, each of the 9 federal provinces have their own statutory requirements related to ECEC. There are also significant differences between publicly provided ECEC and private settings. Systemic challenges include partly low value given to the role, often low salaries, limited career growth opportunities and too little time working directly with the children. As a result, the ECEC sector in Austria is struggling to attract and retain skilled ECEC teachers.

It is against this context that the project was requested, to provide Austria with technical support to improve the staff situation and quality.

Aside from an inception and a closing phase, the project had three main phases of work.

1. Evidence generation – creating a common understanding of the sector, its strengths, weaknesses, and needs.
2. Development of a framework and strategic recommendations – creating a shared vision and aspirational programme of work to strengthen staff quality and conditions and establishing the system reforms required to operationalise the Staff Quality and Conditions Framework.
3. Provision of communication methodologies and tools – to empower those in the ECEC sector to reframe the public discourse on ECEC to be accurate, focused on child development, and social enhancement and to be able to engage in discussion clearly and constructively about the ECEC reforms.

The visual below shows the specific pieces of work which took place under each phase.

Inception Phase	Evidence Generation Phase	Framework and Recommendation Phase	Communication Phase	Closing Phase
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Kick-off meeting</li> <li>•Convening of Working Group and Advisory Group</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Desk Review</li> <li>•Sector Analysis</li> <li>•Report on European Good Practice</li> <li>•Recommendation Report</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Staff Quality and Conditions Framework</li> <li>•Proposal Paper for an ECEC strategy for Austria</li> <li>•M&amp;E Framework</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Development of tools to support ECEC narrative</li> <li>•Narrative paper, logo and slogan for ECEC in Austria</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Final Report</li> <li>•Closing Event</li> </ul>

The project was implemented by the UNICEF Europe and Central Asia Regional Office, in co-operation with the European Commission’s Directorate-General for Structural Reform Support (REFORM), and under the leadership of Austria’s Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research. UNICEF was supported by the Austrian-based Charlotte Bühler Institute and One Step Beyond communications agency, as well as individual consultants.

### Coordination and involvement of stakeholders

Stakeholder engagement and active participation has been essential to this project due to the decentralised responsibilities for ECEC within the federal system in Austria. Having ample opportunities for collaboration among stakeholders, including the federal and province level authorities and other representatives of the sector, was important throughout the course of the project.

There were a number of different platforms created for project implementation. These are shown in the table below.

Name of coordination body	Purpose	Members	Number of meetings
<b>Project standing committee</b>	Day-to-day project coordination	BMBWF, European Commission, UNICEF, CBI and consultants	Every 2 weeks
<b>Advisory Group</b>	High-level management, coordination and oversight of project	BMBWF management, EU, UNICEF, CBI and consultants	Quarterly
<b>Working Group</b> (including 2 smaller parallel working groups: one on communication and one on monitoring and evaluation).	To ensure co-creation of project outputs with ECEC stakeholders from across Austria	BMBWF, EU, UNICEF, CBI, federal province’s departments for ECEC, NGOs and interest groups, higher education	8 full meetings + meetings of parallel working groups

		and research institutions, Association of Cities and Towns, Association of Municipalities, Economic Chamber, Chamber of Agriculture, Federation of Austrian Industries, Federal Chancellery, consultants and advisors	
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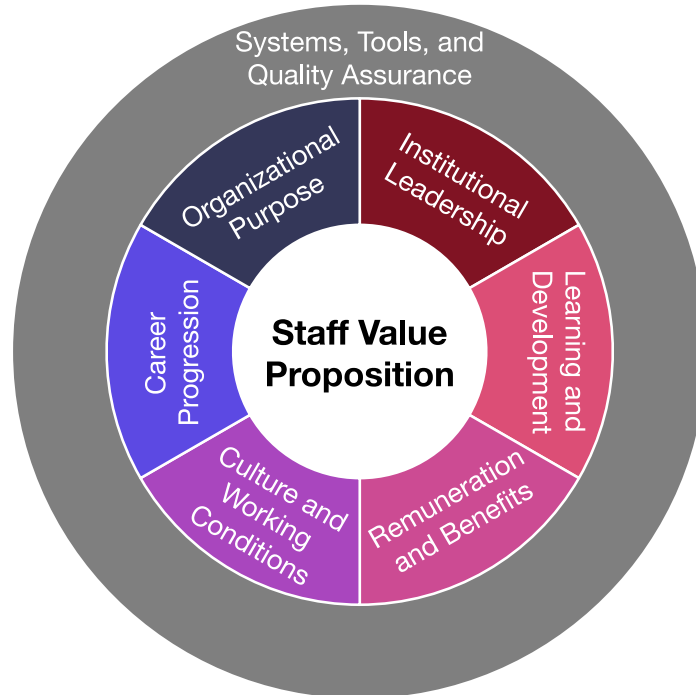
The central component of the project, the Staff Quality and Conditions Framework was jointly developed by the stakeholders involved in this project. For the Framework to have real impact and reduce the discrepancies seen across the ECEC sector in Austria, the objective was to reach agreement from all federal provinces and stakeholders (NGOs, unions, tertiary institutes and ECEC providers) on the quality statements and objectives.

## 2. Project results

**Firstly**, the project developed key evidence, through a participatory process, which has contributed to the body of knowledge on ECEC in Austria. As well as developing the studies themselves, the process helped to create a common understanding among the ECEC stakeholders involved in the project about the current status of ECEC in Austria, the discrepancies between the different federal provinces, and the gaps and needs. This was an important step as it helped to create mutually agreed foundation and the vision for what was needed to be achieved with the Staff Quality and Conditions Framework. A Desk Review of the current status of ECEC throughout Austria, both as a whole, and across the different federal states, was conducted to inform the framework development. A comparative study of good practice from European and advanced systems provided helpful examples and ideas for Austria, based on the reforms and developments in other countries grappling with similar challenges.

**Secondly**, the project resulted in a Staff Quality and Conditions Framework which lays out standards and indicators for staff quality and conditions, a first of its kind for Austria, which demonstrates recommended steps to be taken for improvements in the field of ECEC. This aspirational vision document sets out quality statements for the sector across the areas of the Staff Value Proposition (Damborsky, 2023) as shown in the figure.

**Thirdly**, an extremely positive result of the framework development processes was the



strong collaboration and collegial spirit which developed between the ECEC stakeholders in the project working group, and the number of additional benefits, connections and sharing of experiences which came from the process.

**Fourthly**, a Narrative Paper to support strategic communications, awareness raising and re-shaping the ECEC narrative was developed. The toolkit includes key narratives to promote the importance of ECEC as a foundational stage for children and their development, as well as a service which improves social cohesion, reduces inequalities and has positive returns on investment for the country as a whole. It also includes guidance on how and where ECEC messages can be amplified through campaigns as well as through day-to-day communications and it provides the stakeholders with a logo and slogan for ECEC in Austria.

**Fifthly**, the project resulted in strategic recommendations for broader reforms required to operationalise the framework and to continue to strengthen the ECEC sector in line with the Barcelona targets.

### 3. Project recommendations

During the course of the project, considerations and recommendations were developed at different levels to inform the various phases. The initial recommendations have been

captured in the Staff Quality and Conditions Framework, so the overarching recommendation for this project is:

- **For Austria to implement the Staff Quality and Conditions Framework and to ensure that sufficient funding, oversight, support and accountability is in place to ensure that the implementation can and does take place.**

As well as this, recommendations for the system to support this implementation were developed. While these are fleshed out in more detail as “Goals” in the Proposal Paper for an ECEC strategy for Austria, they are summarised in the table below.

Recommendation	Sub-recommendation
<p><i>While maintaining the current legal mandates of the federal provinces having the responsibility for the provision and oversight of ECEC, establish and implement a country-wide shared vision and commitment to improving ECEC access and quality as well as compatibility of family and work affordability.</i></p>	<p>Increase the dosage of service hours available to children before the age of 5 with the aim to meet the Austrian VIF indicator (=Vereinbarkeitsindikator für Familie und Beruf).</p>
	<p>Systematically reduce ECEC group sizes to reach international best practices.</p>
<p><i>Strengthen coordination through the development of co-created planning documents and establish and use legislation and forums to jointly work towards improved ECEC access and quality.</i></p>	<p>Create a shared vision for ECEC reforms through the development of ECEC strategies and meet regularly to follow the progress.</p>
	<p>Expand the scope of the agreement pursuant to Article 15a B-VG between the federal government and the federal provinces on early childhood education and care for the 2022/23 to 2026/27 kindergarten years to become more focused on ECEC quality (which has concrete quality targets adapted to the current status and needs of each federal province).</p>
<p><i>Increase public investments into ECEC in line with OECD minimum recommended levels of 1% of gross domestic product. As Austrian experts and scientists also repeatedly refer to this target value as a minimum amount, efforts should be made to systematically increase investments to be above this level. Further, funding should be assessed to identify opportunities for increased efficiencies within the system and identify further interventions for support measures for children from migrant, lower-socioeconomic backgrounds and those in rural/remote areas.</i></p>	<p>Set progressive targets for financial investments at federal, province and municipal level. Use the money from the “Zukunftsfonds” and the Article 15a B-VG agreement to be used in particular to increase the number and quality of ECEC places with opening hours that meet the needs, primarily for children under the age of three.</p>
	<p>Earmark funds for supporting vulnerable families to access ECEC specifically and explore options for innovative financing approaches in ECEC, including public private partnerships.</p>



<p><i>Strengthen ECEC quality, through creating a shared vision for ECEC quality, develop and implement associated tools for measuring quality and strengthen systems for comparable data collection.</i></p>	<p>Develop a concept of a National ECEC Quality Framework which includes minimum standards for use in all federal states as well as at municipal and setting level.</p>
<p><i>Implement the Staff Quality and Conditions Framework and continue the collaboration between federal states to further refine and unpack the tool.</i></p>	<p>Expansion of the “Statistics on early childhood education and care and after-school care” based on a common indicator and data framework to include further parameters to measure quality in ECEC. Including introduction of common indicator definitions for data comparability and aggregation.</p> <p>Make use of The Advisory Board for ECEC to oversee and drive aspects of the Staff Quality and Conditions Framework.</p> <p>Building on the data collected under the project, continue monitoring and evaluating the workforce status and needs.</p>
<p><i>Strengthen the nation-wide understanding of the social value of ECEC and its benefits for society as well as for the child. Link understanding of ECEC investments with the evidence from Heckmann, related to returns on investment in the early years and the role ECEC plays in economic growth, as well as the evidence that ECEC supports social integration and social cohesion. Ensure that ECEC is also understood as vital for optimal child development and school readiness and not just as childcare.</i></p>	<p>Widely disseminate and use the ECEC communication tools developed under this project in campaigns on national or state level to increase the awareness of the value of ECEC for child development, social development and economic growth</p> <p>Recognise the value of the ECEC workforce through these campaigns and messages.</p>

#### 4. Lessons learned

- Having multiple in-person working group meetings throughout the course of the project was vital for building relationships, building trust, and ensuring co-creation of the products. These meetings and the strong facilitation of them created a safe and open space for candid discussions about concerns, challenges as well as possible solutions.
- Transparency and open discussion by the BMBWF were very important for this work to be successful, as concerns about changes in roles and responsibilities were quickly addressed in an open way.
- In order to achieve positive changes in the ECEC narrative, useful tools for communicating about ECEC in general, about its reforms and about its day-to-day work have been created that can be used by all stakeholders.