



European Education Area Strategic Framework Working Group on Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)

*Improving the governance of monitoring and
evaluation of quality in Early Childhood Education
and Care (ECEC) – Executive Summary*



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Improving the governance of monitoring and evaluation of quality in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)

Executive summary

The whole report is available in English at
<https://wikis.ec.europa.eu/display/EAC/ECEC+Documents>

This publication is the second report of the current Working Group (WG) on Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), which was established in 2021 as part of a new generation of WGs under the Commission's Communication on Achieving the European Education Area by 2025 (EEA communication, 30 September 2020)¹, as well as the Council Resolution on a Strategic Framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training towards the European Education Area and Beyond (Resolution, 18 February 2021).²

The objective of the WG on ECEC is to:

- facilitate mutual learning among representatives from national authorities in charge of ECEC, stakeholders and international organisations, provide advice and expertise to the European Commission,
- and offer guidance to participating countries in implementing the 2019 Council Recommendation for High-Quality ECEC systems and the European Quality Framework for ECEC.³

The WG is also foreseen to produce concrete outputs in support of participating countries' national reforms, including this present report.

Under the current mandate, the main focus of the ECEC WG is on **the monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of quality in ECEC**. The research findings, shared definitions and key questions upon which the ECEC WG's current work is based are laid out in detail in the [Background Note](#), which further explains that the WG's main activities are structured around the following three topics:

1. **Purposes, values and principles** – examining the values that should underpin the design of M&E processes, as well as the purposes that M&E of ECEC quality should aim to fulfil; (see [1st WG report](#))
2. **Coordinating efforts across levels** – considering how best to ensure that M&E processes are streamlined across the local, regional, and national level, as well as being coordinated across ECEC centres;
3. **Involvement of stakeholders** – exploring the benefits of involving children, parents, ECEC staff and stakeholder representatives in M&E processes, as well as the most effective ways to do so.

This second report presents the results of the WG's discussions on Topic 2 (**coordinating monitoring and evaluation processes across levels**), and more specifically on the following key questions:

- **How can we ensure that M&E processes and results are effectively and efficiently used to improve ECEC policies and the quality of ECEC provision across all level of the system and horizontally across split systems?**
- **How to coordinate M&E processes and tools across all levels of the system (centre, local, regional and national), including in split systems?**

¹ Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on Achieving the European Education Area by 2025. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0625&from=EN>

² Council Resolution on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area and beyond (2021-2030). <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/48584/st06289-re01-en21.pdf>

³ Council Recommendation of 22 May 2019 on High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems. [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:32019H0605\(01\)&from=EN](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:32019H0605(01)&from=EN)

To answer these key questions, this main content of the report is structured into five chapters which explore:

- the potential **benefits to investing in coordinated approaches to the M&E of quality** in ECEC provision
- the **policy challenges experienced by European countries** in coordinating M&E functions, processes & tools across levels
- an **overview of the situation of European countries in relation to coordinating M&E efforts across levels**, drawing on the Eurydice 2019 report “*Key data on early childhood education and care in Europe*”
- the **strategies developed by EU Members States to overcome their experienced challenges** in coordinating M&E processes, and **examples of inspiring practices** which have been collected through case studies
- **pointers for policy developments**, drawing on the lessons learnt from the cross-national analysis of case studies.

Investing in coordinated approaches to the M&E of quality in ECEC provision: potential benefits

Research has demonstrated that **structural quality** (staff-to-child ratios, group sizes, minimum staff qualifications, safety of buildings, etc.) **alone is not sufficient to yield benefits for children. What is most impactful for children’s development is** the quality of the daily interactions that children experience with each other, staff, teachers, materials and activities, which is together known as **process quality**.

To improve the ECEC system as a whole, both the structural quality and the process quality of ECEC services need to be made visible and interpretable to all stakeholders involved. Setting up robust data systems can generate information on the strengths and weaknesses of the sector, support coherency, and strengthen infrastructure for research on ECEC. **Developing coordinated monitoring and evaluation processes can better promote improvements in ECEC, especially if tools are aligned and feedback loops exist across all levels**, data from individual ECEC settings are analysed at broader levels, and the **roles of different stakeholders in M&E across ECEC levels are clearly defined**.

The advantages of streamlined and coherent M&E systems in ECEC are the following:

- *Enabling a shared vision of quality pedagogy (especially process quality), to inform each individual ECEC setting*
- *Ensuring that this shared vision of quality permeates across all types of ECEC provision*
- *Enabling authorities at higher levels to be aware of, and responsive to, needs identified at the more granular level (especially at high-need districts or centres)*
- *Creating feedback loops in which individual-level findings can be aggregated and converted into changes at higher levels of policy-making, while new policy changes or approaches at higher levels of the ECEC system can feed into the practices of individual ECEC centres.*

Challenges in coordinating M&E functions, processes and tools

Most European countries face a number of challenges in coordinating M&E for quality ECEC across all levels of responsibilities.

- *A main challenge is related to aligning M&E processes in complex governance arrangements⁴ according to which ECEC provision is regulated, funded and managed in each country. This can lead to a fragmented data architecture which has a negative impact on the usability of data for developing comprehensive quality improvement initiatives.*
 - In centralised systems, the challenge is that while data collection and analysis might be easier at central level, it might be more difficult to develop quality improvement initiatives that are tailored to localised needs.
 - In decentralised systems, the situation is inverted, with data collection, aggregation, and analysis across the different responsibilities of regional and local authorities being more difficult, while local needs are more easily heard.
 - In integrated systems, where a single ministry coordinates ECEC provision, M&E processes are usually carried out within a unitary approach for services attended by children aged 0 till compulsory primary school age, thus facilitating coherent quality development initiatives for the whole ECEC sector. However, the responsibilities for implementing M&E might be split across different agencies, inspectorates, or regional and local authorities. Also, the quality frameworks defined at central level for M&E can be very broad, and therefore the actual tools and indicators used for M&E may differ dramatically across regions.
 - In split systems, where the responsibilities for M&E and the quality of ECEC provision are divided between different ministries, and different regional and local authorities, there are risks of increased fragmentation in M&E initiatives.
- *A lack of coordination across bodies responsible for M&E might not only produce inconsistencies in data collection, but also create gaps between quality assurance and improvement mechanisms. In this sense, policy makers might struggle to design M&E systems that encourage better quality, as it is easier to focus on ensuring that ECEC providers simply comply with minimum standards.*

⁴ **Governance arrangements** refer to the way in which responsibilities for regulation, funding and monitoring of ECEC provision are shared across different **levels of government** as well as across **different authorities** at the relevant level of jurisdiction.

Levels of government:

- **Central:** refers to the authorities responsible for ECEC at the highest level of governance in a country. Depending on the governance structure of the country, these authorities may or may not exert the key power of decision over ECEC policies and implementation. Also referred to as the national government.
- **Regional or sub-regional:** refers to decentralised level of governance. It is located at state or province level in the vast majority of countries, and may be referred to as communities, Länder, etc. Regional authorities in federal countries are often responsible for ECEC in their particular region.
- **Local:** refers to the government responsible for the local jurisdiction, located at city/town level in the vast majority of countries, e.g. municipality, district, commune, etc. In some countries, the municipalities take the main responsibility for ECEC settings.

Integrated system: Refers to a system in which the responsibilities for ECEC provision are under one (leading) authority (at the national and/or regional level), e.g. the education ministry, ministry of social welfare or another authority. Those responsibilities may stretch from curriculum development to standard-setting, monitoring or financing.

Split system: Refers to a system in which the responsibilities for ECEC services are split across different authorities (at the national and/or regional level), where only the settings for older children are under the responsibility of an educational authority, while those for younger children are under a different authority.

- *Aligning external and internal evaluation*⁵ *processes and tools for quality enhancement is another challenge.* Data collected only through self-evaluation processes raises the issue of reliability; while even when data is collected through external evaluation, usually it is not systematically aggregated across levels in such a way to inform the improvement of ECEC quality at whole system level.
- Finally, *in contexts of multi-layered and decentralised governance where coordinating M&E efforts across levels succeeds in striking a balance among all the tensions reported above, M&E is a substantial task with potentially high costs.*

A European mapping as a starting point

M&E systems in Europe are very diverse: the actors involved, their mission and the freedom they have to fulfil their tasks varies substantially between countries.

It appears that the *M&E of ECEC settings primarily focuses on structural quality for the ECEC of younger children, and more often extends to process quality for settings dedicated to older children.*

- When M&E is implemented under the responsibility of the Ministry of Education or related inspectorates, attention is usually paid to process quality dimensions,
- When M&E is under the responsibility of the Ministry of Welfare (health, labour,...), attention is usually focused only on structural quality dimensions related to compliance with regulation and standards. There are exceptions to this in some MS, which suggests that in contexts of split systems, simultaneous attention to structural and process quality of 0-3 provision could be paid if the educational value of services for younger children is explicitly recognised within a pedagogical quality framework.

The findings of the Eurydice report (2019) show that *in most European countries, M&E processes are decentralised at the level of ECEC service providers or local authorities, especially in the case of integrated systems.* In these systems, M&E processes connected to quality in individual ECEC settings might be more easily realised under the responsibility of Local Authorities. M&E processes connected to quality assurance at system level might be coordinated through aligned vertical governance mechanisms or by established national bodies specialising in evaluating education quality.

Internal evaluation processes carried out by ECEC staff members can be very effective in fulfilling the purpose of quality improvement. Across Europe, there are various regulations and recommendations on the internal evaluation of ECEC settings. Some countries do not have any national regulations for services attended by children under 3. However, in the majority of ECEC systems, national requirements for internal evaluation can be considered as 'strong' with regards to the 3 to 6 age segment. *While it is generally acknowledged that combining internal evaluation processes with external evaluation can be an effective way to fulfil the purpose of quality assurance along with quality improvement, external and internal evaluation processes tend to be carried out in parallel rather than feeding into a reciprocal dialogue (even in contexts where national-level requirements exist for both internal and external monitoring).* In many countries, aggregating the results from the

⁵ **Internal evaluation** refers to the process in which an ECEC setting reflects on their own performance regarding the accomplishment of certain goals, or a process in which staff members reflect on their own practice as a way to monitor progress, attain goals and foster improvement. Internal evaluation is conducted by staff members of the setting by using self-evaluation tools, and it can also be part of a larger monitoring procedure conducted by an external institution.

External evaluation refers to the process in which on the quality of ECEC provision is reported to a local, regional or top-level education authority which is not directly involved in the activities of the setting being evaluated. Generally, external evaluation processes are carried out with a two-fold purpose linking quality control (monitoring the performance of the setting in relation to pre-defined indicators) and quality improvement (suggesting ways to improve practice).

external evaluation of individual ECEC settings at local, regional or national level is a widespread method to monitor ECEC quality system-wide. However, the way in which M&E processes contribute to quality improvement of ECEC provision at system level is still unclear.

Strategies to overcome challenges: examples of inspiring practices

In recent years, several reforms and initiatives were put in place in Member States to strengthen M&E policies and practices with a view to improve the quality of ECEC provision, which have been discussed within the working group. Several conclusions can be drawn from looking at these reforms:

- *Establishing a shared pedagogical vision and understanding which is agreed upon by all the actors who are involved in the processes of M&E of ECEC is the first step toward ensuring that data collection and analysis are coherently designed to help improve services.* Defining a clear legislative framework – quality or curricular framework – is an essential precondition to develop a comprehensive M&E infrastructure.
- *To ensure that the data collection has a clear purpose, it may be helpful to consult the end-users – such as ECEC providers, local administrators and policy-makers – during the design of M&E approaches, to understand which data would be most useful for them.* For the staff working in ECEC settings to trust external evaluators, it is essential to give them a clear and transparent understanding of why the data is being collected and how it is going to be used. *Data should only be collected if it can be analysed for the benefit of users; it should be collected systematically over time, and from multiple sources* (including children, parents and professionals) in a complementary way. *Moreover, a well-balanced combination of data related to both structural and process quality should be collected.*
- *Designing M&E systems which foster a democratic culture of quality improvement based on dialogue and open discussion can counteract the risk that evaluation activities are perceived as a merely bureaucratic accomplishment.* When developing a national M&E system and providing the field with a large number of tools, it must be kept in mind that evaluation should not become an end in itself but should have a formative purpose.
- *Adequate IT infrastructure and services are indispensable for the collection, storage, and processing of data on the scale required for M&E of an ECEC system.* Data systems can be instrumental in meeting demands for public accountability, while at the same time generating relevant information. IT systems should be secure enough to guard against breaches and hackers, safeguarding that sensitive data is seen only by those persons who have the right to access such information. Furthermore, IT systems across health, care, education, and social sectors should also be coordinated to allow inter-operability.
- *M&E systems can significantly contribute to ensuring the improvement of ECEC policies and practices only if a culture of quality development is shared – and constantly nurtured – by all the actors who are involved in M&E processes.* All the actors involved in M&E processes need to have a clear sense of purpose and a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities.
- *Building capacity to improve the quality of ECEC provision requires investment in human resources, methodological support for self- and external evaluation, in-service training and continuing professional development, and coordination platforms or networks for peer-learning.* It is crucial that M&E processes are coordinated by experienced professionals, with a sound knowledge of ECEC

policies, practices and research. This ensures that the assessment of pedagogical practices is carried out in a context-sensitive and developmentally oriented way.

- *Closer consideration should be given to follow-up actions to be taken in cases where M&E highlights a low quality of provision.*

Pointers for policy developments

The mere existence of an M&E process for assessing ECEC quality is not enough on its own to promote quality improvement of ECEC provision and policies. M&E systems are better positioned to enhance the pedagogical quality of services for children and families if they are designed to be coherent, coordinated, and optimised across vertical and horizontal levels of an ECEC system.

This can be achieved by, for example:

- Establishing a shared understanding of ECEC quality as starting point
- Consulting with end-users to understand which data would be most useful to support quality improvement
- Collecting data around quality dimensions that allow children's, parent's and staff's perspectives to emerge
- Developing data collection tools combining structural and process quality dimensions in a complementary way
- Developing an IT infrastructure to support systematic data collection and analysis.

Continuing quality development of ECEC provision relies on the commitment and responsibilities shared among individuals, professional teams, institutions, local/regional/national authorities and agencies working together for creating the conditions that enable all children – and their families – to benefit of the best possible educational opportunities to thrive within the communities they are living in.

Member States therefore could make efforts enabling that:

- All the actors involved in M&E processes have clear sense of purpose and a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities
- Professionals employed at central M&E agencies have the right blend of expertise necessary for fulfilling their role/s (sound knowledge of ECEC policies, research and practice) and to effectively coordinate inputs, roles and responsibilities across different levels of governance
- Collaboration between the agencies responsible for quality assurance and quality development is strengthened
- A culture of quality improvement is sustained at the level of practice by investing in pedagogical leadership, staff continuing professional development and ongoing guidance
- A culture of quality improvement is sustained at the level of policies through shared responsibilities, strategic planning and coordinated governance.

