

BULGARIA

Early Childhood Education and Care
ECEC Workforce Profile

Country report author

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Glossary

EQF – *European Qualifications Framework*

Outcomes based (knowledge, skills, competences), eight-level reference tool to enable qualification comparisons between countries.

<https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/events-and-projects/projects/european-qualifications-framework-eqf>

ECTS – *European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System*

A system for enhancing student mobility through the Europe-wide recognition of credit transfers and credit accumulation in higher education

https://ec.europa.eu/education/resources-and-tools/european-credit-transfer-and-accumulation-system-ects_en

ISCED – *International Standard Classification of Education*

An instrument for comparing levels and fields of education across countries, developed by UNESCO in the 1970s and revised in 1997 and 2011.

<http://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/international-standard-classification-of-education-isced-2011-en.pdf>

About the author

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1. ECEC governance in Bulgaria

In Bulgaria, early childhood education and care is organised as a split system: Pre-primary education is regulated by the Ministry of Education and Science (*Ministerstvo na obrazovanieto i naukata*) and takes place in kindergartens where children aged 2/3 up to 7 years “receive care, upbringing, socialisation and education” (Law on Preschool and School Education, Art. 24). Traditionally, ECEC settings for children under 3 years of age are regulated by the Ministry of Health. Regional and local authorities provide maintenance of the buildings and guarantee compliance with health and safety regulations. Currently there are policy discussions taking place regarding the integration of the two sectors into a unified ECEC system.

2. Who belongs to the early years workforce?

2.1 Regular contact staff in ECEC provision

Table 1 gives an overview of the staff working directly with children and categorises the core practitioners (i.e. staff with group or centre responsibility) according to one of five ECEC professional profiles adapted from the original SEEPRO study (see Box 1 at end of this section).

Table 1

Bulgaria: ECEC staff in centre-based settings

Job title	Main ECEC workplace settings and age range	Main roles and positions	Main age-range focus of initial professional education	Minimum qualification requirement ECTS credits EQF level ISCED level
Education sector				
Pre-primary / Kindergarten Teacher <i>Detski uchitel</i> <i>Profile:</i> Early Childhood Pedagogy Professional or Pre-primary and	<i>Detska gradina Kindergarten</i> (2)3 to 6/7 year-olds ¹ <i>Podgotvitelna grupa/klas 5-6-godishni</i> Transition group in kindergarten or Transition class in primary school	Core practitioner with group responsibility Centre head/ Kindergarten principal	0–6/7 years or 3–11 years	Bachelor, 4 years ECTS credits: 240 EQF level: 6 ISCED 2011: 6 <i>Occasionally:</i> Professional Bachelor, 3 years ECTS credits: 180 EQF level: 6

¹ **Editors’ note:** International data sources use varying ways of presenting the age range of children enrolled in ECEC settings. We have chosen the following age-inclusive format for the SEEPRO-3 reports: **0–2** years for children **up to** 3 years of age and **3–5** years for 3, 4 and 5 year-olds in countries with a primary school entry age of 6 years. In Bulgaria the relevant formats are **0–3** and **3–6/7**, since children start school when they are 7 years old.

Job title	Main ECEC workplace settings and age range	Main roles and positions	Main age-range focus of initial professional education	Minimum qualification requirement ECTS credits EQF level ISCED level
Primary Education Professional	5 to 6 year-olds <i>Podgotvitelna grupa/klas 6-7-godishni</i> Transition group in kindergarten or Transition class in primary school 6–7 year-olds			ISCED 2011: 6
Teacher's Assistant <i>Pomoshnik-vazpitateľ</i>	<i>Detska gradina</i> Kindergarten (2)3–6/7 year-olds <i>Podgotvitelna grupa</i> <i>5-6-godishni</i> Transition group in kindergarten 5–6 year-olds <i>Podgotvitelna grupa</i> <i>6-7-godishni</i> Transition group in kindergarten 6–7 year-olds	Non-qualified co-worker	n/a ²	No required qualification
Music Teacher <i>Muzikalen pedagog</i>	<i>Detska gradina, Kindergarten</i> (2)3–6/7 year-olds <i>Podgotvitelna grupa</i> Transition group in kindergarten <i>5-6-godishni</i> 5 to 6 year-olds <i>Podgotvitelna grupa</i> <i>6-7-godishni</i> Transition group in kindergarten 6 to 7 year-olds	Directly interacts with children two or three times a week, organising activities and working towards goals in the educational area of music; often is attached as a concurrent member of the regular staff in two kindergartens.	3–19 years	Bachelor, 4 years ECTS credits: 240 EQF level: 6 ISCED 2011: 6
Childcare sector				
Nursery Teacher	<i>Detska yasla</i> Crèche/nursery	Appointed to several	0–6/7 years	Bachelor, 4 years

² n/a = not applicable

Job title	Main ECEC work-place settings and age range	Main roles and positions	Main age-range focus of initial professional education	Minimum qualification requirement ECTS credits EQF level ISCED level
<i>Pedagog na detska yasla</i> <i>Profile:</i> Early Childhood Pedagogy Professional	Infant/toddler group 3 months–2/3 years	nursery groups; responsibilities include arranging, planning and managing the educational activities for the children.		ECTS credits: 240 EQF level: 6 ISCED 2011: 6
Medical Nurse <i>Medicinska sestra</i> <i>Profile:</i> Social Care/Health Care Professional	<i>Detska yasla</i> Crèche/nursery Infant/toddler centre 3 months–2/3 years <i>Yasleni grupi kym detska gradina</i> Infant-toddler groups in kindergarten 3 months–2/3 years <i>Domove za medico-socialni grizhi za detsa</i> Health and social care home 3 months–2/3 years	Core practitioner with group responsibility	All ages	Bachelor, 4 years ECTS credits: 240 EQF level: 6 ISCED 2011: 6

In most **kindergartens** a Children’s Nurse is on the premises all day; a Paediatrician and Speech Therapist pay weekly visits. The centre director (Principal) can work directly with the children if staff members are absent for one reason or another; at the same time, according to Directive № 4 (2017), the principal is required to work a minimum of 72 hours per year with children. Principals have the same initial professional education as the group leaders, but are required to complete an additional course in management and leadership issues. Non-qualified Assistants are present in the room; they do not usually work directly with the children, but are expected mainly to perform custodial tasks such as clearing up and cleaning the room or distributing meals (Oberhuemer, Schreyer, and Neuman 2010, 59).

Since budgets now come under the responsibility of the kindergarten principals, some, particularly those in larger cities, manage to fund a full-time position for specialist support staff, e.g. Speech Therapists, Psychologists, Special Pedagogues, even Physical Education Teachers (most often men), who work on site on a regular basis, and are on the kindergarten payroll.

SEEPRO profile categories for ECEC core professionals (adapted from Oberhuemer, Schreyer, and Neuman 2010)

- **Early Childhood Pedagogy Professional** (specialist focus, 0–6/7 years)
- **Pre-primary Education Professional** (exclusive pre-primary focus 3/4–6 years)
- **Pre-primary and Primary Education Professional** (focus on pre-primary *and* primary education 3/4–10/11 years)
- **Social and Childhood Pedagogy Professional** (mainly broad focus, including ECEC, usually 0–12 years, but sometimes including adults)
- **Social Care/Health Care Professional** (sometimes early childhood focus, sometimes broad focus, including adults)

2.2 Centre leader

The full-time position of **Municipal Kindergarten Principal** (*Direktor na obshtinska detska gradina*) is listed in the National Classification of Professions and Occupations (2011). Hierarchically, it is under the supervision of the Municipal Directorate of Education. As per Directive № 15 (2019), the main functions of the Kindergarten Principal are to apply state policy in the area of preschool and primary school education, to manage and bear responsibility for the entirety of the institution’s activities, to plan, organise, control and bear responsibility for the educational process, as well as the acquisition of key competencies by the children, among others.

According to Directive № 15 (2019), the requirements and qualifications for the position of Kindergarten Principal are:

Minimum requirements: Bachelor’s or Master’s degree in Education; 5 years of professional teaching experience

Additional requirements: Professional area: Pedagogical Sciences; professional qualification as “Educator” or “Preschool Teacher”

To fulfil the responsibilities of the position, the Kindergarten Principal must possess strategic, leadership and managerial competences, be results-oriented and competent in negotiation and motivation. The Principal must be able to work in a team, but also to be client-focused. Finally, a degree of digital competence is required.

The Principal is responsible for the following areas:

- Administration and management
- Organisation, coordination and control
- Education and upbringing
- Health and sanitation
- Social and humanitarian activities
- Financial matters.

The Kindergarten Principal is also the Chairman of the Educational Council and is responsible for the implementation of its decisions.

2.3 Centre-based posts of responsibility

Kindergartens sometimes work on micro-projects with various themes that are assigned to one or more teachers and staff as part of their continuing education, but this is considered part of the usual work responsibilities and is not rewarded with additional pay.

With regard to the practical training of students in a real educational environment, universities have contractual agreements with specially selected nurseries, kindergartens and teach-



ers/mentors. Most of the mentoring/supervising staff in partnership institutions are compensated with symbolic sums – according to the regulations of the Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski” and the Faculty of Educational Studies and the Arts, they may work no more than 16 hours per month on mentorship tasks and they are paid a symbolic amount (around 4 EUR per hour). However, there are also kindergartens where the supervision of students takes place on a voluntary basis (i.e. without pay).

The contracted ECEC mentors are highly-qualified pedagogues with experience in activities related to the practical application of innovations and the creation and practical testing of innovative practices. Most of them also have a degree for conducting in-service training (according to the Bulgarian national five-level qualification scale), most often attained in the Department of Information and In-Service Training of Teachers or the Faculty of Educational Studies and the Arts of the Sofia University, or in other universities. Some of the ECEC mentors have attained the highest professional qualification level, which involves the promotion of innovations introduced by the teacher through publications (Engels-Kritidis 2020a).

2.4 Co-ordinating and supervisory staff

The positions of **Senior Teacher** (*Starshi uchitel*) and **Head Teacher** (*Glaven uchitel*) are assigned to Kindergarten Teachers who fulfil the necessary requirements. In addition to the standard teacher functions, the Senior Teacher and the Head Teacher are also responsible for (Directive № 15, 2019):

- Planning, organising and reporting on the staff qualifications
- Analysing staff qualification activities
- Coordinating the participation in professional communities, the exchange of good pedagogical practices, including teaching activities for the acquisition of key competences by children
- Assisting newly appointed teachers and trainee teachers in cases where they have been appointed as mentors
- Methodological support – Senior Teachers support other teachers, while the Head Teacher supports Senior Teachers
- Development of kindergarten curricula, as well as innovative and original educational programmes.

According to Directive № 15 (2019), the requirements for the positions of Senior Teacher and Head Teacher are the following:

Senior Teacher	Head Teacher
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – 10 years of professional experience – A post as “Teacher”* The 5th or 4th Professional Qualification Level – At least 3 qualification credits during the last attestation period – An assessment of no less than “meets expectations” during the most recent performance/attestation review. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Master’s degree in Education – A post as “Senior Teacher” – The 3rd, 2nd, or 1st Professional Qualification Level – At least 3 qualification credits during the last attestation period – An assessment of “exceptional performance” during the most recent performance/attestation review.

* **Note:** If the Teacher has attained a Professional Qualification Level higher than 4th, has attained more than the minimum of 3 qualification credits and has been evaluated as “exceeds expectations” or “exceptional performance” during the latest review, the Teacher can be assigned as a Senior Teacher regardless of the length of professional experience



2.5 Specialist support staff

Directive № 15 (2019) defines the specialist teacher position of **Resource Teacher** (*Resursen uchitel*). In addition to the standard teacher duties, the Resource Teacher is responsible for organising or adapting the educational environment for children with special educational needs (SEN), designing and implementing educational activities aimed at children with SEN, assisting teachers and parents in identifying individual children's needs and progress, as well as other activities and responsibilities related to children with SEN.

Additionally, kindergartens can engage the services of part-time specialist teachers for specific activities, e.g. Speech Therapists, Psychologists, Special Pedagogues, Dance/choreography Teachers, Sports Instructors, Foreign Language Teachers, etc. These teachers are most often in addition to the standard curriculum and their fees are covered by additional payments by the children's parents.

3. Structural composition of ECEC workforce: qualifications, gender, ethnicity

Traditionally, Kindergarten Teachers in Bulgaria have always been highly qualified. As far back as 2003/2004, according to Kusheva et al. (2006), looking at the entire teacher workforce in the education system, including early childhood education, teachers with higher education accounted for about 90%.

The data on gender ratios in pre-primary education show that the overwhelming majority of staff is female. Even though each year several men graduate as Pre-primary Teachers with Foreign Language or as Pre-primary and Primary School Teachers, most of them do not take up work in this job mainly because of the low remuneration and the traditional feminisation of the profession. Although there are no statistical data that show the gender distribution of Pre-primary Teachers in Bulgaria, recent observations and some (few) publications show that, during recent years (perhaps due to the significant increase in teachers' salaries) there have been a number of men working in kindergartens, mainly (but not only) in private settings. For example, according to Omaynikova (2022) in Kindergarten № 29 in Sofia there are two male Kindergarten Teachers and one male Music teacher, while in "Detelina" Kindergarten in the city of Vidin there was a male Kindergarten Teacher as far back as 2015 (BNR 2015). Additionally, in kindergartens that manage to ensure the relevant positions and the budget for them, there are male Physical Education Teachers (Uchiteli.bg 2015).

While over half of Kindergarten Teachers were over 50 years old in 2015 (Kusheva et al. 2006), more recent NSI data for 2022/2023 (see *Table 2*) show a clear tendency of reversal in this trend. The percentage of Pre-primary Teachers over 50 has dropped to 37.7% while the second-largest group (32.2%) are teachers aged 25-39 years old. This can be attributed to the significant increase in teachers' salaries (see *Table 7*), as well as increased interest from graduates of other fields to acquire the qualification of Pre-primary Teacher (as a Master's degree) and pursue a career in the early childhood education system.

Table 2

Bulgaria: Age distribution of teachers in kindergartens during 2022/2023 school year

Age group	Number of teachers	Totals/age groups	Percentage
Under 25 years	556	6,366	32.2
25-29 years	1,256		
30-34 years	2,057		
35-39 years	2,497		
40-44 years	2,982	5,939	30.1
45-49 years	2,957		
50-54 years	2,455	7,442	37.7
55-59 years	2,650		
60 years and older	2,337		
Total number of teachers	19,747		

Source: NSI 2023a

There are no recent national statistics about the overall composition of the ECEC workforce in Bulgaria that show the proportion of qualifications, gender or ethnicity.

4. Initial professional education (IPE)

4.1 Initial qualifying routes (higher education and vocational)

The teaching positions in **pre-primary education** in Bulgaria are usually held by personnel who have completed the traditional university degree of *Pre-school Pedagogy* (a four-year university programme, started in 1984 and available until 1996), as well as one of the more recent four-year degree programmes of *Pre-school Pedagogy with a Foreign Language* and *Pre-school and Primary School Pedagogy* (available since 1996). The first of the new degrees reflects the current need for qualified Pre-primary Teachers who, in addition to the mainstream pedagogical work, are proficient in early foreign language teaching. Graduates of this programme are eligible to teach preschool children in state, private, specialised and profiled children's institutions, as well as to conduct foreign language teaching in English, German, French, Spanish, Italian or Russian (currently only English).

The basic premise of the second degree, the 'hybrid' specialisation in *Pre-school and Primary School Pedagogy*, is the idea of facilitating the transition of children from kindergarten to primary school by providing teaching professionals with a broad spectrum of competence and who are well-acquainted with the specifics of working with children of both preschool and primary school age. Graduates of the programme can organise and conduct instructional, educational, methodological, organisational-managerial, expert, advising, diagnostic-prognostic and cultural activities in the educational system, in administrative-managerial and cultural institutions, as well as in social and sport organisations for children of pre-school and primary school age.

According to the entry requirements for prospective Pre-primary and Primary School Teachers in the Candidate Student's Handbook of the Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski for 2022/2023 (Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski 2022a), there is an entrance exam in one of the following subjects, chosen by the candidate student: Bulgarian Language and Literature, Bulgarian History,

Geography, Philosophy, English, German, French, Spanish, Italian or Russian Language. For enrolling in a programme of *Pre-Primary Education with a Foreign Language*, the entrance exam is in English, German, French, Spanish, Italian or Russian. For both specialisms, the Bulgarian Language and Literature marks from the high school diploma also count towards each candidate's overall score.

The university study programme ends with written state exams. Students of *Pre-school Pedagogy with a Foreign Language* are additionally tested on the respective foreign language, while the students of the hybrid *Pre-school and Primary School Pedagogy* specialisation are tested in a state exam on a pooled questionnaire – one part on preschool education and second part on primary education.

After completing the four-year Bachelor's degree, students can continue for two full-time semesters (one year) or three part-time semesters for a Master's degree programme in the field of pre-primary education or in another area. Furthermore, a three-year full-time or a four year part-time course of doctoral studies for a PhD degree in pre-primary education is available.

It is important to note that there are still two Pedagogical Colleges in Bulgaria where, after three years (six semesters) of study, students can be awarded the acknowledged educational degree of Professional Bachelor in Pre-school Education with a Foreign Language (only English).

One is the Pedagogical College in Dobrich, affiliated to the University of Shumen; the other one is the Pedagogical College in Pleven, affiliated to the University of Veliko Turnovo. According to a recent ministerial decision (Decision № 441 dd. 22 June 2023), 90 students will be accepted in 2023/2024 for the Professional Bachelor degree in the field of Pedagogy of the Pedagogical College in Dobrich and 70 students in Pleven; however, the numbers for both colleges include students from three pedagogical specialties, so it can be assumed that around one third of them will be enrolled in Pre-school Pedagogy with English Language. Almost all graduates of these colleges continue in a Master's degree programme specifically created for these cases.

In several Bulgarian universities there are special curriculum plans for the Master's degree programme in preschool education (four semesters) for those who have graduated from a college and have a "Professional Bachelor" degree and the qualification of Pre-school Pedagogy. One of the beneficial ideas supporting the existence of such colleges is that they allow the respective universities to reach people from smaller towns and also increase their enrolment quotas.

The low percentage of Professional Bachelor degree holders among the teachers in the general field of pedagogy in Bulgaria can be seen in the data on tertiary education graduates in 2022 (NSI 2023b). For the general sector "Education", 139 people graduated with a Professional Bachelor's degree; 2,976 with a Bachelor's degree; 4,497 with a Master's degree and 78 with a Doctoral degree (unfortunately there is no separate statistics for Kindergarten Teachers).

Teachers' Assistants who work in kindergartens graduate from high school (ISCED 3). They do not receive specific training. There is one exception: graduates of the 135th High School 'Jan Amos Comenius' in Sofia gain a special qualification. This is due to the vocational education/training with a 'pedagogical profile' that its students have been receiving since the 1980s during the four years following their eighth class; since 2012, those leaving school receive a certificate as *Assistant Educator in Children's Upbringing and Education*.

There are also various courses offered specifically for Teachers' Assistants. Some of the public and private centres for vocational education organise qualification courses in this area.

Table 3

Bulgaria: Pre-primary / Kindergarten Teacher

Job title in Bulgarian: <i>Detski uchitel</i> Profile: Early Childhood Pedagogy Professional (specialist focus 0–7 years) <i>or</i> Pre-primary and Primary Education Professional
Entry requirements: Higher school leaving certificate, university entrance exam Professional studies: Since 1996: 4-year degree programme <i>Pre-school Pedagogy with a Foreign Language</i> or <i>Pre-primary and Primary School Pedagogy</i> ; a subsequent 1-year Master’s study is possible. Award: State exam, Bachelor (= official requirement for core pedagogues in kindergarten); although optional, it is common for Kindergarten Teachers to have a Master’s degree (ISCED/EQF level 7). ECTS credits: 240 EQF level: 6 ISCED 2011: 6 Main ECEC workplace: Kindergarten (2/3–6/7 years), transitions groups in kindergarten or primary schools (5–6 and 6–7 years), crèche, nursery, infant/toddler centre (3 months to 3 years)

Table 4

Bulgaria: Nursery Teacher

Job title in Bulgarian: <i>Pedagog na detska yasla</i> Profile: Early Childhood Pedagogy Professional (specialist focus 0–7 years) <i>or</i> Pre-primary and Primary Education Professional
Entry requirements: Higher school leaving certificate, university entrance exam Professional studies: Since 1996: 4-year degree programme <i>Preschool Pedagogy with a Foreign Language</i> or <i>Pre-primary and Primary School Pedagogy</i> ; a subsequent 1-year Master’s study is possible. Award: State exam, Bachelor (=official requirement for core practitioners in kindergarten); although optional, it is common for Nursery Teachers to have a Master’s degree (ISCED/EQF level 7). ECTS credits: 240 EQF level: 6 ISCED 2011: 6 Main ECEC workplace: Kindergarten (2/3–6/7 years), transitions groups in kindergarten or primary schools (5–6 and 6–7 years), crèche, nursery, infant/toddler centre (3 months to 3 years)

Table 5

Bulgaria: Medical Nurse

Job title in Bulgarian: <i>Medicinska sestra</i> Profile: Social/Health Care Professional
Entry requirements: Higher school leaving certificate, university entrance exam Professional studies: 4 years at a university/faculty specialising in medical studies Award: Bachelor ECTS credits: 240 EQF Level: 6 ISCED 2011: 6 Main ECEC workplace: Crèche, nursery, infant/toddler centre (3 month to 3 years), nursery groups in kindergarten (3 month to 3 years), health and social care homes (3 month to 3 years)



4.2 Competences, curricula and pedagogic-didactic approaches in IPE programmes

Kindergarten Teacher (*Detski uchitel*)

Competence specifications

According to the Sofia University Study Curriculum for Pre-school Pedagogy with a Foreign Language specialty (Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski, 2021b), effective as of the 2021/2022 academic year, the students are required to attain the following professional competences:

- Application of acquired knowledge and abilities in pedagogical practice
- Utilisation of creative approaches during the realisation of the educational aspects in the curricula for each respective age
- Utilisation of modern and innovative formats and methods for interaction and education
- Ability to transfer knowledge and techniques, to integrate current theoretical achievements in practice
- Ability to communicate, to manage and overcome conflict, and to develop and manage pedagogically-relevant projects
- Ability to create conditions and prerequisites for learning (definition of goals, process organisation, execution, self-control and self-assessment)
- Ability to select approaches, forms of organisation, methods, equipment and pedagogical activities for educational work as appropriate for specific circumstances
- Ability to stimulate and assist children with cognitive activities, intellectual creativity, a positive attitude to learning, research, discovery and self-knowledge of the world
- Ability to help children develop their national, social, ethnic, religious, etc. identity, their self-esteem, their self-respect and respect towards others, tolerance
- Development of individual qualities such as tolerance, outgoing character, self-control, empathy, ability for taking initiative, creativity, etc. which are necessary for the conduct of effective educational and social interactions.

Curricular areas

The basic requirements for attaining the professional qualification of ‘Teacher’ (including ‘Pre-primary/Kindergarten Teacher’) are defined in the government Directive for State Requirements for Attainment of the Professional Qualification of “Teacher”, dated 11.11.2016 and last updated on 05.02.2021.

The directive stipulates that the theoretical preparation should include mandatory, elective mandatory and elective courses (art. 5), and defines the minimum of mandatory academic courses (art. 6 and Appendix № 5, amended in 2021) and their minimum duration in academic hours, as follows:

Table 6

Bulgaria: Mandatory courses for qualifying as a Pre-primary/Kindergarten Teacher:

	Academic course	Minimum duration in academic hours
1	Pedagogy	60 (min. 30 hours of lectures)
2	Main specialisation course: preschool pedagogy	45 (min. 15 hours of lectures)
3	Psychology	60 (min. 30 hours of lectures)
4	Didactics/tuition methodology	120 (min. 30 hours of lectures)
5	Inclusive education	30
6	Information and communication technology in education; working in a digital environment	30

According to the Directive (articles 9-12), “the practical preparation is conducted in kindergartens and schools that are part of the system for pre-school and school education and is realized in the following formats of tuition with a minimum duration in academic hours”:

1. *Observational lesson* (observing and analysing pedagogical situations in kindergartens and schools, conducted under the direct supervision of a university lecturer): 30 hours
2. *Ongoing pedagogical practice* (practicum preparation through observing and conducting pedagogical situations in kindergartens and schools in collaboration with a mentor-teacher under the supervision of a university lecturer): 60 hours
3. *Internship practice* (“independent participation of the students in the educational process via realisation of various kinds of pedagogical activities in kindergartens and schools, conducted under the supervision of a mentor-teacher and an tutor from the higher-education institution”): 90 hours.

Each Bulgarian university which has a pedagogical faculty and is accredited to train students in the field of Pre-school Pedagogy develops its own curriculum, based on the aforementioned minimum requirements.

As an example, according to the 2021/2022 curriculum of the Faculty of Primary and Pre-school Education of Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski, the study programme *Pre-school and Primary School Pedagogy*, which qualifies for work with 3- to 11-year olds in kindergartens and primary schools, comprises 2,850 academic hours in 58 curricular areas and students are awarded 240 ECTS credits on completion (Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski 2021a). In the same university, the other study programme for work in kindergartens – *Pre-school Pedagogy with a Foreign Language* – comprises 2,475 hours of study, 45 curricular areas and 240 ECTS credits. Both study programmes include subjects such as Basics of Education; Didactics; History of Pedagogy and Bulgarian Education; Pedagogical Psychology; Pre-school Pedagogy; Pedagogy of Early Childhood (0-3 years); Pedagogy of Playing Games in Early Childhood; Pedagogical Diagnosis; Basics of Primary School Education; Children's Literature; Pedagogy of Language Use and Speech Development; Pedagogy of Child-Environment Interaction; Pedagogy of Mathematics; Pedagogy of Music; Pedagogy of Art; Pedagogy of Movement. The theoretical studies end with written state exams. Both study routes lead to a Bachelor's degree.

The curriculum of the study route *Pre-school Education with a Foreign Language* is organised into four content areas: (1) theoretical foundations; (2) psychology and pedagogy; (3) practical application/methods; (4) optional subjects. Students are additionally tested on the respective foreign language (only English currently; German, French, Spanish, Italian, and Russian used to be options in the past); the foreign language component comprises 360 hours of auditorium study.

Most of the curricular areas mentioned above include separate hours for practical training, but parallel to this there is a main workplace-based cycle, focusing on the development of kindergarten teachers' practical skills (see *Chapter 5*). For the aforementioned courses, especially for the specific methodological ones, a common theoretical background has been created that enables students to gain a more holistic understanding of the interconnections between theoretical knowledge and didactic strategies, thus helping them to develop professional competences (Engels-Kritidis, Kikušová, and Osad'án 2013).



Nursery Teacher (*Pedagog na detska yasla*)

Competence specifications and curricular areas required for prospective Nursery Teachers are exactly the same as those for Kindergarten Teachers. Graduates of the two previously mentioned Bachelor's degree programmes can also work as Nursery Teachers.

Medical Nurse (*Medicinska sestra*)

Competence specifications

According to the Directive for Unified State Requirements for the Attainment of Higher Education in the specialisms of 'Medical Nurse' and 'Midwife Nurse' at Bachelor level (introduced in 2005, with amendments and additions in 2006 and 2010), the study programme provides: (1) Appropriate knowledge of disciplines that are the basis of nursing, including adequate knowledge of the human organism, the psychological functions and the behaviour of healthy and diseased people, as well as the human social environment; (2) Adequate knowledge of the essence and the ethics of the profession and the general principles connected with health and nursing; (3) Appropriate practical clinical experience; (4) Ability to participate in the practical tuition of health personnel and work experience with this personnel; (5) Experience in collaboration with other medical specialists.

Curricular areas

Candidate students are required to have completed secondary education and to pass a written examination, determined by the higher education institute. The study programme for a Bachelor's degree in Medical Nursing takes four academic years (eight semesters) to complete and comprises 4,600 academic hours. Tuition includes theoretical and practical preparation. The theoretical preparation is conducted via mandatory, elective mandatory and elective courses delivered as lectures, seminars and practical exercises with a total duration of at least six semesters. The practical component of IPE takes place through educational (clinical) practice and internship. The mandatory courses (and their minimum duration in academic hours) more closely associated with the nurses' work in nurseries and infant-toddler centres include the following: Practical Basis of Nursing (660 hours); Nursing in Paediatrics (45 hours); Nursing of Women in Labour and Newborns (30 hours); Nursing of Children and Adults with Disabilities (60 hours); Hygiene and Ecology (30 hours); Therapeutic Feeding and Nutrition (15 hours); Pathology – Knowledge of Diseases (405 hours); Infectious Diseases and Epidemiology (30 hours); Paediatrics and Neonatology (45 hours); Ear, Nose and Throat Diseases (15 hours); Health Promotion (15 hours); Children's Pedagogy and Children's Psychology (30 hours); Medical Safety in Emergency Situations (30 hours); Principles and Methodology of Teaching (45 hours), etc. The ratio between theory-based and practice-based IPE is determined by the higher education institution, but the proportion of academic hours allocated to practical experience in work placements should be no less than 50% of the total hours.

4.3 Alternative entry and qualification routes, system permeability

The study route *Pre-school and Primary School Pedagogy* is available on a full-time and a part-time basis. Part-time studies are for those in employment while studying. Having in mind the low salaries in the educational sector, some students work in completely different areas, but a large number work as Teachers' Assistants in kindergartens or as part-time Pre-primary Teachers until they take their final exams.

Candidates who have completed a Bachelor programme in another humanitarian discipline are also given the opportunity to take an extended two-year (four semesters) Master's programme in order to acquire the qualification for working as a Pre-primary Teacher (see Sofia University

St. Kliment Ohridski 2022b). An admission score is assessed, comprising average results from state examinations and average results from semester examinations during their Bachelor's degree course; the overall entry requirement is a score of at least 7.00. The interest in this Master's programme is very high – during recent years, each autumn more than a hundred people apply and enter this programme. Since the 2015/2016 academic year, a new curriculum has been approved by Sofia University; for candidates with a Bachelor's degree with a pedagogical qualification (regardless of the specific area), a shorter two-semester (instead of four) course of study has been launched. In order to put the scale of interest in these programmes into perspective, it should be mentioned that in the 2021/2022 academic year, 167 people enrolled for the regular four-semester programme, while 128 entered the Master's degree programme for candidates with a pedagogical qualification (Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski 2021c). The tendency for an increased interest by graduates of other areas in attaining the qualification of preschool teacher has continued throughout the last 6 academic years, during which the courses of these two Master degree programs comprise of over 100 people each.

On the other hand, Bachelor's degree students who graduated with the *Pre-school and Primary School* or the *Pre-school Education with a Foreign Language* specialisms can continue their Master's degree in a different area, giving them an additional pedagogical qualification in order to expand their expertise and field of competence, e.g. a Master's degree in Speech Therapy, in Special Education, in the Pedagogy of the Aesthetics of Mass Communication and others.

The field-based studies component of IPE accentuates a form of training that allows Pre-primary Teachers to adapt to the constantly changing educational needs of children. In this respect, increasing the number and quality of exchange programmes for students and teachers-as-mentors will be essential for ensuring that they are always up-to-date with good pedagogical practices developed by other European countries and worldwide.

5. Guided workplace experience (practicum) in the initial professional education of core professionals

Pre-primary / Kindergarten Teachers (*Detski uchitel*)

The practical element of the study route *Pre-school and Primary School* also entails work placements of 780 hours out of a total of 2,850 hours, i.e. comprises over 27% of the overall study programme. The number of hours spent in kindergarten or school increases per semester, and the final, eighth semester comprises a practical placement only, split equally between a kindergarten and a primary school. Each part ends with a state exam, and the final mark is an average of both separate marks – one for the kindergarten and another for the primary school. In the study route *Pre-school Education with a Foreign Language* the curriculum comprises 780 hours in practical placements out of a total of 2,475 hours, i.e. approx. 31%. The eighth semester is spent entirely in a kindergarten placement.

Students need to be able to transfer their acquired theoretical knowledge into the kindergarten's educational context. The whole system of field-based studies ensures that students gradually move from observation and analysis of teaching situations e.g. by carrying out small projects and research studies (during the first several semesters of their study), to enacting pedagogical situations (during the following semesters, usually in pairs) and finally, during the seventh and eighth semesters, to independent performance in everyday pedagogical conditions (Roussinova and Angelov 2008).



The practical element of initial professional education is regulated in the Directive for State Requirements for Attainment of the Professional Qualification of “Teacher”. For the placements in a real-life educational environment, universities have contractual agreements with specially selected nurseries, kindergartens and teachers/mentors. The mentoring/supervising staff in partnership institutions receive a symbolic monetary compensation. There are also kindergartens with ECEC mentors who work in placement settings on a voluntary basis, subject to a special contract.

The contracted teacher trainers/mentors are highly-qualified pedagogues with experience in activities related to the development, application and evaluation of innovative practices. Most of them have also attained a qualification level (according to the Bulgarian national five-level qualification scale – see also *Chapter 6*), most often acquired through courses at the Department of Information and In-Service Training of Teachers or the Faculty of Educational Studies and the Arts of Sofia University, or at other universities. Some of the teacher trainers/mentors have attained the highest professional qualification level, which involves the presentation of innovations introduced by the teacher through publications.

The organisation, realisation and evaluation of field-based studies is part of the overall evaluation of each study programme by the relevant university tutor. These depend on conditions defined by each particular university tutor for his/her subject.

The overall aim for all types of field-based studies is for the student to obtain a comprehensive view of the educational process, to gain professional and organisational competences connected with the role of the teacher, as well as competencies related to the realisation of educational activities in kindergartens.

The student has the chance to understand and verify the realisation of modern didactic strategies in a real-life educational context and thus to acquire key competencies such as: implementing educational projects at the level of kindergarten; orienting himself/herself in the programme systems for pedagogical interaction of kindergartens; realising general methods of education and general didactic of teaching in kindergarten; diagnosing the reasons for children’s problems and preparing appropriate pedagogical intervention to resolve them; communicating his/her knowledge with specialist educational and psychological services; preparing methodically educational sessions related to particular educational content (Engels-Kritidis, Kikušová, and Osad’án 2013).

As a form of student self-evaluation and also external evaluation, students are required to prepare a portfolio – a summary of necessary documents which give evidence of their educational activities. At Sofia University, this is called a *pedagogical diary*. This diary (or *portfolio*) has to contain all proposed and realised curricular projects, didactical approaches and other documents, including self-assessment by the student. The content of each project and the relevant preparations have to be discussed with the tutors responsible for the teaching of didactics in the relevant courses.

In most universities in Bulgaria, some of the students win competitions for participation in student exchange programmes such as Erasmus+, DAAD, etc. They spend various periods of time (usually a semester) in another European country mainly for improvement and exchange of knowledge and skills in the field of practical training.

The project *Student Internship* (2014-2015 – www.praktiki.mon.bg) realised with the financial support of the Operative Programme ‘Human Resources Development’ and co-financed by the European Social Fund of the European Union) offered an opportunity to students specialising in pedagogy/education to conduct their field-based studies (paid internship – one-time payment of 246 EUR (480 BGN) for 240 hours in kindergartens, schools, etc. in another country. The project was realised in partnership with all 51 higher education institutions in Bulgaria. The practical



education was attended by over 60,000 students in total, including a large number of students placed in preschool institutions. The project budget included funding for the compensation of academic mentors from the universities, as well as mentors assigned by the employers. The second phase of the same project was underway across the country until the end of 2023.

Nursery Teachers (*Pedagog na detska yasla*)

Prospective Nursery Teachers undergo the same format of workplace-based learning as prospective Kindergarten Teachers.

Medical Nurses (*Medicinska sestra*)

As previously mentioned, the ratio between theoretical and practical preparation in the curriculum for Medical Nurses is determined by the higher education institution, but the academic hours allocated to practical preparation should be no less than 50% of the total hours. The practical preparation during IPE is realised via educational (clinical) practice and internship; this is organised and conducted in faculties and/or affiliates of higher education institutions, as well as clinical settings that have been accredited for student education.

6. Continuing professional development (CPD) of ECEC staff

According to the national system for in-service training, all Bulgarian teachers (including Kindergarten Teachers) can develop their qualifications on a five-level qualification scale. The first two levels involve education on contextual and technological innovation, as well as the sharing of the teachers' individual experiences and pedagogical practices, while the latter three levels focus on activities related to the practical application of innovations and the creation and practical testing of individual innovative practices. The highest professional qualification level represents the dissemination of innovations introduced by the teacher through publications (Kusheva et al. 2006).

In the Law on Preschool and School Education of 2015, there is a separate section 4, titled 'Career development of pedagogical specialists' (National programme development of pedagogical specialists 2016), which defines different teaching levels – Teacher, Senior Teacher, and Head Teacher – also applicable for young children's teachers. As foundations for the career development of pedagogical specialists, the document mentions acquired qualification credits, acquired professional qualification level, as well as results of performance appraisals; a larger number of qualification credits and a higher professional qualification level are bases for a faster career development of pedagogical specialists, regardless of their years of service. The requirements and the procedure for acquiring teaching levels are defined by the State Educational Standard for the Status and Development of Teachers, Head Teachers and other Pedagogical Specialists (Directive № 15 dated 22.07.2019).

The Collective Labour Agreement applicable for the public education system (Art. 8, 2022) states that the budget for educational staff qualifications is defined at the start of each calendar year and should amount to no less than 1.2% of the annual salary of pedagogical staff. The budget is used for the enrolment of pedagogical staff in qualification courses after discussion in the educational committee and approval by the Centre Head. Some of the courses are optional, while others may be obligatory. Therefore, ECEC employers cover the costs of attending continuing



professional development activities in the size of the expenditures according to the mentioned budget, divided between members of the pedagogical team. If the cost of qualification is higher, the teachers have to cover the difference themselves.

The main providers of continuing professional development across the country are university departments of information and in-service training of teachers; the National Institute for Education and Qualification in the Educational System; some pedagogical faculties; educational inspectorates; non-governmental organisations; foundations, and other public and private providers at national, regional and local level.

The options for paid absence for education of full-time employees in Bulgaria (including Pre-primary Teachers and Teachers' Assistants) are defined in the Labour Codex (last amended in February 2023). According to the codex, Teachers and Teachers' Assistants who are studying at university while in employment can be granted 25 days of paid leave per year; additionally, they are entitled to 30 days of paid leave for preparing and taking matriculation or state exams, or the preparation and defence of a thesis, graduation project or dissertation. For preparation of a PhD thesis, the students can request six months of paid leave, subject to approval by the employer. For taking an entrance exam for a university or PhD course, students can request 12 days of paid leave.

The Collective Labour Agreement applicable for public education (Art. 46, 2022) states that the employer "can approve paid leave for qualification development, acquisition of new and/or additional qualifications" of pedagogical staff, "as long as the acquired knowledge, skills and competences will contribute to the improvement of the quality of the educational process in the educational institute". Usually, there are no problems regarding access opportunities to CPD – Centre Heads approve and generally encourage such leaves and they organise internal staff substitutes for the period of the paid leave (substitute teachers working overtime are compensated accordingly).

Participation in specific forms of CPD is **formally recognised** in terms of **career advancement**.

According to the Rules for organising calls for candidates for the post of Principal/Centre Head in public kindergartens in the Municipality of Sofia (2015), candidates for kindergartens (with or without nursery groups) have to meet the following main criteria: to have a Bachelor's or Master's degree with a professional qualification as Pre-primary Teacher and at least five years of full-time pedagogical experience, to not have a criminal record, and to have not been stripped of the right to work as a teacher. The call for candidates is published and the assessment is performed in two stages: part one comprises a 25-question test with questions related to application of the legal framework relevant to the educational system; the second part is an interview.

For the qualification of school or kindergarten heads/principals and teachers, the National Institute for Education and Qualification in the Educational System (2023) was founded in 2006. The aims of the National Institute are to organise educational activities for administrative staff of Bulgarian schools and kindergartens, to develop educational programmes and to participate in international projects. During the last 4 years (2020-2023), approximately 4,500 head teachers and 17,000 teachers have participated in different educational activities. Topics include Kindergarten Management – a basic programme for newly-appointed Head Teachers, Financial Management of Kindergartens – management of delegated budgets, Project Management, Management of Educational Processes, Human Resources Management in Schools, Control and Assessment of Teachers' Work, Assessment and Self-assessment of School Management, Working with Interested Parties – models of interaction between school/kindergarten and parents, Leadership Programmes – education of national or regional leaders, Mentorship Education, Development



and Improvement of Specific Professional Competences for Teachers – entrepreneurship, application of information technologies in the educational process, integration of pupils with special educational needs.

Some (relatively few) private kindergartens cover tuition costs for the university studies of their Teachers' Assistants or part-time substitute teachers to become qualified teachers, or for their teachers to be awarded a Master's Degree.

7. Working conditions and current workforce issues

7.1 Remuneration

Staff in kindergartens and primary schools receive the same salaries as all teachers in Bulgaria and have a relatively similar professional status. In both cases they are not civil servants. According to the most-recent available data of the National Statistical Institute (NSI 2023c) as of Q3 2023 the average gross salary of a teacher in Bulgaria (regardless of whether they are beginners, experienced or work in a city or rural area) is 1,015 EUR/ 1,985 BGN per month. *Table 7* shows the minimum starting salary (before taxes) according to the Collective Labour Agreement for the system of Preschool and School Education from 06.12.2022 (Art. 27, as updated by Annex dated 11.08.2023) regarding the salaries of employees in the public education sector. While the high inflation due to the geopolitical situation in the area should be taken into account, several updates of teachers' salaries in recent years have made it possible for teachers to feel they are starting to receive a more dignified salary, even though there is still room for improvement.

As per the Collective Labour Agreement applicable for public education (Art. 28, 2022), Teachers' Assistants in kindergartens receive at least 105% of the national minimum wage, which currently amounts to 419 EUR/819 BGN per month.

Table 7

Bulgaria: Minimum starting salary (before taxes) of employees in the public education sector*

Group	Position	Minimum salary/month (01.01.2023)
I. Pedagogical staff with management functions	Head Teacher (principal)	1,065 EUR/2,082 BGN
	Assistant Head Teacher	985 EUR/1,926 BGN
II. Pedagogical staff	Teacher	874 EUR/1,709 BGN
	Senior Teacher	901 EUR/1,763 BGN
	Mentor	936 EUR/1,831 BGN

* Collective Labour Agreement for the system of Preschool and School Education 2022 and Annex to the Collective Labour Agreement 2023.

According to the Collective Labour Agreement applicable for public education (Art. 33, 2022), for attained professional qualification levels teachers are entitled to a minimum additional payment of between 15 EUR/30 BGN (for the 5th level) and 46 EUR/90 BGN (for the 1st level). Teachers with a PhD receive an additional 66 EUR/130 BGN, while for those with a DSc the amount is 82 EUR/160 BGN.

Regarding remuneration of Medical Nurses who work in ECE, according to the Collective Labour Agreement applicable for the healthcare sector (Art. 47, 2022), the minimum starting salary in Bulgaria is 741 EUR/1,450 BGN.

7.2 Full-time and part-time employment in ECEC provision

All staff in kindergartens are employed on a full-time basis (40 hours per week).

7.3 Support measures in the workplace for newly qualified and newly appointed staff

In terms of staff support measures in the workplace, Centre Heads usually arrange pairs of teachers so that a newly qualified teacher is paired with a Senior Teacher, the second acting as a mentor for the first one. Kindergartens from the same municipality often exchange observational sessions, aiming at the exchange of “good practices”.

7.4 Non-contact time

Six hours daily are spent in direct contact with the children, so two hours a day are non-contact time (preparation work, staff meetings, cooperation with parents, networking in the community and other activities). The working times of the two members of staff responsible for any one group overlap during the midday break for one hour. Teaching staff in both kindergartens and primary schools are entitled to 48 days of paid annual leave.

7.5 Current staffing issues

It is a positive fact during recent years is that there are no shortages of candidates for Kindergarten Teacher positions. This can be attributed not only to the increased teachers’ salaries, but also to the large number of higher education degree holders who choose to study for the additional qualification of Kindergarten Teachers and then enter the labour market in addition to the traditional preschool-education degree holders.

Moreover, it is often the case that Kindergarten Principals recruit retired Kindergarten Teachers (as well as Teachers’ Assistants), especially when someone from the staff is temporarily absent from work (maternity leave, illness, etc.).

Also, there is a practice of kindergartens with a mentorship contract with a university recruiting students in their final year and attracting them for a future full-time employment contract.

8. Recent policy reforms and initiatives relating to staffing and professionalisation issues

According to an amendment to the Early Education and Schools Act in 2020, as of the 2023/2024 school year, compulsory attendance at kindergarten is extended to three years; kindergarten will be mandatory for children turning 4 years old during the school year. State and municipalities have a duty to ensure that the conditions for this are in place by 2023/2024 at the latest.

As per Directive № 26 (2008) on the organisation and operation of nurseries, a **Nurse** is required as part of the nursery staff, but a recent change in the Directive (applicable since 01 January 2023) allows for exceptions in cases when a nurse cannot be allocated to a nursery group – in such cases, the group can be assigned at least one pedagogue who has undergone training on early childhood development, complex application of healthcare and first aid, and one Teacher’s Assistant who is responsible for hygiene. However, this exception is only applicable if there is at least one medical specialist allocated to the nursery.



An interesting initiative of the Bulgarian provisional government in 2022 was a planned but ultimately not implemented amendment to the Law for Preschool and Primary Education (Parliament of the Republic of Bulgaria 2022), which included a clause that transferred state nurseries under the supervision of the Ministry of Education and Science (from the Ministry of Health). There were debates with arguments both for and against this proposal, with supporters hailing it as an interesting idea worth pursuing in the future.

9. Recent country-specific research focusing on ECEC staff

Enhancement of intercultural competence of prospective Pre-primary Teachers

Source: Spiridonova 2021a, 2021b, 2021c (see *References* for full details)

Aims: Spiridonova presents a model for the enhancement of intercultural competence of prospective Pre-primary Teachers based on the concept of intercultural competence as a construct with three aspects – cognitive, affective and behavioural.

Procedure: 230 Master degree students preparing to become Pre-primary Teachers participated in the evaluation of an innovative model for the education of tolerance in preschool children as part of a Kindergarten Teacher’s intercultural competence.

Findings: The results show that the three aspects of the teacher's intercultural competence are well-advocated in the theoretical and practical training of the students who are prospective Kindergarten Teachers. *Cognitive* aspects encompass intercultural knowledge through pedagogical reflection on the broad spectrum of specific manifestations of culture. *Affective* aspects refer to the intercultural sensitivity of the teacher and *behavioural* aspects are expressed in skills for implementing intercultural pedagogical technologies within educational institutions.

Implications: The results of this research were taken into account when updating the educational content of the following disciplines in the curricula of the *Pre-school Pedagogy with a Foreign Language* and *Pre-school and Primary School Pedagogy* courses at Sofia University: “Intercultural education”, “Games and Intercultural competences”, and “Pedagogical Interaction in a multicultural environment” (Sofia University 2021a, 2021b).

Attitudes of teachers in public inclusive kindergartens relating to work with children with special education needs

Source: Trosheva-Asenova 2022 (see *References* for full details)

Aims: To investigate the attitudes and preparedness of kindergarten teachers in public kindergartens regarding the inclusion of children with special educational needs.

Procedure: 102 preschool teachers in Bulgarian kindergartens across the country participated in the research via completion of a questionnaire.

Findings: The results show positive attitudes towards the inclusion of children with SEN and the willingness of teachers to work with them and provide them with additional individual support. At the same time, more than half of the participating teachers do not have any qualifications for working with children with SEN and their practical experience is minimal or absent entirely.

Implications: Such content needs to be included more effectively in the university curricula for Bachelor’s degrees in preschool pedagogy and more CPD opportunities offered that focus on

building competences for working with children with SEN. The results of this research will be taken into account in upcoming curricula updates of the *Pre-school Pedagogy with a Foreign Language* and *Pre-school and Primary School Pedagogy* courses at Sofia University.

Contemporary aspects in the preparation of preschool pedagogues from the perspective of students, preschool teachers, directors of educational institutions and university lecturers

Source: Spiridonova et al. 2023 (unpublished project proposal) (see *References* for full details)

Background: At the end of 2023, a scientific team from the Department of Preschool and Media Pedagogy at the Faculty of Educational Studies and the Arts of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" under the direction of Associate Professor Lora Spiridonova, PhD started work on a two-year project on the above-named topic.

Aims: The aim of the research is to study the current state, as well as to outline the trends and prospects for the educational process in the Bachelor's programs of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" that prepare preschool teachers (i.e. specialties "Preschool Pedagogy and Foreign Language", "Preschool and Primary School Pedagogy" and "Media Pedagogy and Artistic Communication") from the point of view of students as future teachers in preschool educational institutions, of directors as employers, of university lecturers as experts and of ECEC mentors in kindergartens who work in collaboration with them.

Procedure/method: Questionnaires measuring students', teachers', head teachers', and lecturers' levels of satisfaction and their evaluation of the educational process and its practical and theoretical results are being developed.

Results/implications: The results are expected to provide the foundation for a discussion about improvement of the educational process regarding the preparation of future preschool teachers.

10. Workforce challenges – country expert assessment

While incorporating a desire for learning from relevant European practices and legislation in the ECEC field, the Bulgarian educational system constantly looks for ways of preserving and promoting positive national traditions in education (Engels-Kritidis 2012). Building upon a solid historical and theoretical basis and encompassing the overall transformation of social life in the country, early childhood education and care in Bulgaria is now being further reformed in order to adapt to the constantly changing educational needs of children and demands of the educational system. Children and their needs are firmly established as the core focus of contemporary early childhood pedagogy. With the Law on Preschool and School Education (2015), in which pre-school education is seen on an equal footing with school education, a significant success has been achieved for the sector. On the other hand, this shift is also producing new challenges: Bulgarian Kindergarten Teachers need to be aware of possible negative effects which could occur. These include countering the early onset of strictly didactical methodologies which may develop through the recently introduced compulsory attendance for 4 year-olds, and being able to keep the idea of the 'preciousness' of childhood at the core of their practice.



Related challenges include focusing more strongly on the following priorities, and while they are connected mainly to improving the quality of the ECEC workforce in Bulgaria, they also define the scope and potential of improving and enhancing the ECEC system in its entirety.

- Providing CPD opportunities to develop an individualised and differentiated approach to working with each child (not only with those with a background of migration or SEN/D) during the organised group activities, even in large classes (see also Engels-Kritidis 2015)
- Expanding the opportunities of Kindergarten Teachers to work in nurseries instead of medical nurses and bringing the nurseries under the auspices of the Ministry of Education and Science (currently they are under the Ministry of Health)
- Establishing a national programme for the mentoring of newly-appointed teachers in the pre-school education system
- Continuing the national policy of taking measures to raise the social status and the salaries of pre-school teachers via initiatives for improving their qualifications and creating models for career development, including a new remuneration system.

On a positive note, the challenge of increasing the number of young staff in the ECEC system is gradually improving. Due to the recent increase in teacher salaries as well as improvement of the professional status, there is increased interest in the pre-primary study routes and more of the graduates pursue a career working in kindergartens. Additionally, many people with different Bachelor degree backgrounds apply for a Master's degree in *Pre-primary Education*; these candidates are highly motivated to stay in the profession and to pursue continuing professional development. As a result, as mentioned previously, the age distribution of Kindergarten Teachers has now begun to shift towards younger professionals.

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