

## Chapter 2

### Early childhood education and care in Latvia

*This chapter reviews early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Latvia. All children are entitled to an ECEC place from 1.5 years old, and participation is compulsory for children aged five and six. It is provided and funded largely by municipalities, but private provision has grown in recent years, particularly in larger cities. Latvia spends a relatively large share of its GDP on ECEC compared with OECD countries. Barriers exist however for developing a high-quality and motivated ECEC profession and municipalities vary in their capacity to fund, deliver and monitor provision.*

*Latvia should continue to expand ECEC, particularly for younger children and those in rural areas; take a more strategic approach to improving the quality and status of the profession; strengthen data collection, monitoring and the use of research in policy making; and review the governance and funding arrangements for ECEC to support the achievement of national policy goals.*

The statistical data for Israel are supplied by and under the responsibility of the relevant Israeli authorities. The use of such data by the OECD is without prejudice to the status of the Golan Heights, East Jerusalem and Israeli settlements in the West Bank under the terms of international law.

## Introduction

High-quality early childhood education and care is positively associated with the cognitive, social and emotional development of children, and achievement among all children (OECD, 2006; Heckmann and Masterov, 2007; Heckman, 2012). In Latvia early childhood education and care (ECEC) covers all institutional arrangements providing care and education for children under primary school age – 1 to 7 years of age. Some countries make a distinction between “child care” – looking after children while their parents are at work – and “early education” – enhancing child development and preparing children for formal schooling. In practice, the division is not clear, as there are opportunities to learn in settings labelled “care”, and “educational” settings provide care for children. The use of the term ECEC supports an integrated and coherent approach to policy and provision which is inclusive of all children and all parents, regardless of their employment or socio-economic status (OECD, 2001, 2006; Bennett, 2008a). Although ECEC in Latvia is often referred to as “pre-school education”, which would suggest a primary focus on early education, it recognises that ECEC arrangements fulfil a wide range of objectives, including care, learning and social support.

Most of today’s rising generation in Latvia will have spent part of their early childhood in some form of ECEC programme. After a period of contraction in the early 1990s, service provision began to recover later that decade and the recovery has continued ever since. Nowadays around 90% of 5- and 6-year-olds are enrolled in ECEC (OECD, 2014a). Still, the transition to universal enrolment is incomplete as participation in ECEC, especially for children under the age of three, remains relatively low and unequal throughout the country. There are calls for greater investment in the quality of the ECEC workforce and better monitoring of educational quality in general. Current governance and financing arrangements also hamper equal access to high-quality ECEC.

This chapter starts with an overview of the ECEC provision in Latvia, followed by a detailed analysis of the key policy issues it faces. It concludes by presenting concrete policy recommendations for strengthening ECEC provision throughout Latvia.

## Context and main features

### *Governance and financing*

In Latvia, ECEC is an autonomous function of local governments. The central government has at its disposal powerful steering mechanisms, such as legislation and discretionary funding, to motivate and enable local authorities

to deliver agreed outcomes. The legal foundations for ECEC institutions, whether public or private, are laid down in the Education Law, the General Education Law, the Law on Local Governments and the regulations approved by the institution’s founder, as well as various other regulatory enactments regarding health and safety that are also used for external evaluation purposes (Eurypedia, 2015).

To ensure a certain length of participation in ECEC programmes, many countries provide legal entitlements to ensure access to affordable, high-quality ECEC. Since 2011, all children in Latvia have had a legal entitlement to ECEC from 1.5 years of age. Latvia thus belongs to a small group of EU countries in which children have a legal entitlement to ECEC from a very early age, although in countries like Denmark, Finland and Sweden, entitlement starts earlier: from their first year onwards. In addition, since 2002 the last two years of ECEC, i.e. for children aged 5 and 6, have been compulsory in Latvia.

In Latvia, ECEC is defined comprehensively, encompassing the cognitive, socio-emotional and health development of the child. The Education Law of Latvia, for example, states that ECEC, or “pre-school education” as it is often referred to in Latvia, is “an educational level in which multi-dimensional development of the child as an individual, in the strengthening of health and preparation for the acquisition of primary education takes place” (Eurypedia, 2015). The central government has defined the main objectives and tasks of ECEC in the State Pre-school Education Guidelines (Box 2.1).

#### **Box 2.1. Objectives and primary tasks of ECEC (“pre-school education”) in Latvia**

The State Pre-school Education Guidelines define the objective of ECEC as follows:

The objective of ECEC is the promotion of the comprehensive and harmonious development of a child, observing his or her development patterns and needs, knowledge, skills and attitudes required for an individual and social life, thereby purposefully ensuring the child has the chance to prepare for the acquisition of basic education.

The guidelines stipulate that the primary tasks of ECEC shall be:

- to promote the development of physical skills and movements of a child
- to promote the development of self-esteem, awareness of abilities and interests, development of feelings and will of a child
- to promote the development of cognition and curiosity of a child, ensuring the acquisition of knowledge and skills
- to promote the development of communication and co-operation skills of a child

**Box 2.1. Objectives and primary tasks of ECEC (“pre-school education”) in Latvia (continued)**

- to promote the forming of a child’s positive attitude towards himself or herself, other persons, the environment and the State of Latvia
- to promote the development of safe and healthy lifestyle skills of a child.

In addition the guidelines include a description of the pedagogical process, the content and learning outcomes, and how the evaluation process is organised.

*Source:* Cabinet of Ministers (2010), *Regulations Regarding the Guidelines for the State Pre-school Education*, Regulation No. 709, adopted 3 August 2010, Cabinet of Ministers, Republic of Latvia, Riga.

In Latvia, municipalities are obliged to ensure that children who have declared residence in the administrative territory of the municipality are able to access ECEC in the institution closest to their home. ECEC is largely the responsibility of municipalities.

The founders of public ECEC institutions are municipalities, while private institutions can be founded by people or legal entities such as foundations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Municipalities may establish an ECEC institution upon the request of parents of at least ten children living in their administrative territory. In case of children with special needs this number is eight. Children are enrolled when parents have submitted all necessary documents, and if there is a place available. Entrance tests are prohibited and parents and guardians are in principle free to choose among different types of ECEC institutions, i.e. those offering general programmes, programmes in minority languages (e.g. Russian or Polish), programmes for children with special education needs, and programmes for children with both special education needs and in minority languages.

In reality, however, the low population density in some parts of the country may limit choices, despite municipalities providing free bus transportation to children in remote areas. In the larger cities, shortage of places similarly limits parents’ and guardians’ choices.

Each municipality has a Board of Education to perform all education-related functions from ECEC to upper secondary education, including the founding and supervising of ECEC institutions. These municipal boards need to co-ordinate with the Ministry of Education and Science (MoES) on any issues relating to the establishment, reorganisation and closure of these institutions, however. Each board can develop its own

binding regulations, which in turn means that decision-making processes regarding ECEC can differ between municipalities.

As in many OECD countries, both parents and community members play an important role in the governance of ECEC institutions in Latvia, including through participating in school boards. For example, the school boards have a decision-making role in the rules governing the daily life in the ECEC institution, and have a consultative role on issues related to the choosing of educational content, methods and materials (MoES, 2015).

### *Financing ECEC*

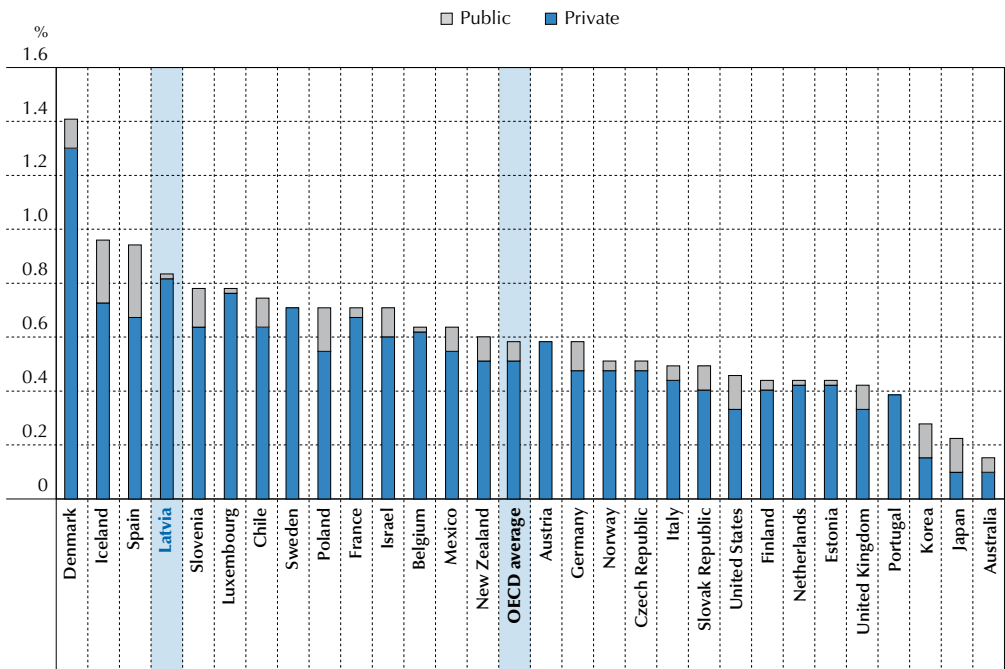
A growing body of research evidence suggests the need for significant public financial investment supporting a sustainable and equitable ECEC system (OECD, 2006; Bennett, 2008b; Cleveland and Krashinsky, 2004; UNICEF, 2008). Latvia's public commitment to ECEC is demonstrated by its relatively high expenditure on ECEC as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP) and the large share of public funding.

In 2011, Latvia spent 0.83% of its GDP on early childhood education for children aged 3 or older. This was above the OECD average (0.57%) and among the highest for the OECD and partner countries with available data. Of these countries only Denmark (1.41%), Iceland (0.96%) and Spain (0.93%) had higher expenditures (Figure 2.1). The greatest share of spending for this age group came from public sources (98.2%), with only a very small proportion originating from private sources (1.8%), mostly from private households (OECD, 2014a).

Public funding comes from municipalities, apart from the salaries of teachers working in compulsory ECEC programmes, i.e. for 5- and 6-year-olds, which come from central government grants. These grants amounted to EUR 23 791 537 in 2015, which is about 7% of the total earmarked grants provided by the central government to municipalities (MoES, 2015).

Parents have to pay fees to cover children's meals. Meals are provided three times a day (breakfast, lunch and afternoon snacks) at a low cost, about EUR 44 per month. Some charges may be made for additional services, for instance, foreign language teaching for children. Municipalities may reduce the fees for meals for children from low-income families, and most of those in rural areas do (Eurydia, 2015; European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat, 2014; MoES, 2015). Since 2013, the central and local government have financed learning tools such as different training materials, books and workbooks. Parents pay only for items children use personally such as pencils, crayons and paper. The learning materials for 5- and 6-year-olds are financed from central and local government budgets, but those for 1.5-4 year-olds from the local government budget.

Figure 2.1. Expenditure on pre-primary education (for children 3 years and older) as a percentage of GDP, by source of funding (2011)



Countries are ranked in descending order of public and private expenditure on educational institutions.

Source: OECD (2014a), *Education at a Glance 2014: OECD Indicators*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/eag-2014-en>.

Private, fee-based ECEC institutions have grown in numbers in recent years as a response to shortages of public ECEC places. These institutions are mostly found in the larger cities where these shortages are acute. The high cost of private ECEC services and the lack of municipal support have limited access to ECEC until recently. When access to ECEC became a legal entitlement from the age of 1.5 in 2011, the various policy measures that followed have aimed to expand and diversify the ECEC services available (financially and territorially) to families in all parts of the country (Ivanovs, 2013).

As a result, parents who are forced to enrol their children in private ECEC due to a shortage of public places can obtain co-financing from the local government and/or central government (MoES, 2015). Since the beginning of 2013, municipalities which are unable to provide children in their administrative territory with a place in a public ECEC institution, are required to partly fund a private ECEC place. Parents are provided with an allowance

ranging from EUR 70 to a maximum of EUR 260 per month, with the higher range mostly paid in city areas like Riga where private ECEC fees are higher.

In 2013 the government also initiated a pilot project giving parents financial support from the central government to enrol their children in private ECEC (Box 2.2) (Ivanovs, 2013; MoES, 2015).

### Box 2.2. “Childcare support and child-minder service” pilot project

On 1 September 2013 the Latvian government started a pilot project to provide financial support for parents who need child care support for their children aged 1.5-4 years who are not benefiting from public childcare (from the age of 5, municipalities have a legal obligation to provide pre-school education to children). The financing will be provided until the end of 2015 in order to solve the problem of long waiting lists for public kindergarten registration and help parents to return to work at the same time providing safe conditions for the child.

The combined co-funding paid for by the state and by local government to the child should be enough to decrease parents’ expenditure on private kindergartens or child-minding services. Central government support for full-time child care is up to EUR 142, with the condition that state and municipal support combined (most municipalities already provide some support addressing such situations) does not exceed a certain limit. For example it cannot exceed EUR 228 per child in Riga planning region and approximately EUR 185 in other regions and rural territories. The state spent close to EUR 8.8 million in 2013 and 2014 and has allocated another EUR 4.8 million for 2015.

*Sources:* MoES (2015), “Country background report Latvia”, unpublished, MoES (Ministry of Education and Science), Riga; European Commission (2013c), “Exchange of good practices on gender equality: Comments paper – Latvia”, Parenting in France, 5-6 November 2013, France, [http://ec.europa.eu/justice/gender-equality/files/exchange\\_of\\_good\\_practice\\_fr/lv\\_comments\\_paper\\_fr2013\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/justice/gender-equality/files/exchange_of_good_practice_fr/lv_comments_paper_fr2013_en.pdf).

### *Child and family benefits*

The question of the appropriate age at which out-of-home childcare will benefit children is one of the most controversial issues in the childcare debate. Some see nothing wrong with out-of-home childcare starting from three months of age – as long as the care is high quality. Others consider that the critical developmental needs of the first year of life demand nothing less than the constant, loving, one-to-one interaction of parental care. For millions of working parents in OECD countries this is a question that must be answered under pressure from career demands and household budgets (OECD, 2007, 2011; UNICEF, 2008). It is therefore a question that is almost inseparable from the issue of parental leave and other child-related benefits.

In Latvia, a number of these benefits, i.e. state family benefit, childcare benefit and childcare grants, are universal benefits provided to parents at the same rate regardless of income, while the country's degree of income redistribution is relatively low (OECD, 2015a). In 2014, Latvia amended the Law on State Social Allowances in 2014, increasing parents' entitlements to child and parental benefits. Women are now entitled to 19 weeks of maternity leave at a rate of 100% of the usual salary. Fathers get two days at a rate of 80% of the usual salary. The amendment also raised child benefit to EUR 171 per month, making it universal for parents whose children have yet to reach the age of 1.5 years. Parents are entitled to this benefit regardless of their employment status (State Social Insurance Agency, 2015).

Some OECD countries provide a prolonged period of paid leave (around two years or more) either as parental leave alone or in conjunction with separate child/home care. For example parents can take prolonged paid leave of around 100 weeks or more in Finland, Hungary, Norway, Poland and the Slovak Republic. In many OECD countries, including Latvia, periods are considerably shorter. Latvian parents are entitled to prolonged parental leave for a period of up to 1 year at a rate of 60% of the beneficiary's average insurance contribution wage, or up to 1.5 years at a rate of 43.75%. There is flexibility in the use of benefits, however, as parents can also continue working and receive parental benefits equal to 30% of the granted benefit during the period of prolonged parental leave.

### ***Organisation of ECEC services and learning***

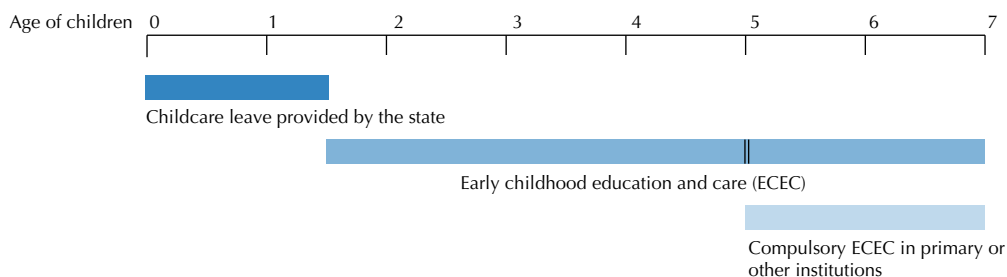
In Latvia integrated ECEC settings (*pirmsskolas izglītības iestādes*) are available to children from the age of 1.5 to 7 (Figure 2.2), with no breaks or transfers between ECEC institutions until the start of primary school. All institutions and programmes fall under the responsibility of MoES. Such an integrated approach is rather uncommon among EU and OECD countries, and is mainly found in the Scandinavian countries (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat, 2014).

There is some distinction between ECEC for very young children (1 to 4 years) and those about to enter primary education. As mentioned, from the age of 5 ECEC is compulsory and children have to follow a specific programme (*pirmsskolas izglītības vadlīnijas*) that is in accordance with the Guidelines for Pre-school Education (Cabinet of Ministers, 2012). The guidelines offer examples of programmes but teachers also have the right to develop their own programmes as long as they are in accordance with the guidelines (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat, 2014;



MoES, 2015). It is also possible for children to receive their compulsory ECEC outside the integrated setting, for example in a primary school or other type of education centre (*skolas un citas izglītības iestādes*). Other service providers include day nurseries, playgroups, day care centres and institutions of interest-related education that provide activities for children under primary school age.

Figure 2.2. Overview of ECEC in Latvia



Source: Adapted from European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat (2015), *Early Childhood Education and Care Systems in Europe: National Information Sheets 2014/15*, Eurydice Facts and Figures, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, [http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/documents/thematic\\_reports/191EN.pdf](http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/documents/thematic_reports/191EN.pdf).

ECEC programmes either follow the school model, grouping children together by age, or the family model, grouping children of different ages. It is also possible to group children according to the language of instruction which can be Latvian or a minority language, depending on the demands made by parents. While most minority languages such as Polish play only a minor role in ECEC provision, a considerable share of children are taught in Russian: close to 22 000 children, about 23%, were enrolled in Russian language ECEC institutions in 2013 (Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, 2015). From the age of five, however, the Latvian language is a compulsory subject for all children in ECEC.

It is also possible for families to provide ECEC at home.<sup>1</sup> For this, parents may receive pedagogical and methodological support at consultative ECEC centres. Municipalities are obliged to provide such support but not all are able to due to budgetary constraints, particularly the smaller ones. They therefore sometimes commission these services from institutions or individual specialists (MoES, 2015). Whether parents' demands for such support are fully met is not known.

Usually, ECEC institutions operate all year round with a break during the summer holidays of one to two months (usually in July and August). In principle, children should also be able to attend ECEC during the summer break on parental request. However, whether or not an institution is open during the summer depends on the provider of the institution.

ECEC outside school hours is not usually a policy priority in OECD countries and this also applies to Latvia. Latvia has a number of ECEC institutions that offer all-day childcare usually from 7.00 or 7.30 a.m. until 6.00 or 6.30 p.m., except on Saturdays and Sundays. More than 9 out of 10 children attend ECEC for more than 30 hours per week (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat, 2014). Some ECEC institutions (65 in 2013) even have one or more 24-hour groups where it is possible for children to stay overnight. However, only a very small minority of children (about 2%) make use of these services (MoES, 2015).

### *Network of early childhood education and care institutions*

The number of ECEC institutions has gradually increased, from 550 in 2003/04 to 617 in 2013/14. This increase has mainly occurred in urban areas; in rural areas the number has not grown substantially. ECEC provision is particularly limited in the thinly populated south and southeast of the country (Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, 2015; MoES, 2015).

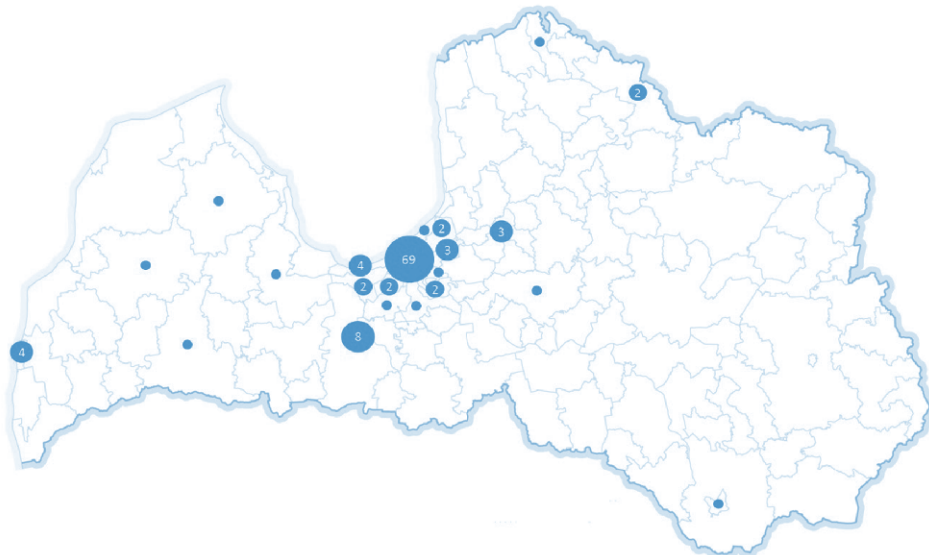
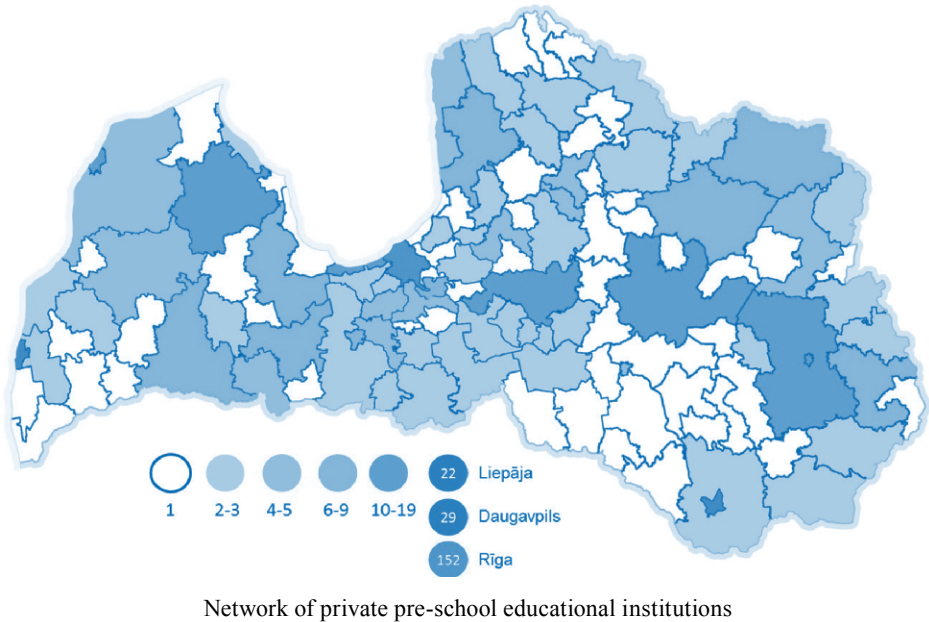
Private institutions play a relatively minor role in Latvia though their numbers have been growing in recent years mostly due to shortages of ECEC places in city areas. Of the 617 ECEC institutions in 2013/14, 526 were municipal (public) and 91 private (Figure 2.3). This translates into 74 128 children enrolled in public ECEC institutions compared with 5 063 in private institutions. The majority of these private institutions are located in the capital city, and there are very few private institutions outside the bigger cities.

As mentioned, Latvia has faced shortages in ECEC places in recent years. This has been fuelled by internal migration from rural to urban areas. As a result many child development and play centres have been opened by both municipalities and private individuals. The purpose of these centres is to provide childcare services so that parents can access the labour market. As a rule, these centres also provide educational activities for children.

### *National ECEC curriculum*

Having an explicit curriculum matters at all stages of education including ECEC. A well-defined curriculum articulates purposes, goals, learning content and approaches to learning, and takes into account the needs of

Figure 2.3. **Latvian network of public and private ECEC institutions (2013)**  
 Network of municipal pre-school educational institutions



Note: Pre-school groups in other institutions are excluded. Special pre-school educational institutions are included.

Source: MoES (2014), *Education Development Guidelines 2014-2020*, Ministry of Education and Science, Riga, <http://m.likumi.lv/doc.php?id=266406>.

all relevant stakeholders. Critical learning areas for young children include literacy, numeracy, science, information and communications technology (ICT), art and music, and physical and health development (OECD, 2012). Curricula are influenced by many factors, including a society's values, content standards, research findings, community expectations, culture and language.

Latvia has defined the Model Programme for Pre-school Education (2012) which sets out the education plan and curriculum guidelines. The document focuses on play-centred learning and competences and includes elements like the environment, social life, children's native and state language and literature, and mathematics. The list of subjects also includes drawing, needlework, sports and music. Optional activities, such as foreign languages, are also possible depending on the institution, which makes the programme adaptable to local needs. Apart from learning activities, children also spend time outside taking walks and playing freely. Children in full-time ECEC are also provided with meals during the day and the chance to take a nap.

Research highlights the importance of play for children's cognitive and social development (OECD, 2012). It is argued that children learn about the world and environment, develop imagination and creativity, and face a wide range of emotional experiences through play. Latvia pays special attention to play as a basic method of teaching in ECEC. Other methods used include practical elements, verbal methods, modelling and experimenting. Teachers are free to choose from any of these methods, but they are encouraged to use play as the main teaching method, given that various play activities ensure children's physical, intellectual and emotional development (MoES, 2015). OECD countries with similar coherent play-based curricula include the Czech Republic, Finland, New Zealand, Norway and Sweden.

Latvia has no national assessments for monitoring children's developmental outcomes during or at the end of ECEC to inform the government and others on the quality of ECEC throughout the country. Latvia's ECEC curriculum and the Guidelines for Pre-school Education however provide descriptors of the knowledge, skills and attitudes that children are expected to have obtained at the end of ECEC. These are to inform teachers in their observations of children's progress. The teacher is expected to tell children regularly about their achievements emphasising the positive aspects and encouraging the improvement of skills, and regularly consulting with parents on their children's development. Since 2011, ECEC institutions should provide parents or guardians with written information on the achievements, i.e. the knowledge, skills and attitudes regarding the planned curriculum outcomes, of their children upon completion of ECEC (Eurypedia, 2015).

### *The ECEC workforce*

In 2013, there were 9 703 ECEC teachers – often referred to as “pedagogues” in Latvia – working in ECEC institutions in Latvia (Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, 2015). These included some 1 700 specialist staff: educational methodologists (deputy principals), music teachers, sports teachers, speech therapists, special education teachers, educational psychologists and other educators (MoES, 2015). Almost all ECEC teachers were female (99.5% in 2012), and 14% were less than 30 years old in 2012, while 27% were aged 50 or older (Eurostat, 2014a).

More than 90% of ECEC teachers were working on a full-time basis in 2012, meaning 36 teaching and contact hours per week (Eurostat, 2015a). Administrative data show that the vast majority of compulsory ECEC teachers (for ages 5 and 6) worked in only one institution in 2014 (91%) (OECD, 2014b).

In 2013, the annual average actual gross salary of Latvia’s ECEC teachers was EUR 6 697, which is among the lowest across EU-28 countries and considerably lower than the average salaries of their peers at primary and secondary levels (EACEA/Eurydice, 2014). In Latvia, the central government sets teachers’ minimum statutory salaries, while municipalities and private providers may offer higher salaries. The minimum statutory salary for a full-time ECEC teacher was set at EUR 4 610 in 2014, rising to a maximum of EUR 4 781, indicating a relatively flat salary scale.

The ratio of students to teaching staff is an important indicator of the resources devoted to ECEC. In 2012 the average student-teacher ratio for ECEC programmes for 3-6 year-olds in Latvia was 11 which is low compared to the OECD average ratio of 14 (OECD, 2014a). Many OECD countries have set standards for class sizes and/or student-staff ratios in order to guarantee the health and safety of children, an effective and equitable learning environment, and adequate working conditions for ECEC staff. In Latvia, it is up to institutions and municipalities to decide on such standards, as central regulations were abolished in 2009 in order to reduce bureaucratic obstacles.

Like many OECD countries Latvia has recognised the importance of having ECEC staff with a high level of formal education. There are many ways of becoming an ECEC teacher in Latvia. To qualify, teachers should obtain a first-level professional tertiary qualification by completing a 3- or 4-year professional study programme (4.5 years if part-time). Those already qualified to teach a different level of education can complete a 2-year full-time study programme (2.5 years if part-time) or a master’s level study programme. In addition, those who already work as teachers

in other levels can obtain an ECEC teacher qualification by completing at least 72 hours of in-service training. In 2012/13, 1 740 teachers and 164 leaders and methodologists (deputy principals) completed such pre-school teachers' professional competence development courses (from the "B programme", described in Chapter 3). In 2013, nine out of ten ECEC teachers (90.1%) had obtained the required professional qualification (MoES, 2015).

To help prepare teachers for the profession, initial teacher education programmes include a six-week internship or professional practice in an ECEC institution. Beginner teachers are also supposed to be provided with mentoring support in their first year of working but there is little information at the national level as to whether they actually receive such support.

Government regulations state that a teacher is expected to participate in a professional development programme of at least 36 hours every 3 years. This is shorter than some OECD countries with similar statutory requirements. For example, in Estonia ECEC teachers must take 160 hours of professional development every 5 years. In Finland and Scotland (the United Kingdom) teachers are required to participate in 30 and 35 hours of professional development respectively every year (OECD, 2014a).

In 2013 there were 591 heads managing ECEC institutions in Latvia. To become the head of an ECEC institution, candidates must provide evidence of at least 3 years of professional experience in ECEC and 2 years of administrative experience. There is no additional requirement for training before or after appointment as a head. These requirements are similar to many EU countries where the requirements include 2 to 5 years of professional experience and no compulsory training. In Latvia, heads are in principle not involved in pedagogical activities, which is the case in only a few other EU countries including the Flemish Community of Belgium, Croatia, Estonia, Lithuania and Scotland (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat, 2014).

### ***Quality assurance***

In Latvia, both the central and local governments are responsible for ensuring ECEC services comply with regulations. Like in many OECD countries, compliance with regulations is monitored through two processes: the registration of new ECEC institutions or individual service providers and external evaluations or inspections (OECD, 2012; MoES, 2015). To register an ECEC institution, a person authorised by the founder of the institution needs to submit an application to the State Education Quality Service (SEQS). The SEQS decides whether to register the institution on the Register of Educational Institutions, based on compliance with relevant regulations.

In addition to formal ECEC institutions, Latvia also has family day carers, commonly referred to as “child-minders”, who are qualified private persons offering child-minding services. They are registered in the Register of Child-Minder Services that is also managed by the SEQS. Registered child-minders are required to meet certain qualifications (Box 2.3) and are supervised by the State Inspectorate for Protection of Children’s Rights, as well as several government agencies including local governments, the State Fire and Rescue Service, the Food and Veterinary Service and the Medical Inspection.

### Box 2.3. Family day carer (“child-minder”) qualifications and safety requirements in Latvia

On 1 September 2013, the Cabinet of Ministers’ regulation on family day carer registration, referred to as the “child-minder” register and professional activity organisation, came into force, defining the qualification and safety requirements for family day carers. The regulation stipulates that a person who wishes to work as a family day carer needs to have completed a professional education programme of at least 40 hours in order to be registered, unless the person has received secondary or tertiary pedagogical education or obtained a professional qualification as a family day carer.

In addition, a provider of family day care services (legal person, public or local authority) must meet the following requirements: 1) have the State Fire and Rescue Service’s approval that fire safety requirements have been met if the service is provided outside the child’s home; 2) have regular health inspections for persons engaged in the supervision of children; 3) have a license from Food and Veterinary Service, if a full-time service is provided outside the child’s home, for catering of meals for children; 4) meet the working procedure regulations and regulations on protection of safety at work; and 5) ensure fire safety, labour protection, hygiene and first aid.

*Source:* Cabinet of Ministers (2013), *Prasības bērnu uzraudzības pakalpojuma sniedzējiem un bērnu uzraudzības pakalpojuma sniedzēju reģistrēšanas kārtība* [Regulation on Family Day Carer Registration], Regulation No. 404, adopted 16 July 2013, Riga, <http://likumi.lv/doc.php?id=258873>.

Evaluation of the quality of an ECEC setting is often conducted for external or internal accountability purposes. When quality is evaluated for external accountability, for example by the education inspectorate or other government agency, ECEC settings are understood as an instrument for implementation of family, labour market and education policies on national, regional and local levels (Litjens, 2013).

In Latvia, the SEQS has the right to carry out an investigation based on a complaint from a parent or another state institution. These may lead to the initiation of an administrative violation case. In 2014, 3 out of a total

of 31 administrative violation complaints initiated by the SEQS concerned ECEC, all of which led to a prosecution, although they were not initiated by parent complaints. In OECD countries, the responsibility for conducting these external evaluations, often in the form of inspections, varies. There may be a central agency in charge of inspections that may focus on procedural aspects, processes or a combination of both. In Ireland and Norway, for example, inspections are combined with interviews with managers and staff (OECD, 2012).

Latvia has no such central agency responsible for evaluating the quality of ECEC institutions. Instead, as in many OECD countries, responsibility has been decentralised to municipalities (OECD, 2006, 2012). Approaches to monitoring and evaluating the quality of ECEC institutions thus vary across the country, although municipalities must abide by national laws and regulations (Eurypedia, 2015). Concerns have been raised about the capacity of some of the smaller municipalities to effectively manage and support their ECEC institutions and schools (OECD, 2014b).

### ***Responding to children with special education needs***

Children with specific education needs such as physical or cognitive impairments are in need of specialised care, including specialised staff, adapted environments or a more flexible group organisation. Yet access to ECEC for these children is often inappropriate in OECD countries (OECD, 2006). In Latvia, children with special needs (including health or development impairments) can attend special education institutions or special education groups at general education institutions, or are integrated into general groups in institutions that offer special ECEC programmes (Eurypedia, 2015).

In 2013/14, there were 4 892 children with special needs enrolled in ECEC institutions. About one-third (1 616) were integrated into regular ECEC institutions leaving the majority in special ECEC institutions. When admitting a child with special needs, a regular ECEC institution can choose to provide a special education programme for several children with the same or similar special needs, or to admit the child and develop an Individual Education Plan to ensure that adequate support is provided.

If a child shows any signs of special needs parents can contact municipality services for information about what kind of support is available and where they can receive it. The Municipal Pedagogical Medical Commission consists of different specialists – special education teachers, speech therapists, psychologists and sometimes doctors and social workers. They assess children and provide them with a “statement”. Most pre-school age children who attend special groups or special ECEC institutions have speech and language



development problems. They are offered special support to develop their linguistic and communication skills, normally by a speech therapist and/or special education teacher (Eurypedia, 2015; MoES, 2015). In 2013 about 10% of children of pre-school age were attending special education programmes, while specialists estimate that around 20% could benefit from additional specialist help (MoES, 2015).

As stated previously, the vast majority of ECEC institutions belong to municipalities and it is their responsibility to provide adequate support for children and their families. In Latvia, as in several other countries like Estonia, Finland, Slovenia and the United Kingdom, the central government provides supplementary funding for children with additional educational needs. To date, this financial support is only provided for those children in special ECEC institutions and not those who are enrolled in regular ECEC institutions, thereby overlooking their special education needs (Calite, 2010; European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat, 2014).

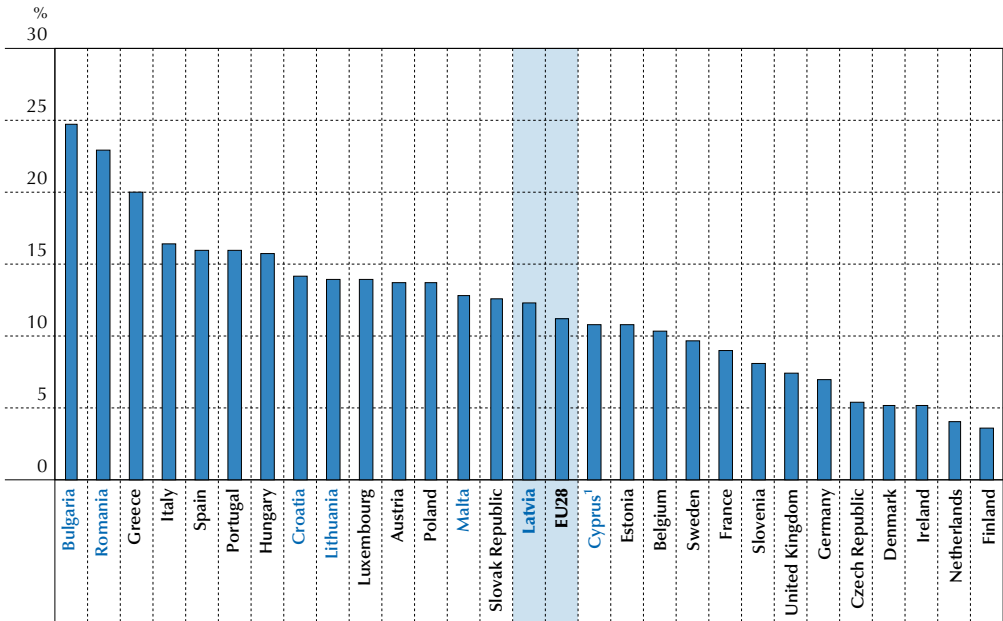
### ***Children living in poverty***

As in many OECD and EU countries, child poverty is an important policy issue that may prevent children from breaking the cycle of disadvantage. Children born into severe poverty are disproportionately exposed to factors that impede psycho-motor development, socio-emotional growth and cognitive processes (European Commission, 2013b). When combined with deprived or neglectful family backgrounds and poorly educated parents, poverty becomes the single greatest barrier to educational achievement (Coleman et al., 1966; Duncan et al., 1998; Heckman, 2008; Melhuish et al., 2008; EACEA/Eurydice, 2009; Del Boca, 2010; Ladd, 2012).

In 2013, 12.3% of children under the age of 6 were living in poverty in Latvia, which is slightly higher than many OECD and EU countries (Figure 2.4). Though it has dropped considerably since 2010, when it was as high as 19.6%, the data still show a sizable proportion of young children at risk of social exclusion who may need specific measures to support their educational and other developmental needs.

Unlike education, where high spending does not always ensure learning achievement, government spending on family and social benefits is strongly correlated with the reduction of child poverty rates (Bennett, 2008a). The effects of child poverty can be lessened through family support and children's services, but governments also need to tackle family poverty upstream through energetic social, housing and labour policies including income transfers to low-income groups, comprehensive social and family policies, and supportive employment schemes and work training (Bennett, 2008a; OECD, 2006, 2011).

Figure 2.4. Child poverty among children under the age of six (2013)



Notes: Non-OECD countries are shown in blue.

Poverty thresholds are set at 50% of the median equalised disposable income of the entire population.

1. Note by Turkey: The information in this document with reference to “Cyprus” relates to the southern part of the Island. There is no single authority representing both Turkish and Greek Cypriot people on the Island. Turkey recognises the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC). Until a lasting and equitable solution is found within the context of the United Nations, Turkey shall preserve its position concerning the “Cyprus issue”.

Note by all the European Union Member States of the OECD and the European Union: The Republic of Cyprus is recognised by all members of the United Nations with the exception of Turkey. The information in this document relates to the area under the effective control of the Government of the Republic of Cyprus.

*Countries are ranked in descending order of at risk of poverty rate among children under age 6.*

Source: Eurostat (2015b), “At-risk-of-poverty rate by poverty threshold, age and sex (source: SILC)”, Eurostat database, Eurostat, [http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=ilc\\_li02&lang=en](http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/show.do?dataset=ilc_li02&lang=en) (accessed 14 August 2015).

The Latvian government has implemented a number of policies in these areas. These include the amendment of the Law on State Social Allowances increasing child and parental benefits and the co-funding of ECEC places and family day care services, mentioned above. Free meals are also offered to children from very poor families attending ECEC, and several projects have

been implemented to improve the larger social support system for children and their families (see Box 2.4 for one example). These various policy initiatives, although not always co-ordinated or implemented in a coherent manner, seem to have contributed to mitigating the effects of socio-economic disadvantage and enhancing the chances of Latvia’s youngest children enjoying an early education (and care).

**Box 2.4. “Hand-in-Hand for Child Support” – responding to equity challenges in Latvia**

The major cause of children not completing primary school education, which is compulsory in Latvia, include family troubles and insufficient family support networks. A pilot project in the Latvian city of Cesis aimed to reduce dropout rates and improve the social support system for families and children. Through this project, “Hand-in-hand for child support”, 28 people were trained to work directly with parents in ECEC institutions and primary schools. The overall objective of the project, which began in 2008 and ended in 2010, was to develop mechanisms that detect when support for students and their families is needed – and to ensure that these students and families receive timely, relevant assistance. The project worked to improve co-operation between students, parents, schools and other local government institutions in order to solve various everyday issues regarding children and their families. It also helped educators cultivate a positive environment for co-operation within the family context.

*Source:* European Commission (2013a), *Barcelona Objectives: The Development of Childcare Facilities for Young Children in Europe with a View to Sustainable and Inclusive Growth*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, [http://ec.europa.eu/justice/gender-equality/files/documents/130531\\_barcelona\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/justice/gender-equality/files/documents/130531_barcelona_en.pdf).

## Key policy issues

### Policy issue 1: Despite good progress, enrolment of the youngest children is relatively low and unequal across Latvia

Enrolling young children in ECEC does not just benefit children’s development. It can also contribute to ensuring a supply of workers, equality of opportunity for women, family well-being and social inclusion. OECD countries have been expanding ECEC in tandem with the change in women’s participation in the labour force due to a mix of economic pressures requiring women to work and women claiming their equal rights in the workplace and in society at large. Above all, research shows ECEC offers an opportunity for societies to attempt a significant reduction in poverty, inequality and disadvantage. An increasingly competitive, knowledge-based global economy is helping to convince both governments and parents that ECEC is a worthy

investment: an investment in the future academic success and employment prospects of the next generation (OECD, 2006; UNICEF, 2008).

During the last two decades Latvia has made considerable progress in increasing ECEC enrolments, particularly for 5- and 6-year-olds. This corresponds with Latvia's relatively high and increasing female labour force participation. Nevertheless, despite the good progress made, enrolments for children under age 3 are still relatively low compared to many OECD countries. Shortages of places, high costs for private ECEC and an insufficiently diversified ECEC system have played their part; all issues which the Latvian authorities have aimed to resolve in recent years.

### ***Steady progress towards universal enrolment among children aged 3 years old and older***

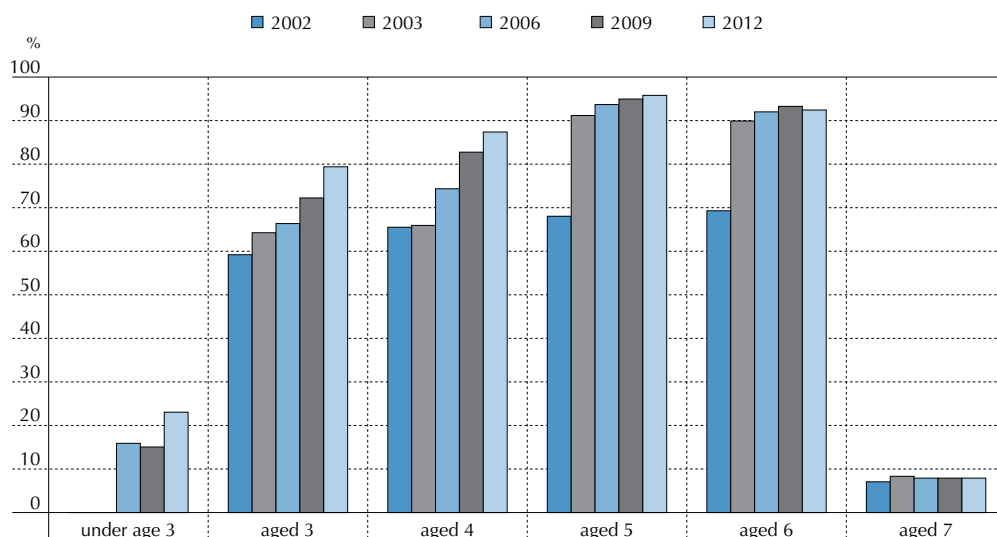
Latvia has had a long tradition of public ECEC dating back to the time when it was still part of the Soviet Union (USSR). This however all changed at the onset of the collapse of the USSR. The years that followed 1991, when Latvia regained independence, were characterised by a transition to a market economy. In this period the country also experienced a pronounced economic recession. With tight public budgets, priority was given to financing basic education over ECEC. A large share of ECEC facilities were closed down as a result. This left many parents with the sole responsibility for the early education and care of their young children and for preparing their children for school, often without alternative support systems in place. As a result enrolments of 3-6 year-olds drastically dropped to a low of 28.4% in 1992 which was almost half that of 3 years before. Enrolments gradually rose as the country climbed out of economic recession.

The year 2002 was an important turning point. An amendment to the General Education Law made ECEC for 5- and 6-year-olds compulsory. Although the economic crisis that struck the country in 2008/09 almost made it optional again, the (financial) commitment of the central government kept it mandatory (Eurydice, 2010). Figure 2.5 shows the result of this commitment, with about 96% of 5-year-olds and 92% of 6-year-olds enrolled in ECEC in 2012.

The figure also shows the considerable proportion of children still enrolled in ECEC at the age of 7 (7.8% in 2012), which is higher than other EU countries with a school starting age of 7. For example, in Estonia, Finland and Sweden, where it is also possible to defer admission to primary school, the proportions of 7-year-olds enrolled in ECEC were much smaller (1.8%, 1.5% and 1.4% respectively) (Eurostat, 2014b). The review team considers this an issue deserving further policy attention, given that late enrolment may limit children's opportunities. Although holding a child back

or delaying the start of ECEC may reduce the ability range in the class, it simultaneously increases the age range, which poses other challenges to the social fabric of the classroom. This may also be an issue of equality of opportunity if certain groups are over-represented among children who start school later (such as children who are relatively young within the age-group, boys and children from ethnic minority backgrounds). Whether this is the case in Latvia is not known.

Figure 2.5. Net enrolment rate of children up to 7 years of age (2002-12)



Sources: Age 3 to 7 – OECD (2014a), *Education at a Glance 2014: OECD Indicators*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/eag-2014-en>; under age 3 (from 2006 to 2012) – Eurostat (2015c), “Formal childcare by age group and duration - % over the population of each age group (source: SILC)”, *Eurostat database*, Eurostat, [http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/product?code=ilc\\_caindforma&language=en&mode=view](http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/product?code=ilc_caindforma&language=en&mode=view) (accessed 15 May 2015).

There is also the possibility that a child’s lack of school “readiness” is caused by special needs that would be better addressed in other ways (Sharp, 2002), but whether this is the case is also unknown. MoES should therefore investigate who these children are and the reasons for their delayed entry into school.

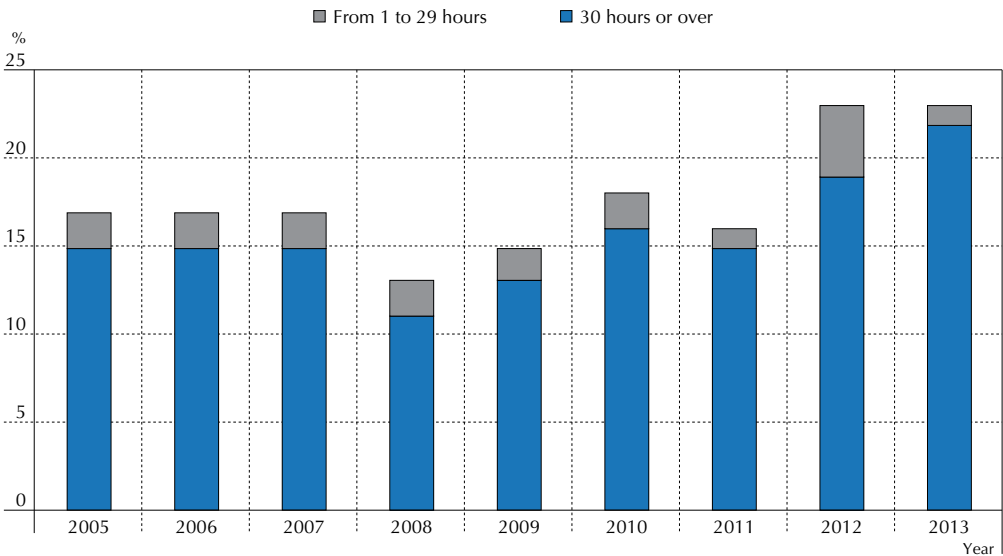
For children aged 4 years and younger, enrolment rates have also increased in the last decade, despite the economic hardships caused by the crisis. In 2012, 87% of 4-year-olds were enrolled in ECEC which was above the OECD average of 84%. With 93.3% of 4- to 6-year-olds enrolled in ECEC in 2012, Latvia is already nearing the EU 2020 benchmark (95% of children from

age 4 to compulsory primary school age), only just below the EU-28 average of 93.9% (European Commission, 2014a). In addition, Figure 2.5 shows the steady progress made during the last decade of increasing enrolments for 3-year-olds. In 2012, 80% of 3-year-olds were enrolled in ECEC which was considerably above the OECD average of 70% and about 20% more than a decade before.

### *Continue efforts to resolve waiting lists and expand participation among children under the age of 3*

The ECEC enrolment of children under 3 has also increased during the last decade, particularly since the amendment of the law in 2011 which entitled children to ECEC from the age of 1.5. Figure 2.6 shows the positive impact this amendment and other policy efforts have had on enrolments of children under the age of 3.

**Figure 2.6. Percentage of children under 3 in formal ECEC, hours per week (2005-13)**



Source: Eurostat (2015c), “Formal childcare by age group and duration - % over the population of each age group (source: SILC)”, *Eurostat database*, Eurostat, [http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/product?code=ilc\\_caindformal&language=en&mode=view](http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/product?code=ilc_caindformal&language=en&mode=view) (accessed 15 May 2015).

Despite this progress however, participation rates are still relatively low compared to many OECD countries. In 2012 almost one in four children (23%) under the age of 3 were enrolled in formal ECEC, which is below

the OECD average (33% in 2010). Some municipalities have struggled to adequately respond to the (growing) demand for such services. Shortages of facilities were fuelled by intensive regional migration towards mostly city areas. As a result parents and guardians in some municipalities, particularly in Riga and other large cities, have faced long waiting lists in recent years (MoES, 2015).

In response Latvia has implemented a range of policies and programmes to expand and diversify ECEC services, including by modernising its ECEC network. For example since 2009 the Latvian government has built or expanded 17 public ECEC institutions. An additional 61 were renovated by June 2014 through the EU-funded “Infrastructure and Services” programme (MoES, 2015).

Other policy measures aimed at expanding access have used the public funding for children in private ECEC institutions. For example, in 2013 the Riga City Council was persuaded by parents to make funding rules for ECEC institutions more liberal, allowing private institutions to apply for municipal funding per child on the same basis as municipal ECEC institution. Another example is the earlier mentioned “Childcare support and child-minder service” pilot project that started in 2013 and provides financial support for parents who need child care support for their children aged 1.5-4 years but are not benefiting from public childcare. The combined co-funding paid for by the state and local government to the child should be enough to decrease parents’ expenditure on private kindergartens or child-minding services.

On the latter, the Ministry of Welfare in 2013 introduced the Child-minder Service in response to the fact that some municipalities had difficulties in providing every child with a place at an ECEC institution. The service is aimed at ensuring safe, meaningful and useful organisation of childcare, stimulating the child’s comprehensive development. Such service is an alternative to organising child-care at an ECEC institution. If the child does not get a place at an ECEC institution financed by the municipality, parents can entrust child care to a child-minder registered on the register of the Child-minder Service (see Box 2.3). Furthermore, the child-minder (family day carer) may receive state aid (EUR 142) and municipal co-financing; thereby partly or fully covering the costs of the service provided to the child (MoES, 2015).

The evidence shows these and other efforts by central government, municipalities and private persons are having their effect. For example in September 2014 there were 11 265 children in Latvia waiting for an ECEC place; a year later this number had dropped to 8 809 (MoES, 2015). MoES should continue to carefully monitor this process as further efforts are likely to be needed to meet the demand for ECEC in urban areas, particularly as migration from rural to urban areas is expected to continue in the years to come.

There has been much policy attention on expanding ECEC services in urban areas in recent years, and for good reasons and with good results although more needs to be done. The children in rural areas should not be overlooked, however. Importantly, as will be discussed in detail in Chapter 3, there are considerable differences in student performance between students in rural and urban areas. Quality ECEC at an early age has the potential to increase children's school readiness and diminish differences in later student performance. Latvia should therefore consider shifting its focus towards strengthening ECEC enrolments in rural areas as long as the services are of good quality.

Increasing enrolment rates in rural areas, especially for the youngest children, may require promoting ECEC among parents. In Norway, for example, outreach programmes and one-stop shops have educated parents about the importance of early child development and kindergarten's role in supporting it. Some municipalities have developed outreach programmes to encourage greater participation by minority-language children in particular (Engel et al., 2015).

Moreover, programmes that involve raising parents' skills and increasing parents' opportunities for work, possibly in conjunction with broader efforts to enhance parental engagement, may increase ECEC participation. In Estonia, within the framework of the Strategy of Children and Families and its associated development plan, parenting programmes have been operating since 2012 covering such topics as child health and development, bullying in ECEC institutions, and children's and parents' rights. Some training courses are provided within ECEC institutions (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat, 2014).

Parenting programmes are often directed at the most vulnerable groups, as in Ireland and the United Kingdom (Wales and Northern Ireland). In the United Kingdom, for example, many schools have been providing extended services including a range of activities, childcare, parenting support such as family learning, and access to targeted and specialist support services (Carpenter et al., 2010).

Another such example comes from Latvia itself where between 2009 and 2013 the "Change Opportunities for Schools" project was implemented, turning small schools into multifunctional educational, cultural and social support centres. The main goal of this school-based community development project was to deal with the issue of social disintegration due to the economic crisis by offering support to maintain and revive small schools in rural areas, small towns and urban peripheries and to develop them into multifunctional community resource centres. While expanding and improving ECEC provision was one of the main tasks, considerable attention was paid to supporting parents through educational opportunities,



social support, and consultations for job seekers and those wishing to start small businesses (Soros Foundation Latvia, n.d.).

Another policy option to strengthen enrolment among younger children living in rural areas is to lower the compulsory age of participation in ECEC. This is often considered an effective option from an equity point of view, as inequalities are likely to exist before schooling starts and tend to grow as long as school is not compulsory (OECD, 2013b). Latvia for now is not considering further lowering the age of compulsory ECEC to 4, but will actively encourage participation of all 4-year-olds. However, it should not limit its efforts to this age group and should concentrate on those children – and their parents – living in rural areas of the country.

## **Policy issue 2: Barriers to developing a high-quality and motivated ECEC profession**

There is a growing body of research suggesting that having well-qualified staff with the right pedagogical knowledge and the ability to create rich and stimulating learning environments is central to the quality of ECEC and ultimately child outcomes (Litjens, diMattia and Viatte, 2010; Huntsman, 2008; Burchinal et al., 2002; OECD, 2006, 2012). Latvia is faced with an ageing ECEC workforce; close to one in five will retire in the next decade, even as it already faces shortages of qualified ECEC teachers, especially in Riga and other large cities. The high workload and relatively low salaries are the main factors in this shortage.

Little is also known about the quality and effectiveness of initial education and professional development in Latvia. These and other inter-related areas concerning the working conditions and quality of ECEC staff point towards the need for a more strategic approach to ensuring sufficient numbers of motivated and quality ECEC staff in the years to come.

### ***Ensuring attractive working conditions***

Research evidence shows that adequate working conditions for staff, for example manageable group sizes and competitive salaries, affect staff job satisfaction and retention, which in turn contributes to the overall quality of the system (OECD, 2012). Competitive wages attract professional staff, increase their job satisfaction and performance, and may result in lower staff turnover rates (CCL, 2006). In Latvia, however, ECEC staff face high workloads and low salaries. These conditions have contributed to ECEC teacher shortages in the larger cities (MoES, 2015) despite several municipalities offering higher wages on top of the minimum salary funded by the state.

Since 2009, the introduction of the Assessment System for Teacher Performance (see Box 3.1, Chapter 3) has enabled ECEC teachers to receive an additional allowance based on their performance. Teachers who have been assessed as performing at Levels 3, 4 or 5 receive an allowance of 8%, 20% and 25% respectively on top of their monthly salary. The evidence from our review suggests that these performance allowances have had a motivating effect on at least some of the ECEC work force.

In addition, as mentioned in Chapter 1, at the time of writing, MoES is piloting a new school funding model that includes increasing salaries of ECEC teachers to EUR 600 per month. The review team considers this to be a positive development that may help attract sufficient numbers of motivated and high-quality graduates to join the profession.

However, the proposed amendments do not resolve the salary differences between ECEC staff and those working at the primary level. Under the new scheme the minimum proposed salary for primary school teachers is EUR 160 higher than that of their peers working in ECEC making it a more attractive career option for those considering education as a profession. Though such differences in pay are common, some OECD countries, like the Flemish Community of Belgium, Portugal and British Columbia (Canada), provide equal salaries to ECEC and primary teaching staff (OECD, 2012). The evidence suggests there is good reason for such measures. For example a research study demonstrated that giving fully qualified ECEC teachers' salaries equivalent to their primary education colleagues resulted in student performance that was two or more times better in literacy and maths (Pianta et al., 2009).

### ***Investing in and guiding the professional development of ECEC staff***

Apart from salaries, municipalities and headmasters can play an important role in providing good working conditions for their staff by facilitating professional development and further training. In Latvia municipalities are responsible for funding the professional development of ECEC staff. There is no clear overview at the national level of the actual investments made by municipalities and institutions in the professional development of their staff.

Furthermore, the minimum requirement to participate in 36 hours professional development every 3 years is low compared with several OECD countries with available data (OECD, 2014a) and is possibly too little. Municipalities are also expected to organise further education courses for ECEC staff but little is known at the central level about the actual participation of staff in such courses nor about their quality.

Latvia has the benefit of an experienced ECEC workforce, but this also means that many left initial education a long time ago. In order for staff to maintain their professional quality, they need to engage in ongoing professional

development (OECD, 2012). The reform of the ECEC curriculum that will follow the implementation of the competency-based curriculum in basic education (see Chapter 3) is likely to increase the need for professional development.

In addition, the evidence shows there is a need to enhance teachers' capacities and change their attitudes to working with children with special education needs (Calite, 2010; Kaša, Liepina and Tuna, 2012; Nimante and Tubele, 2010; AC Konsultācijas, 2007). This issue is of particular importance considering the notable proportion of pre-school aged children that have not been formally diagnosed with special needs, but who have been recognised as actually needing special support in their learning, with estimates ranging from 10-20% (Kaša, Liepina and Tuna, 2012; MoES, 2015).

The key to effective professional development is identifying the right training strategies to help ECEC staff stay up to date with scientifically based methods and curriculum subject knowledge so as to be able to apply this knowledge in their work (Litjens and Taguma, 2010). It also should continue over a longer period of time with staff having regular or long-term opportunities for training (Sheridan, 2001; Urban et al., 2011). Only when learning experiences are targeted on the needs of staff and offer tangible development opportunities can professional development have favourable outcomes (Mitchell and Cubey, 2003).

Again, at the national level there is limited information available on the actual training needs of ECEC staff. The review team was informed that ECEC staff choose professional development courses based on their own preferences, rather than an assessment of their performance and identification of further professional development needs. In Latvia there is also no mandatory requirement to capture the developmental needs identified in professional development plans (MoES, 2015) that could serve as a guidance for professional development planning.

Part of the challenge would seem to lie in the fact that there are no national standards for ECEC professionals to inspire, assess and guide staff in their professional development. Instead founders or heads of ECEC institutions are required to develop their own quality criteria for the purpose of assessing the quality of the work of teachers. A unified understanding of what high-quality ECEC entails in Latvia is lacking.

The five “key areas” of the new Assessment System for Teacher Performance give an indication of the desired competences of Latvian teachers (see Chapter 1). ECEC teachers are also entitled to participate in the system and many have done so since it was introduced in 2009. It enables ECEC teachers to be recognised for their performance and obtain a supplement to their salary depending on their assessed performance level. However, the key areas fail to capture the full range of competences

ECEC staff require for their daily work. They are therefore not suitable for informing ECEC professional development.

Latvia should therefore consider developing national standards for ECEC staff, as well as ensuring that heads of ECEC institutions are adequately trained in using them to evaluate the performance of staff to help identify further learning needs. To do this, Latvia may look towards countries like England (the United Kingdom) or Portugal. England for example introduced the Early Years Teacher Status (EYTS) programme in 2013 to recognise graduate-level staff who had demonstrated that they had met a set of national professional standards (Box 2.5).

### Box 2.5. ECEC teacher standards – examples from England and Portugal

In **England**, the Department for Education introduced the Early Years Teacher Status (EYTS) programme in 2013, building upon the strengths of the Early Years Professional Status programme launched in 2007. With this programme, teachers and trainee teachers who meet the Early Years Teachers' Standards are awarded EYTS that demonstrate that they are specialists in early childhood development. The teachers awarded EYTS are expected to be accountable for achieving the highest possible standard in their professional practice and conduct.

The eight Early Years Teachers' Standards are as follows:

1. Set high expectations which inspire, motivate and challenge all children.
2. Promote good progress and outcomes by children.
3. Demonstrate good knowledge of early learning and Early Years Foundation Stage.
4. Plan education and care taking account of the needs of all children.
5. Adapt education and care to respond to the strengths and needs of all children.
6. Make accurate and productive use of assessment.
7. Safeguard and promote the welfare of children, and provide a safe learning environment.
8. Fulfil wider professional responsibilities.

In 1998, the Ministry of Education in **Portugal** acquired the copyright to the Effective Early Learning Project, initiated in the United Kingdom. The *Desenvolvendo a Qualidade em Parcerias* (DQP), the Portuguese version of this project, focuses on the implementation of a model for assessment and for quality development in pre-school institutions. It can be used in pre-school teacher training, as well as in the monitoring and review of teaching practice in kindergartens. One of the instruments of the DQP is the *Adult Engagement Scale*, which is used by pre-school teachers to evaluate their own practices, and to monitor the process quality of their colleagues in peer reviews. This scale assesses the effectiveness of the teaching-learning process in kindergartens, and the quality of adult intervention.

### Box 2.5. ECEC teacher standards – examples from England and Portugal (*Continued*)

The scale focuses on the types of interactions between the practitioner and the child, and the interactions are classified into three areas:

- **Sensitivity** refers to the attention paid by the practitioner to the child's feelings and emotional well-being. Indicators for sensitivity include empathy, sincerity and authenticity. The observations focus on the way the pre-school teacher responds to the diversity of needs of the children, including conveying to the child the feeling that they are valued and accepted; listening to the child, recognising children's need to receive attention; recognising and responding to children's insecurities and uncertainties; treating children with loving care; and praising and supporting the child.
- **Stimulation** focuses on how the adult stimulates the child's learning and development process. The observations focus on the following actions staff initiate: proposing an activity; providing information; and supporting the development of an activity to stimulate action, reasoning or communication.
- **Autonomy** is the degree of freedom that the practitioner gives to the child, to experiment, give opinions, choose activities, and to express his or her ideas. It also refers to how the adult supports conflict resolution and the establishment of rules and behavioural management. The observation of autonomy focuses on the following aspects: the degree of freedom a child has to choose an activity; the opportunities a child gets to experiment; the freedom to choose and decide how to carry out activities; the respect of staff for the work, ideas and views of the child; the opportunity for children to independently solve problems and conflicts; and the involvement of the children in the making of and compliance with rules.

The results of the engagement scale can be used to discuss, analyse and improve a practitioner's own practice or those of a colleague in an open dialogue. Pre-school teachers are trained on the use of DQP and the Adult Engagement Scale during pre-service education and professional development, and a DQP handbook has been developed to support staff.

*Sources:* National College for Teaching and Leadership (2013), *Teachers' Standards (Early Years)*, National College for Teaching and Leadership, [www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/211646/Early\\_Years\\_Teachers\\_Standards.pdf](http://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/211646/Early_Years_Teachers_Standards.pdf); OECD (2015b), *Starting Strong IV: Monitoring Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264233515-en>.

### ***Ensuring quality and selective initial teacher education***

Research evidence points towards the importance of having high-quality initial teacher education to shape teachers' quality of teaching practice and care for children, as well as their later professional development. Although many OECD countries have recognised the importance of a high level of initial teacher education at the tertiary level, they have shaped their initial teacher education in quite different ways. The duration varies widely across

OECD countries, for example (OECD, 2014a). Among countries considered to have quality ECEC systems are Sweden and Norway, where initial teacher education lasts 3 and 3.5 years respectively.

Initial ECEC teacher training in Latvia lasts 2 years – leading to a first level higher education and preschool teacher qualification – or 4 years if leading to a second level higher pedagogical education and preschool teacher qualification. These programmes, like those in the majority of the OECD countries, include a practicum, meaning practical modules or internships in front of students in schools. The goal of these practical field experiences is to familiarise students with classrooms, and to avoid them having a “reality-shock” at the beginning of their teaching career (Musset, 2009). In Latvia, student teachers undergo a practical period of 6 weeks. Though the practicum periods of initial teacher education programmes varies greatly among countries (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2013; Musset, 2009), the evidence recommends an extended school practice (at least 30 weeks), interwoven with coursework and careful mentoring (Darling-Hammond, 2006).

In addition to the two initial teacher education programmes mentioned above teachers with a teaching qualification for primary education can also become a qualified ECEC teacher after a programme lasting just 72 hours (MoES, 2015). Whether this alternative pathway is too short and risks the quality of these teachers is not known. This is something MoES should consider investigating.

Some OECD countries like Austria, Denmark, Finland and Germany have competitive examinations to enter initial teacher education in an effort to raise standards and draw in the best graduates. Latvia, like Belgium, Estonia, the Netherlands and Poland, has none and once they have completed initial teacher education programmes, candidates face no further requirements to test their quality and motivation before entering the profession, unlike in France, Japan and Korea (OECD, 2014a).

### ***The need for a more strategic approach to developing the ECEC workforce***

These inter-related areas concerning the working conditions and quality of ECEC teachers deserve immediate coherent and strategic policy attention in order to ensure the conditions for a high-quality and motivated workforce. Latvia’s Education Development Guidelines 2014-2020 recognise this issue as one of the key education objectives.

The development of the ECEC workforce is currently left too much to municipalities who vary in their capacity to take on this responsibility. Stronger support and steering by the central government seems needed. The proposed national standards for ECEC staff are a case in point.

In addition more than a quarter of the ECEC workforce (27%) were aged 50 or older in 2012 (Eurostat, 2014a). Demographic decline is likely to diminish the demand for new ECEC staff to some degree, especially in some areas of the country, but the supply of new high-quality ECEC staff will still need a national solution. The recruitment of sufficient numbers of quality ECEC staff and the essential transfer of knowledge and skills by experienced staff to the new generation is something deserving strategic consideration.

### **Policy issue 3: Strengthening the systematic data collection, monitoring and use of data on ECEC**

As the benefits of ECEC are increasingly recognised and investment grows, it is becoming critical to know whether ECEC systems are delivering high-quality services. Moreover, understanding how an ECEC system performs is not only important for accountability, but also to improve policy design and implementation and inform parents about the quality of what is available (Levitt, Janta and Wegrich, 2008).

The mere existence of ECEC is not itself a guarantor of quality. Good ECEC has an enormous potential for giving children the best possible start in life, limiting early disadvantage, advancing equal opportunities for women, boosting educational achievement and investing in citizenship. Poor-quality ECEC, on the other hand, has the potential for both immediate and long-term harm (OECD, 2012; UNICEF, 2008) – making monitoring of quality essential.

At present little is known about the quality of ECEC at the national level, although some data suggest there is reason for concern. There is no systematic approach to monitoring at the system level, including an underdeveloped use of research to inform policy and practice. At the local level, Latvia has no uniform monitoring approaches and limited upwards reporting.

#### ***Underdeveloped system-level monitoring of ECEC***

The quality of ECEC is a multi-faceted concept (Box 2.6) and its interpretations vary across countries, making this a complex policy area. Developing adequate monitoring tools is becoming an increasingly vital issue as they would provide much-needed information on system performance. In order to use them to full effect, governments need to define the purpose and scope of their monitoring efforts; this may include assessing needs for staff training or mentoring, making funding decisions, adjusting curricula or policy changes.

Most often, countries monitor minimum standards or child outcomes (the latter predominantly in Anglo-Saxon countries; OECD, 2006). The tools

available include programme records, structured child observations and learning outcomes, but they need to be chosen carefully as they each provide different information.

### Box 2.6. Quality of ECEC: A multi-faceted concept

The 2006 *Starting Strong II* report offers a coherent framework to understand the different aspects of quality from the perspective of overall ECEC governance. It has seven inter-related elements:

**Orientation quality:** the type and level of attention that a government brings to early childhood policy, e.g. through national legislation, regulations and policy initiatives.

**Structural quality:** the overarching structures needed to ensure quality in ECEC, which is ensured by the clear formulation and enforcement of legislation or regulations. These may include the quality of the physical environment, staff training levels, etc.

**Educational concept and practice:** centres' educational concepts and practice are generally guided by the national curriculum framework which sets out the key goals of the early childhood system.

**Interaction or process quality:** the warmth and quality of the pedagogical relationship between educators and children, the quality of interaction between children themselves, and the quality of relationships within the educator team figure among the progress goals most frequently cited.

**Operational quality:** operational quality is maintained by leadership that motivates and encourages working as a team and information sharing. It includes regular planning at centre and classroom level, opportunities for staff to engage in continuous professional and career development and time allowed for child observation.

**Child-outcome quality or performance standards:** ECEC services are provided not only to facilitate the labour market or other aims but above all to improve the present and future well-being of children.

**Standards pertaining to parent/community outreach and involvement:** this area is mentioned less than other quality standards in national regulations and curricula, but can emerge strongly in the requirements for targeted and local ECEC programmes.

Source: OECD (2006), *Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264035461-en>.

In recent years, Latvia has tried to improve its system-level monitoring of ECEC. Since 2009 the State Education Information System has collected data about the children in ECEC institutions, as well as information on the staff working there. In January 2015 the Childcare Register was incorporated into the system to gain a more coherent overview of the full ECEC system (MoES, 2015).



Despite these recent efforts, the data collection, monitoring, and use of data and research for policy making all require considerable improvement, particularly in certain areas. For example, Calite (2010) noted the lack of accurate data about the number of children with disabilities in ECEC.

Furthermore, very little is known about the actual quality of ECEC in Latvia. The State Pre-school Education Guidelines (2012) as mentioned describe the pedagogical process, content and learning outcomes of ECEC programmes, and how the evaluation process is to be organised. There are no national-level data available on the learning outcomes of children in ECEC, however, which one can argue leaves the country guessing about the quality and effectiveness of ECEC provision. In Latvia, the monitoring of children's development is done solely by municipalities, whose approaches tend to vary (MoES, 2015), due to the absence of any national assessment instrument.

The evidence suggests this is an issue of concern. According to the PISA 2012 results, in most countries with available data, students who reported having attended ECEC for more than one year performed better in mathematics than those who reported they had not, even after accounting for students' socio-economic status. Latvia was one of the few exceptions where such a relationship was not observed (OECD, 2013a). Though one can argue these data only provide an insight into the quality of Latvian ECEC in the early 2000s, the lack of national data sources makes it hard to dispute these findings.

Monitoring of child developmental and learning outcomes is crucial to informing ECEC staff and families about children's skills and development. Such knowledge can improve staff interactions with children and facilitate the adaptation of curricula and standards to meet their needs (Litjens, 2013). In addition, the monitoring of ECEC can show how effective ECEC interventions or programmes have been.

The literature urges caution, however, and notes the importance of ensuring monitoring tools are developmentally appropriate (Copple and Bredekamp, 2009; Gestwicki, 2011; Kostelnik et al., 2011; Meisels and Atkins-Burnett, 2000; Sattler, 1998; Saracho and Spodek, 2013). The tools should be designed to identify children's learning needs, abilities and skills according to their age groups. The best tool will vary according to the knowledge and skills children have or are expected to have at different developmental stages. For instance, young children are usually not able to complete a paper-and-pencil test. Children's comprehensive development is also not just reflected in and affected by academic knowledge and cognitive skills, but also by physical well-being, motor development, social and emotional development, and approaches towards learning (Barblett and Maloney, 2010; Raver and Knitzer, 2002; Snow, 2007).

The review team learned that Latvia is in fact considering a pilot project (to be funded through the European Social Fund) to systematically monitor child development and outcomes. We agree this pilot initiative is important for exploring a suitable approach for monitoring the developmental outcomes of children in ECEC. The Early Development Index (EDI) may serve as a source of inspiration for this effort. The EDI is a population-level measure of children's development or well-being which was originally developed in Ontario, Canada. Other countries have since developed their own EDI according to their cultural and societal needs. For instance, Australia developed the Australian Early Development Index. The EDI consists of a checklist on children's development which is completed by teachers. The results are aggregated at the group level (school, neighbourhood, city, etc.) to provide a population-based measure of community, and across the country (if implemented at country level). The checklist measures five key domains of early childhood development: 1) physical health and well-being; 2) social competence; 3) emotional maturity; 4) language and cognitive skills (school-based); and 5) communication skills and general knowledge. The data are not reported at the child or class level which means they are not used as a diagnostic tool for individual children or to assess their school readiness. The results of the EDI do allow local authorities, communities or providers to assess how local children are developing relative to other children (Litjens, 2013).

### ***Strengthening the links between research, policy and practice***

MoES has made good use of research to inform policy making at other levels of education (see Chapters 4 and 5). It should expand this good practice to the field of ECEC, which could benefit greatly from a stronger use of research to inform policy and practices. Budget constraints have obviously been a key factor in the recent past, but the review team formed the impression that within MoES the “culture” of using research as an instrument for policy making is also not well developed. It would seem key for MoES to develop its own analytical capacity to use research and other evaluation results to improve its policies.

In addition, MoES should consider increasing its investment in researching the quality and equity of ECEC. A strategic approach could allow efforts and resources to be focused and support the use of research findings in the policy-making process. An example to follow might be Norway which adopted an overall strategy for educational research in 2008, including an extensive research programme on ECEC (Box 2.7). That strategy directed the strengthening of educational research on ECEC in Norway, an effort that continues to this day.

### Box 2.7. Strategic use of research on ECEC in Norway

In 2008, the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research adopted an overall strategy for educational research, including research on and for *barnehager* (kindergartens). The strategy pointed out that, previously, research on ECEC tended to address questions relating to accessibility, distribution and the cash-for-care benefit rather than questions relating to the quality, content and tasks of *barnehager*. The strategies *Kunnskap for Kvalitet* (2008–2013) (Knowledge for Quality) and *Kvalitet og Relevans* (2014–2019) (Quality and Relevance) directed the work of strengthening educational research.

The goals are:

- to strengthen the expert communities that conduct research on education
- to raise the quality and relevance of the research
- to stimulate innovation and closer co-operation between research communities in Scandinavia, Europe and worldwide
- to facilitate the use of knowledge and research results in governance, administration and practice in the education sector.

Norway also carries out surveys of parents' opinions and consults them on a regular basis about any difficulties and wishes they have about ECEC services. These play a critical role in maintaining quality, affordability and transparency in the spending of budgets. National surveys and parent consultations provide information about ease of access, opening hours, the administration and distribution of places, family background, quality standards, parents' perception of the well-being of children, and the provision of meals and healthcare for children.

*Source:* Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research (2015), *Background Report from Norway 2014: OECD – Thematic Review of Early Childhood Education and Care Policy 2014*, Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, Oslo.

### ***Moving towards a unified approach to monitoring service quality***

Evaluating the quality of an ECEC setting (referred to as service quality) is often conducted for accountability purposes. These purposes can be for external or internal accountability (Adams and Kirst, 1999; Levitt, Janta and Wegrich, 2008). The latter focuses on internal staff processes and practices. OECD countries differ as to where the responsibility for monitoring service quality lies: some have a central authority, in others responsibility is devolved to lower levels of government, as is the case in the Scandinavian countries for example.

In Latvia, the responsibility for evaluating service quality is devolved to municipalities. Municipalities are also expected to evaluate and supervise the work of ECEC institutions and help resolve any issues, but there is no requirement in law for them to actually do this.

Furthermore, as mentioned, there are no state regulations on the organisation of day-to-day activities in ECEC which are instead defined by the founder of the ECEC institution. There are common recommendations on the organisation of early education included in the State Pre-school Education Guidelines. Despite these and other guidelines and regulations approaches to evaluating service quality among municipalities vary, with little guidance provided by the central government as to how this should be done.

There is also no requirement to report upwards. As a result, little is known about service quality at the national level and this, importantly, also includes the quality of staff. Our conclusion therefore is that stronger accountability to and supervision by the central government should be considered, especially if concerns about the quality of ECEC are supported by further evidence.

ECEC institutions, like any other type of organisation, need feedback on their performance to help them identify how to improve. Some countries like Denmark, Scotland and Sweden have promoted internal evaluations or self-assessments to provide the basis for external evaluations as well as to help institutions reflect on the quality of their pedagogical staff, care environment and other structural aspects (Litjens, 2013). In Sweden, for example, each ECEC setting is expected to prepare an annual evaluation report based on an internal assessment exercise (OECD, 2012).

Scotland provides us with another example. Its Inspectorate of Education developed “The Child at the Centre: Self-Evaluation in the Early Years” (Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Education, 2007), a resource document to support ECEC institutions in the self-assessment process. At the centre of the self-evaluation process is a framework of quality indicators arranged around six questions which the Inspectorate of Education, and other agencies, have adopted for evaluation purposes: 1) what outcomes have we achieved?; 2) How well do we meet the needs of our centre community?; 3) How good is the education we provide?; 4) How good is our management?; 5) How good is our leadership?; 6) What is our capacity for improvement?

Latvia should consider following these examples and promoting internal evaluations. It should require ECEC institutions to develop and publish self-evaluation reports, as it already does for schools (see Chapter 3). Providing resource documents and training on how to use them will be key to the successful implementation of such a policy measure.

Further, we would like to note there would seem to be much to gain from improving the systematic identification and dissemination of “good practices” and innovations. There are some, if not many, examples of good practices or innovations in Latvia that could inform and support ECEC practitioners working in other parts of the country. However at present these are often not (well) known beyond the municipality border, partly as a result

of the absence of a national policy to deliberately identify and disseminate such practices throughout the Latvian ECEC system and beyond.

#### **Policy issue 4: Governance and financing hamper equal access to quality ECEC**

Can a decentralised system guarantee reasonably equal treatment of all children across a country? This is a key question posed in the OECD *Starting Strong II* publication, and one that many countries which have devolved responsibilities for ECEC are struggling with. It is also a significant challenge faced by many of Latvia's municipalities, in particular the smaller ones. Concerns have been raised in recent years about their (financial) capacity to effectively manage their local education systems, as well as other social services (OECD, 2014b, 2015a). In addition, the evidence suggests family and child benefits are not sufficiently targeted towards low-income families (OECD, 2015a).

##### ***The need to review governance and funding of ECEC services***

Latvia's local government reform in 2009 aimed to establish administrative territories (regions) capable of promoting economic development in association with local governments and to ensure high-quality provision of services. This has resulted in a consolidation of municipal governments and created an intermediate level of government. Yet the disparity in local government sizes still poses challenges in terms of capacity and resources (OECD, 2015a) which in turn risks affecting the quality of ECEC services provided.

In principle, variations in municipal funding capacity should be evened out, at least to some extent. For example the government has rules on the minimum spending per child per year on ECEC overall (Kaša, Liepina and Tuna, 2012), and the local government equalisation fund and/or the transfer of social benefits to parents and guardians should also even out funding. The evidence however shows that inequality remains, partly due to the inadequacy of the country's equalisation fund, and because social benefits are not properly targeted (OECD, 2015a). Less than 20% of all social benefits go to the poorest quintile, while the richest quintile receives almost 27%. In addition, municipalities vary considerably in the generosity of their social security, with Riga being the most generous.

Latvia is planned to review the local government equalisation fund which indeed would seem essential to help to diminishing disparities in funding capacity between municipalities. A more targeted approach to the provision of child and family benefits may also be needed to diminish family and child poverty (OECD, 2015a), and enhance access to ECEC for children from the poorest families.

At present equal access to high-quality ECEC services partly depends on local financial capacity as well as on the political will to invest. This

is particularly an issue for ECEC provision for children under five, where central government does not fund the salaries of ECEC staff. Staff working in poorer municipalities may also have less opportunity to participate in good quality professional development programmes than their peers in the more prosperous parts of the country, jeopardising children's rights to equal quality ECEC.

Young children with special education needs and their families are another example. While central government funding is provided for special ECEC institutions for all ages from 1 to 7 years old, no such funding is provided for children with special needs below the age of five who are enrolled in regular institutions. These institutions instead depend solely on the municipal budget, which varies considerably among municipalities (MoES, 2015; OECD, 2015a), affecting their capacity to provide additional support to those children that need it most. Such a situation is critical as early intervention is crucial for mitigating and overcoming developmental disorders (EADSNE, 2010). In response to this situation MoES intends to review funding arrangements to facilitate the integration of children with special education needs into regular schools. The review team agrees this is an important measure to ensure equal access to ECEC throughout Latvia.

In addition, there would seem to be scope for further collaboration between municipalities, or a reduction in their number through mergers. The review team learned that some municipalities have established collaborations with others to enhance their capacity which is a positive development that should be encouraged. Others however are unlikely to do so unless motivated by the central government for example through financial incentives.

Latvia may also look towards the examples of some OECD countries that have clustered certain numbers of ECEC institutions and schools – sometimes deliberately crossing municipal boundaries – as a means to overcome professional isolation and pool resources and expertise, and to establish best practice in curriculum and planning implementation (Ares Abalde, 2014). For example in Portugal the government has been reorganising its public school network around school clusters since 2006. A typical school cluster consists of five to ten pre-schools and primary schools with one secondary school. This reorganisation aims to facilitate transitions across education levels, as well as to overcome geographical isolation and social exclusion. In 2012, a quarter of all pre-schools, primary and secondary schools were in clusters. Central to the implementation process has been widespread consultation with key partners including central, regional and local government, school clusters, and executive boards and unions. Financial incentives for municipalities have also played their part (Santiago, 2012; Matthews et al., 2008).

## Recommendations

The following policy recommendations can help the Latvian government meet the challenges presented above and advance its policy agenda for ensuring equal access to a quality early childhood education and care for all of Latvia's youngest children.

### ***Recommendation 1: Continue expanding ECEC services, in particular in rural areas and for the youngest children***

During the last two decades Latvia has made good progress in expanding access to ECEC. A range of policy measures by the central government and municipalities have helped ensure that the vast majority of Latvian children from the age of three onwards nowadays participate in ECEC, with participation rates surpassing those of many OECD countries.

Good progress has also been made in recent years to resolve the waiting lists in Riga and some other larger cities and expand access to ECEC services. These efforts by the central government and municipalities should be continued and particular attention should be paid to expanding access to ECEC services for children aged three and younger. Latvia should carefully monitor the impact of these efforts and ensure services are of quality; and take action where found needed.

In addition, Latvia should consider shifting its policy attention to children living in rural areas. Though Latvia does not intend to lower the age of compulsory ECEC to 4 years in the near future, it should consider this an option for the longer term. The government has indicated it will encourage the participation in ECEC among 4-year-olds, but should not limit efforts to this age group. In particular, efforts to enhance participation should focus on those young children – and their parents – living in rural areas of the country. Outreach programmes informed by those of Norway or Latvia's own "Change Opportunities for Schools" project could be considered for this.

Furthermore, Latvia should investigate the make up of the relatively large group of 7-year-olds still in ECEC, and the reasons for their delayed entry into primary school. Informed policy actions should follow this investigation.

With a longer-term perspective in mind, Latvia should carefully monitor whether current and future needs for ECEC services are being met. In a context of rapidly changing demographics this should not be considered a one-time exercise but instead should be regularly repeated and fed into an ongoing national dialogue on the future size and quality of the country's ECEC services.

***Recommendation 2: Take a strategic approach to improving the quality and motivation of ECEC staff***

Despite efforts to improve the working conditions and quality of ECEC staff in recent years, the human resource development of ECEC staff remains a fragmented and underdeveloped area of policy that is shared between the central government and municipalities. Although less so than other levels of education, Latvia's ECEC work force is ageing and together with a decline in the numbers of children these conditions call for a more strategic and national approach to human resource development of ECEC staff. The recruitment of sufficient numbers of quality ECEC staff and the essential transfer of knowledge and skills by experienced staff to the new generation is also something deserving strategic consideration.

Such a strategic approach depends on the careful planning and monitoring of the workforce. Projections and regular discussions between MoES and municipalities should form the basis for strategic workforce planning.

A well-designed career structure for ECEC staff should be central to Latvia's strategic approach to human resource development. This requires also looking into the salary structure of staff. While writing this report Latvia is considering increasing the salaries of ECEC teachers. This may indeed help in drawing the best graduates into the profession and further motivate those already working in it.

Latvia currently lacks national professional standards for ECEC staff, leaving room for variable interpretations of what ECEC staff should know and be able to do. Such standards, outlining the professional expectations at all stages – from the beginning of their career to advanced levels – should be developed to inform appraisals, guide the professional development of staff and form the basis of well-designed career structure. Head teachers' capacity to assess staff, including providing effective feedback and coaching to support professional development, should not be overlooked. Latvia should also consider making professional development plans for ECEC staff mandatory. Such plans can help ensure that the professional development and growth of staff is linked to that of the ECEC institution and ultimately that of the children in it.

Furthermore, entry into initial education and the profession should become more selective, which is also an issue for other levels of education (see Chapter 3). Such a measure may help raise the status of the profession and further test the quality and motivation of aspiring ECEC staff. Lastly, Latvia should consider investigating the quality of initial teacher education and professional development programmes, which again is also an issue for other levels of education (see Chapter 3). For example, there is an apparent need to strengthen teachers' preparation for identifying and working with children with special needs.



### ***Recommendation 3: Strengthen data collection, monitoring and use of research***

Despite efforts to improve the monitoring and evaluation of ECEC in recent years, little is known about the quality of ECEC in Latvia, although some data suggest there is reason for concern. Latvia should therefore further strengthen its data collection at a national level, and its monitoring and use of data and research evidence on ECEC.

An in-depth understanding of the quality and effectiveness of ECEC programmes and dissemination of good practices and innovations, requires the systematic monitoring of developmental outcomes of children in ECEC, as well as the quality of staff working in it. At present little information is available on either at the national level. MoES is considering a pilot project to systematically monitor child development and outcomes of ECEC. The review team agrees this pilot initiative is important for exploring a suitable approach for monitoring child development and outcomes of ECEC. Similarly Latvia should consider monitoring the quality of its ECEC staff. The proposed national standards for ECEC staff are to serve as a key input of such an effort.

In addition, MoES should promote and provide clearer guidance to municipalities and ECEC institutions on how to conduct self-evaluations. Experiences from other countries show the value of developing resource documents including frameworks of quality indicators for this purpose.

Furthermore, MoES should consider expanding the SEQs's mandate to include evaluating ECEC programmes, or at least the compulsory programmes for 5- and 6-year-olds initially. It should increase its efforts to collect and disseminate good practice to enhance peer learning and motivate the ECEC profession throughout the system, perhaps through printed materials and websites. Both MoES and the SEQs are well placed to do this.

To help implement these recommendations, MoES should consider developing a well-resourced research programme to investigate the conditions that lead to improvements in the quality and equity of ECEC services. It should pursue a comprehensive, multi-disciplinary approach to research, prioritising those topics which need immediate policy attention, such as disadvantaged children and children with special needs.

The review team found considerable scope to enhance the quality of the data collected, enabling MoES make greater use of educational data and research to monitor and evaluate policy initiatives. Investing in the assessment and evaluation capacity of MoES staff is also essential. To supplement its research capacity, MoES could consider supporting the establishment of an autonomous national agency or institute with responsibility for conducting research in ECEC and other educational topics. It should also have responsibility for disseminating research findings.

***Recommendation 4: Review the governance and financing arrangements of ECEC***

During the last two decades Latvia has decentralised social services and reformed its administrative structure, among others, with the aim of ensuring high-quality provision of services. Despite these efforts some municipalities, especially the smaller ones, lack the capacity and resources to deliver on this aim. This is particularly an issue for ECEC services for children under five, where central government does not fund the salaries of ECEC staff.

Latvia should therefore review the current governance and funding arrangements for ECEC. In particular it should use funding to promote the integration of children with special education needs in regular ECEC institutions. In addition, it should ensure that ECEC staff working in poorer municipalities have equal access to quality professional development opportunities. This could be done through various means including discretionary funding or targeted programmes. The proposed measures to monitor system and service quality (Recommendation 3) are also important for strengthening public accountability and ensuring children's rights to equal quality ECEC.

In addition, the revision of the local government equalisation fund is essential to diminishing disparities in funding capacity between municipalities. Combined with a more targeted approach to the provision of child and family benefits, as already recommended by the OECD (OECD, 2015a), family and child poverty could be reduced, and access to ECEC for children from the poorest families enhanced. Further, Latvia should consider giving municipalities incentives to collaborate to enhance their capacity, or even amalgamate with other municipalities, which apart from improving the quality and equity of ECEC services could bring efficiency savings.

## Note

1. The Education Law states that education can be provided at home until Grade 4.

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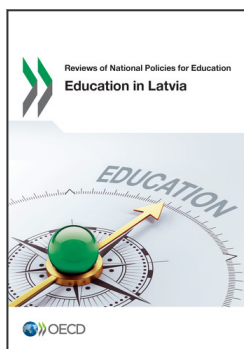


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