

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

A brief on the EU technical support project for Austria (2022-2024)



Background

Early childhood offers a critical window of opportunity to shape the trajectory of a child's holistic development and build a foundation for their future. The European Pillar of Social Rights states that all children have the right to affordable Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) of good quality. It is in the earliest years of a child's life that the foundation and capacity to learn is laid, and this is built on throughout life. Learning is an incremental process; building a strong foundation in the early years is a precondition for higher level competence development and educational success as much as it is essential for health and the well-being of children. Participating in ECEC for children aged 0 to 6 and interaction with well-trained and quality ECEC professionals is beneficial for all children and especially beneficial for children of a disadvantaged background. It helps by preventing the formation of early skills gaps and thus it is an essential tool to fight inequalities and educational poverty. Quality, affordable and accessible ECEC also allows for increased parental-workforce participation.

The demand for ECEC for children from 0 to 6 is rising in Austria, however, a shortage in trained ECEC professionals has led to limited provision and decreased enrolment rates, specifically among children aged 0-3 years old. The main source of this shortage has been tied to the following:

- There are differing staffing and employment conditions for ECEC staff across Länder (provinces) and the municipalities including differences in salaries and salary schemes (Austria has over 60 different schemes), group sizes, the professional staff-child ratio, and service-related matters such as preparation time without direct child services.
- The ECEC profession is not perceived to be attractive, especially by male students, which is certainly also strongly influenced by the low level of recognition of the profession in society and the low salary.
- There is a high fluctuation of ECEC professionals due to retirement and to moving towards employers or regions offering more attractive working conditions.

The lack of ECEC staff as well as large group sizes and high fluctuation thus have severe negative effects on many children with disadvantaged backgrounds as the linguistic support cannot be guaranteed at the highest possible quality. Tackling the problem of framework conditions of ECEC staff has an impact on the quality of early childhood education and thus the improvement of children's wellbeing in ECEC services to guarantee their rights.

The Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research is committed to strengthening ECEC quality and aligning provision to EU standards. As such, the ministry has requested technical support through the European Union's Technical Support Instrument (TSI), the EU programme that provides tailor-made technical expertise to EU Member States to design and implement reforms. Support is requested in the area of ECEC, with the purpose of improving ECEC staff conditions, quality, and capacity to enhance the quality of education for young children in Austria.

Projected intended impact and outcomes

The expected long-term effect of this project is a strengthened quality, availability, equity and stability of ECEC workforce in Austria and reduced staff shortages. This will contribute to better access to and quality of ECEC services in the country. The specific objectives of this TSI Project will be achieved through the following outcomes:



Outcome 1: The Austrian authorities have gained extensive knowledge of the current status of the ECEC sector and implications for staffing.



Outcome 2: The Austrian authorities at federal and province level have jointly developed a Model Framework for ECEC Staffing Quality and Conditions, to serve as a template/good practice for adaptation and adoption at the province level, as well as a Monitoring and Evaluation Framework for quality control and coordination of ECEC.



Outcome 3: Austrian authorities (federal and province level) agree on a detailed implementation strategy on the improvement of framework conditions and recruitment in ECEC, including a nationwide action plan and a roadmap for implementation.



Outcome 4: Based on concepts and recommendations developed by the project, the Austrian authorities (federal and province level) conduct a national communication and advocacy campaign aimed at increasing uptake of the ECEC profession.

By aiming to improve the framework conditions for staff in early childhood education and care (0-6 years) and therefore raise staff supply and quality in the sector, the TSI project will indirectly contribute to the success of the quantitative expansion of elementary education envisaged by Austria under the national Recovery and Resilience Plan, supported by the EU through NextGenerationEU.

Key Project Deliverables

The project has the following key activities and outputs to achieve the above outcomes:

- A project inception report and kick-off meeting
- A report on a desk review of ECEC workforce conditions in Austria
- A report on European good practice on strengthening ECEC workforce conditions
- A sector workforce analysis diagnostic report
- Consolidated recommendations report
- Model framework for ECEC staffing quality and conditions
- ECEC workforce monitoring and evaluation framework and guidance document
- Recommendations to inform an implementation strategy for improving ECEC Framework conditions, with roadmap and action plan.
- Communication strategy and associated tools for use in the conduction of a national communication and advocacy campaign aimed at increasing uptake of ECEC profession
- Consolidated project outputs, findings, recommendations and next steps in the form of a final project summary report.

Project Management Structure

