

# CROATIA

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](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 Croatia

In Croatia, ECEC is regulated by the Preschool Education Act<sup>1</sup> (Official Gazette, No. 10/1997, 107/2007, 94/2013, 98/2019, 57/2022, 101/23), by the National Curriculum for ECEC (Official Gazette, No. 5/2015), and by the State Pedagogical Standard of ECEC (Official Gazette, No. 63/2008, 90/2010). ECEC is provided by kindergartens and other legal entities that have established education programmes for children aged from 6 months to primary school age (under age 7). It is implemented through education, healthcare, nutrition and social care agencies for children from the age of six months until the start of primary school. ECEC is divided into three educational cycles, based on the age of children: from 6 months to one year of age, from 1 to 3 years, from 3 years of age to the start of primary education (age 7). Provision for children under 3 years is classified as ISCED 010 and as ISCED 020 for children aged 3 years and over.

A kindergarten (ECEC institution) can be established by the authorities of the Republic of Croatia, local and regional units of self-government, religious communities, and other legal and natural persons. All ECEC programmes are supervised by the Ministry of Science and Education (*Ministarstvo znanosti i obrazovanja*). The dominant providers of ECEC are public institutions established by local government authorities. In addition to regular kindergartens, children can also participate in other pre-primary and early childhood programmes provided by other legally recognised institutions – in primary schools, playgroups in libraries, or in other health, social, cultural and sports organisations. Their provision focuses on various short-duration programmes (Eurydice 2023).

ECEC represents the initial level of the education system. However, there is no universal legal guarantee to a place in ECEC for children under age 6. For 6 year-olds, a one-year pre-primary programme prior to starting school is compulsory. Pre-primary programmes last 250 hours in total. The responsibility for financing and developing ECEC capacities is set at the local level (towns and municipality). The territorial fragmentation of Croatia's public administration and differences in levels of administrative capacity and financial resources hinder the expansion and availability of ECEC. Croatia's funding model – 99% of ECEC costs are decentralised to the municipality level – is viewed as the primary obstacle to increasing ECEC coverage in the country (The World Bank 2019).

It can be concluded that Croatian ECEC is integrated in the educational system and significantly decentralised. The establishment and funding of ECEC programmes falls under the jurisdiction of local authorities (counties, cities, and municipalities), under the supervision of the Ministry of Science and Education.

## 2. Who belongs to the early years workforce?

### 2.1 Regular contact staff in ECEC provision

The professional staff specifically qualified for educational work with children up to 7 years of age in Croatia are **ECEC Teachers** (*odgojitelj/odgojiteljica djece rane i predškolske dobi*). The role

<sup>1</sup> The Preschool Education Act is a literal translation of the title of the Act which refers to ECEC.



of ECEC Teachers is to plan, programme and evaluate educational work and to support the development of every child according to their abilities, while cooperating with peers, parents and the local community.

According to the Preschool Education Act (Official Gazette, No. 10/1997, 107/2007, 94/2013, 98/2019; 57/2022), ECEC institutions employ various **specialist support staff** who also work with children and members of their families, regardless of their developmental, social or family status, as well as a **Nurse** as a health manager. Qualified **Primary School Teachers** can also work in pre-primary programmes located in primary schools in the place of ECEC Teachers. In cases of staff shortages, they may also be employed as ‘unqualified staff’ in other ECEC programmes, but they are then required to complete the ECEC Teacher qualification within two years.

Table 1 gives an overview of these professionals. The core practitioner (ECEC Teacher) and the qualified co-worker (Nurse) are also categorised according to one of five profiles adapted from the original **SEEPRO** study (see Box 1 at the end of this chapter).

Table 1

Croatia: ECEC staff in centre-based settings

Job title	Main ECEC work-place settings and age range	Main position/s	Main age-range focus of initial professional education	Minimum qualification requirement ECTS credits EQF level ISCED level
<i>Odgojitelj/odgojiteljica djece rane i predškolske dobi</i> <b>ECEC Teacher</b> (sometimes called Kindergarten or Preschool Teacher)  <i>Profile:</i> Early Childhood Pedagogy Professional	<i>Predškolske ustanove i programi</i> <b>Kindergarten</b> and other licensed ECEC institutions  6 months – 6 years <sup>2</sup>	Core pedagogue with group responsibility	6 months – 6 years	Bachelor’s degree, 3 years university  ECTS credits: 180 EQF level: 6 ISCED 2011: 6
<i>Stručni suradnik – pedagog</i> <i>Stručna suradnica – pedagoginja</i> <b>Pedagogue</b>	<i>Predškolske ustanove i programi</i> <b>Kindergarten</b> and other licensed ECEC institutions 6 months – 6 years	Specialist support staff	Broad focus (children and adults)	Master’s degree (3 +2 years university)  ECTS credits: 300 EQF Level: 7 ISCED 2011: 7
<i>Stručni suradnik – psiholog</i> <i>Stručna suradnica - psihologinja</i> <b>Psychologist</b>	<i>Predškolske ustanove i programi</i> <b>Kindergarten</b> and other licensed ECEC provision 6 months – 6 years	Specialist support staff	Broad focus (children and adults)	Master’s degree (3+2 years university)  ECTS credits: 300 EQF level: 7 ISCED 2011: 7

<sup>2</sup> **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 for countries with a school starting age at 6: **0–2** years for children **up to 3** years of age and **3–5** years for 3, 4 and 5 year-olds. In the case of Croatia the corresponding format is **0–6**, because children start school between the ages 6 and 7 years.

Job title	Main ECEC work-place settings and age range	Main position/s	Main age-range focus of initial professional education	Minimum qualification requirement ECTS credits EQF level ISCED level
<i>Stručni suradnik – edukacijski rehabilitator, logoped, socijalni pedagog</i> <i>Stručna suradnica – edukacijska rehabilitatorica, logopetkinja, socijalna pedagoginja</i> <b>Educational and rehabilitation professionals</b> (Curative Educator, Speech Therapist, Social Pedagogue)	<i>Predškolske ustanove i programi</i> <b>Kindergarten</b> and other licensed ECEC institutions  6 months – 6 years	Specialist support staff	Broad focus (children and adults)	Master's degree (3+2 years university)  ECTS credits: 300 EQF level: 7 ISCED 2011: 7
<i>Viša medicinska sestra/Viši medicinski brat</i> <b>Nurse</b>  <i>Profile:</i> Social Care/Health Care Professional	<i>Predškolske ustanove i programi</i> <b>Kindergarten</b> and other licensed ECEC institutions  6 months – 6 years	Qualified co-worker, particularly in health issues	Broad focus (children and adults)	Bachelor's degree 3 years university  ECTS credits: 180 EQF: Level 6 ISCED 2011: 6
<i>Učitelj/Učiteljica razredne nastave</i> <b>Primary School Teacher</b>	<i>Program predškole</i> <b>Pre-primary provision in schools</b>	Core pedagogue with group responsibility	6 – 6 years	Master's degree (5 years university)  ECTS credits: 300 EQF Level: 7 ISCED 2011: 7
<i>Pomoćnik/pomoćnica za djecu s teškoćama u razvoju or</i> <i>Stručni komunikacijski posrednik/posrednica</i> <b>Assistant for children with developmental disabilities or Communication Mediator</b>	<i>Predškolske ustanove i programi</i> <b>Kindergarten</b> and other licensed ECEC institutions  6 months – 6 years	Support co-workers in the education and upbringing of children with developmental disabilities	6 months – 6 years	Completed secondary school education <b>plus</b> completion of a further education programme for working with children with developmental disabilities  ECTS credits: n/a EQF level: 4 ISCED 2011: 4

Box 1

**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

In Croatia, the principal is the administrative and professional manager of a kindergarten. The institution is governed by a steering council consisting of 5 to 7 members. At least half of the members of the council are appointed by the founder/provider from the ranks of public workers, one member is elected by the parents of the enrolled children, and the other members of the council are elected via secret vote amongst the ECEC Teachers or specialist support staff.

A person who meets the job requirements for the post of ECEC Teacher or specialist support staff, and has at least 5 years of work experience in ECEC, can be appointed Principal. The Principal is selected on the basis of a public tender announced by the governing council of the institution, and appointed and dismissed by the founder of the institution. The term of office of the principal is 5 years, with the possibility of re-election (Preschool Education Act, Official Gazette, No. 10/1997, 107/2007, 94/2013, 98/2019, 57/2022, 101/2023). Principals generally do not work directly with children, and their role is pedagogical guidance and administration.

According to the Croatian Qualifications Framework Act (Official Gazette, No. 22/2013, 41/2016, 64/2018, 47/2020, 20/2021), the expected sets of competences for Principals of educational institutions, including kindergartens are:

- Planning and programming the work of the educational institution
- Analysis of the learning environment
- Quality assurance
- Workplace organisation
- Advisory work
- Communication and presentation skills
- Human resources management
- Implementation of legal regulations.

However, accredited-education programmes for Principals in Croatia have not yet been developed. This gap is being filled by some civil society organisations that implement programmes for Principals as part of lifelong learning (e.g. Step by Step, Forum of Freedom in Education), but they are not licensed and are not available to all Principals.

There is also no adequate system for attracting individuals who are interested in the position of ECEC Principal which would encourage a selection of higher-quality candidates. Obtaining a license is not prescribed by law. There are no suitable criteria for determining the pedagogical and management competences of candidates. None of the important elements related to assuming the position of ECEC Principal, to the performance of his/her duties, or to leaving office, has been appropriately regulated. This means that ECEC Principals are not adequately-prepared for the management of ECEC institutions (Strategy for education, science and technology, Official Gazette, No. 124/2014).

Even though the Strategy predicts a definition of competence standards and the institutionalisation of the education of future Principals, and despite the fact that the Principal's role was introduced into the register of professions by the ministry, Croatia is still waiting for changes in the professionalisation of Kindergarten Principals.

## 2.3 Centre-based posts of responsibility

Beyond the post of Centre Leader, the only designated post of responsibility in Croatia relating to pedagogical tasks which require a co-ordinating focus across the ECEC setting is that of Supervisor or Mentor during field practice within students' initial professional education courses.

According to the Ordinance on kindergartens as professional development centres (Official Gazette, No. 49/2004), higher educational institutions (HEI) and kindergartens enter into an agreement which, among other things, defines the obligations of the HEI to pay for the work of Mentors and other individuals involved in the organisation and implementation of work programmes with students.

In some kindergartens Principals appoint a shift manager from the ranks of ECEC Teachers. This ECEC Teacher performs duties such as scheduling of ECEC Teachers' shifts, weekly recording of working hours of ECEC Teachers or other tasks ordered by the principal. These duties generally are not paid additionally and are not defined by legislation.

## 2.4 Pedagogical co-ordinators and supervisory staff

Croatian legislation does not provide for special positions regarding coordination or supervision of pedagogical work. If it is a kindergarten with regional facilities, facility managers are appointed from the ranks of ECEC Teachers or specialist support staff.

Professional and pedagogical supervision of kindergartens is performed by the Education and Teacher Training Agency, which also organises the professional development of staff (Act on the Agency for Education, Official Gazette, No. 85/2006).

Professional work in the Agency is performed by Advisers and Senior Advisers. A person with a university degree and 3 years of work experience in education may be elected as an Adviser, while a person with a university degree and 7 years of work experience in education may be elected as a Senior Adviser. Other conditions are defined by the statute or other general acts of the Agency.

## 2.5 Specialist support staff

The specialist support staff (*stručni suradnik, stručna suradnica*) in a kindergarten include a Pedagogue, a Psychologist and an educational rehabilitation expert such as a Speech Therapist, Social Pedagogue or a Curative Educator (State Pedagogical Standard of ECEC, Official Gazette, No. 63/2008, 90/2010).

A **Pedagogue** (*stručni suradnik – pedagog/stručna suradnica – pedagoginja*) monitors the realisation of educational activities, gives expert contribution to the achievement of educational goals and improves the overall educational process by:

- Proposing innovations, contemporary methods and forms of work
- Proposing, participating and assisting ECEC Teachers in the realisation of professional development programmes and their lifelong learning
- Cooperating with parents and helping them in the upbringing and education of children and tackling educational problems
- Cooperating with other educational actors
- Contributing to the development of teamwork in the ECEC institution
- Publicly presenting the educational work of the ECEC institution.

A **Psychologist** (*stručni suradnik – psiholog/stručna suradnica -psihologinja*) monitors the psychosocial development and progress of each child, sets developmental tasks and takes care of the mental health of children. Psychologists contribute to the development of teamwork in the kindergarten and participate in creating a framework for realising children's rights. The role of Psychologists is especially important in the work with children with special educational needs (e.g. children with disabilities and gifted children) and in devising developmental tasks which



facilitate the strengthening of the child's abilities. A Psychologist also works on the emotional and psychological strengthening of the family in order to better support the child's conditions of growing up. He/she collaborates with ECEC Teachers, parents and the local community and improves the overall work of the kindergarten. Further professional tasks include establishing connections with health and social care institutions, using supervisory assistance, participating in continuing education and research programmes, and publicly presenting the results of the work of the kindergarten.

**Curative professionals** (Curative Educators, Speech Therapists, Social Pedagogues) work on recognising, alleviating and eliminating children's difficulties. They identify the specific needs of children with disabilities and inform ECEC Teachers, other co-workers and parents about them. They create conditions for the inclusion of children in special and regular ECEC programmes.

In cooperation with ECEC Teachers, the specialist support staff (and parents) determine the most appropriate methods for each individual child and apply them in their work. They cooperate with health and social care institutions and others in the prevention of developmental disorders in children. They monitor, study and check in practice scientific and theoretical knowledge in the field of educational and rehabilitation sciences. They improve their own work and the whole process of inclusion of children with disabilities in the community.

Specialist support staff are obliged to spend 25 working hours per week in direct pedagogical work with children, ECEC Teachers and parents, and other tasks within the hourly rate up to full working hours (40 hours).

The number of specialist support staff with regard to the number of educational groups or the total number of children is as follows (State Pedagogical Standard of ECEC, Official Gazette, No. 63/2008, 90/2010):

- For 10 educational groups or 200 children, one full-time specialist support staff member
- For 11 to 20 educational groups or up to 400 children, two full-time specialist support staff (of different profiles)
- For 21 to 30 educational groups or up to 600 children, three full-time specialist support staff (of different profiles).

If educational groups with a special programme for children with disabilities or programmes for gifted children are established in the kindergarten, the number of specialist support staff is increased by 0.10 working hours per educational group per week. The number of specialist support staff can be increased due to special educational needs of children, dislocation of facilities and the diversity of programmes implemented in the kindergarten.

The profile of the specialist support staff is selected by the kindergarten based on the needs of the children and the programmes it implements. In the selection of specialist support staff, it is necessary to respect the multidisciplinary nature of the team of specialist support staff (Pedagogue, Psychologist and experts in the field of curative education: a Speech Therapist, a Social Pedagogue or a Curative Educator). If the kindergarten does not employ any specialist support staff members, resources in the local community are used. However, such cooperation is not specifically defined by law.

The regulation outlined above means that kindergartens with less than 200 children are not obliged to employ specialist support staff. Since approximately 40% of all kindergartens belong to this group of ECEC institutions, many children and kindergartens in Croatia have to manage without specialist support.

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

According to national data (CBS 2023a, Tab.1), at the beginning of the year 2022/2023 there were 673 kindergartens (with 910 units) and 144 other institutions (e.g. primary schools, libraries) implementing ECEC programmes in Croatia. 384 were self-contained kindergartens, whereas 289 were kindergartens with affiliated units/departments in various locations.

The data on the overall composition of the ECEC workforce are shown in *Table 2*. National data about the ethnicity and migrant status of employees are not available because they are not systematically compiled. However, according to the last census held in 2021 (CBS 2022), the majority of the population are Croats (91.63%), meaning that predominantly Croatian staff work in Croatian ECEC institutions.

Table 2

Croatia: Structural composition of ECEC workforce (kindergartens), 2022/2023

Staff categories	ECEC Teachers	Nurses	Specialist support staff	Administrative and other staff (including Assistants)	Total	Proportion of workforce, in %
Staff with specialist higher education degree (BA)	11,977	353	49	515	12,894	51.64
Staff with specialist higher education degree (MA)	2,522	113	1,123	685	4,443	17.79
Staff with specialist vocational qualification (post-secondary)	660	110	-	5,304	6,074	24.33
Staff with non-specialist qualification	-	-	-	1,556	1,556	6.24
<b>Total</b>	<b>15,159</b>	<b>576</b>	<b>1,172</b>	<b>8,060</b>	<b>24,976</b>	<b>100</b>
Including: Men	165	20	36	876	1,097	4.4
Staff with a background of migration	No systematically compiled national data					

Source: CBS 2023a, own calculations

Differences in the educational levels of individual employees mostly stem from changes in the system of education of ECEC Teachers, which enables the acquisition of a Master's degree in early and preschool education. This level of education is not a mandatory condition for performing the duties of an ECEC Teacher. Employees who were educated before the implementation of the Bologna Process, and who have retained the right to qualify according to previous regulations, have lower levels of education.

## 4. Initial professional education (IPE)

### 4.1 Initial qualifying routes – higher education and vocational

Since 2005, professional studies for prospective ECEC Teachers in Croatia have been transformed significantly through the implementation of the Bologna Process. The major change was raising all initial ECEC Teacher education programmes to the tertiary level. Today, all studies for ECEC Teachers are conceptualised as university studies lasting three years (Bachelor's degree). After completion of a three-year undergraduate study programme (six semesters), the specialist **Bachelor's degree in Early and Preschool Education** prepares the ECEC Teachers for duties and tasks related to the education and care of young children up to compulsory school age (from 6 months to under 7 years of age), caring for them and educating them in different ECEC settings. They can then continue to follow a graduate two-year university study programme (four semesters) for a **Master's degree in Early and Preschool Education**, qualifying them to perform highly professional, research and developmental work in the field of ECEC.

Other professionals who work as specialist support staff in ECEC settings have followed different university study programmes (pedagogy, psychology, curative education, speech therapy, social pedagogy) and working in ECEC settings is just one aspect of their professional interest. They are qualified to work in a variety of settings, with different populations (young children, school pupils, teenagers, and adults). If they work in kindergartens, their main role is to support the ECEC Teachers, children and parents in the educational process.

The condition for enrolment in higher education in Croatia is the completion of a high school (gymnasium or vocational secondary school) and passing the Final State Exam. In addition to these two conditions, some higher education institutions may accept the results of competitions during high school and other achievements (eg. completed music school, the status of a categorised athlete, etc.).

Many universities offer initial ECEC education study programmes in Croatia. Their programmes are not uniform, and the procedures for enrolment differ. Thus, in some higher education institutions, additional tests of specific knowledge, skills and abilities are conducted, while in others they are not.

For enrolment in the undergraduate university study programme, psychological testing of abilities and motivation is conducted, but also artistic abilities, musical abilities and basic motor skills are assessed.

For enrolment in the undergraduate university study of **curative education**, an oral assessment of general knowledge, aptitude and motivation for the field of study is conducted, as well as an additional check of the specific abilities and skills required. For enrolment in the undergraduate university study of **speech therapy**, an assessment of language-speech-voice status (interview) is performed, and the exclusion criterion is the presence of language-speech-voice difficulties of the candidate. For enrolment in the undergraduate university study of **social pedagogy**, an oral assessment of knowledge, inclination and motivation for study is performed, and a health certificate from a school doctor is required.

For the study of **pedagogy and psychology**, a test of abstract thinking and an initial interview with candidates are conducted (although due to epidemiological circumstances, this was omitted in the academic year 2020/21).

The specifics of IPE in Croatia are:

Table 3

**ECEC Teacher / Kindergarten Teacher**

<b>Job title in Croatian:</b> <i>Odgojitelj/odgojiteljica djece rane i predškolske dobi</i> <b>Profile:</b> Early childhood pedagogy professional
<b>Entry requirements:</b> completion of 4 years at a gymnasium or vocational secondary school and Final State Exam (= university entrance exam) <b>Professional studies:</b> 3 years at university level <b>Award:</b> Bachelor – Early and Preschool Education <b>ECTS credits:</b> 180 <b>EQF level:</b> 6 <b>ISCED 2011:</b> 6 <b>Main ECEC workplace:</b> ECEC settings, 6 months – 6 years

Table 4

**Croatia: Specialist support staff (Pedagogue, Psychologist, Rehabilitation Specialists, Speech Therapists, Social Pedagogues)**

<b>Job titles in Croatian:</b> <i>Stručni suradnik – pedagog/stručna suradnica – pedagoginja</i> <i>Stručni suradnik – psiholog/stručna suradnica -psihologinja</i> <i>Edukacijski rehabilitator/edukacijska rehabilitatorica</i> <i>Logoped/logopetkinja</i> <i>Socijalni pedagog/socijalna pedagoginja</i>
<b>Entry requirements:</b> completion of 4 years gymnasium or vocational secondary school and Final State Exam <b>Professional studies:</b> 5 years study at a university (undergraduate and graduate study programme in Pedagogy, Psychology or Education and Rehabilitation Sciences) <b>Award:</b> Master's degree <b>Total ECTS credits:</b> 300 (180+120) <b>EQF level:</b> 7 <b>ISCED 2011:</b> 7 <b>Main ECEC workplaces:</b> As Pedagogues, Psychologists, experts in inclusive education and rehabilitation, social pedagogy or Speech Therapists in ECEC settings, 6 months – 6 years old. Graduates also may work in schools, public sector services, state institutions and local and regional self-governing institutions (with children, adolescents and adults).

Table 5

**Croatia: Nurse**

<b>Job title in Croatian:</b> <i>Viša medicinska sestra/Viši medicinski tehičar, Zdravstveni voditelj</i> (lit. "senior nurse") <b>Profile:</b> Social and Health Care Professional
<b>Entry requirements:</b> completion of 4 years gymnasium or vocational secondary school and Final State Exam (= university entrance exam) <b>Professional studies:</b> 3 years study at a university of applied sciences <b>Award:</b> Bachelor <b>Total ECTS credits:</b> 180 <b>EQF level:</b> 6 <b>ISCED 2011:</b> 6 <b>Main ECEC workplaces:</b> Working with children, parents and professionals in the field of protection of children's health and a healthy environment in ECEC settings. Graduates also may work in different health and social welfare institutions.

Primary School Teachers are employed in ECEC only as an exception, in cases of a shortage of ECEC Teachers.

## 4.2 Competences, curriculum, and pedagogic-didactic approaches in IPE programmes

According to the Croatian Qualifications Framework Act (Official Gazette, No. 22/2013, 41/2016, 64/2018, 47/2020, 20/2021), all qualifications and related learning outcomes should be harmonised with the *Croatian Qualifications Framework* and entered in the *Register of Croatian Qualifications*. In the field of ECEC, the occupational standard for ECEC Teacher was entered in the register of the Croatian Qualifications Framework on 15 May 2023.

Occupational standards for the Bachelor ECEC qualification (level 6) are:

1. Participation in preparing the annual plan and programme of ECEC curricula
2. Planning and evaluating the education process
3. Designing spatial, material, time, and other conditions for the implementation of the education process
4. Implementation of the education process (direct work, individual, and group access)
5. Implementation of specific educational programmes
6. Conducting prescribed pedagogical documentation
7. Communication and cooperation within the ECEC institution (parents, colleagues, specialist support staff, others)
8. Planning and implementation of continuing individual and institutional development
9. Evaluation and self-evaluation of individual and institutional work
10. Care for the safety and well-being of children.

The most important tasks of the ECEC Teachers are:

- Participation in the preparation of the annual work plan and the programme and curriculum of the kindergarten or other ECEC setting
- Planning and preparing direct educational work with the children
- Preparing and organising incentives, activities, and environments for educational work
- Carrying out the educational process through direct work and an individual and group approach
- Implementation of special educational programmes
- Keeping the prescribed educational documentation
- Collaboration and professional communication with parents, work colleagues and other stakeholders
- Implementation of the personal CPD and development plan
- Assessing and self-evaluating their own work and the work of the centre
- Concern for the safety and well-being of the children.

On the basis of the occupational standard drawn up, a qualification standard is created that defines the learning outcomes that a person must acquire in order to be able to fulfil the key tasks of ECEC Teachers and to acquire this qualification. This is documented with a diploma. The learning outcomes form the basis for the creation of study programmes that train specialists for the profession.

It is important to emphasise that qualification standards have not yet been adopted and implemented in the initial education programmes of ECEC Teachers, so they continue to study according to different study programmes, depending on which university and higher education institution they study at. It means that the curriculum of each higher education institution for each study programme is defined at the institutional level. Before the approval of study programmes, all higher education institutions have to undergo an accreditation process by the Agency for Science and Higher Education. *The Scientific Activity and Higher Education Act* (Official Gazette, No. 23/2003, 198/2003, 105/2004, 174/2004, 02/2007, 46/2007, 45/2009, 63/2011, 94/2013, 139/2013, 101/2014, 60/2015, 131/2017) stipulates that curricula should be in line with the latest scientific achievements, national priorities, and professional demands and be comparable to EU curricula. However, there are no compulsory or core subjects defined at the national or regional level. A common feature of all programmes is their university level, which means that ECEC vocational studies no longer exist in Croatia.

### 4.3 Alternative entry and qualification routes, system permeability

Formal opportunities for moving up and across qualifications frameworks, as well as alternative pathways of entry into ECEC work, are not developed in Croatia. ECEC workers can continue their professional development by entering advanced formal education study routes or through continuing professional development activities, without the possibility of changing their professional position or workplace. Even though the Croatian Government has adopted many different strategies and laws that focus on informal learning, these initiatives are still waiting to be implemented.

The only formal possibility to change the level of qualification is enrolment in a graduate ECEC study-as-you-work programme. However, ECEC Teachers who acquire the Master of ECEC qualification remain in the same job, with the possibility of a salary increase (depending on decisions made by the founders of the kindergarten).

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

Learning in the ECEC workplace is incorporated in the curricula of each faculty that provides a study programme for ECEC. These practica are conducted in kindergartens that have the status of a training centre. This status is determined by the Ministry of Science and Education, based on the requirement of the faculty that organises the students' placements (Ordinance on kindergartens as professional development centres, Official Gazette, No. 49/2004). Mutual obligations of the training centre and the faculty are regulated through a signed contract which is renewable on an annual basis. This contract includes a plan of the work with students, as well as regulations for the financial support for mentors and the ECEC institutions where the placement will be arranged. This financial support is provided by higher education faculties and is based on the number of students who decide to spend their practicum in each institution.

According to the relevant Ordinance (Official Gazette, No. 49/2004), the mentorship of students is performed by ECEC Teachers or specialist support staff with at least five years of experience. The mentor in the practicum class is initially appointed by the principal of the kindergarten or ECEC Teachers' council for a period of one year. After one year of successful mentoring, the

ministry appoints a mentor for a period of four years at the suggestion of the cooperating institutions. A mentor in the practicum class:

- Plans, prepares and evaluates the student’s work
- Collaborates with the university teacher who is responsible for the methodology courses
- Collaborates with other mentors in the kindergarten
- Participates in the analysis of students' educational work
- If needed, participates in the sessions of professional bodies of the higher education institution when discussing issues in the field of methodology and professional-pedagogical practice of students
- Keeps written documentation.

Another possibility is that the students themselves choose kindergartens for work-based learning; however, these institutions are not required to have the status of training centres. Practica in the study programmes of different higher education institutions may have different organisational forms, timetables and allocation of ECTS credits (see *Table 6*).

All students are obliged to keep a diary of work, as well as other documentation defined in the course syllabus. The mentor is obliged to evaluate the quality of the student’s practice through a written report. At the end of the practicum, the student hands in the various forms of documentation to the responsible university tutor, who checks whether all obligations have been fulfilled. This is the only formalised procedure of self-evaluation and evaluation of student’s practice. However, each university tutor can give the students special assignments connected with specific lectures or courses. In such cases, students evaluate their work within the framework of these courses and reflect on their work together with their university tutors.

*Table 6*

**Croatia: Practical courses within the ECEC study programmes**

University (HEI)	Bachelor’s degree		Master’s degree	
	Hours	ECTS	Hours	ECTS
Juraj Dobrila University of Pula, Faculty of Educational Sciences	280	7	-	_3
University of Split, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences	150	5	-	-
Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek, Faculty of Educational Sciences	120	9	90	6
University of Rijeka, Faculty of Teacher Education	60	6	-	-
University of Zadar, Department of Teacher and Preschool Teacher Education	120	8	90	6
University of Zagreb, Faculty of Teacher Education	120	6	160	6

Source: Study programmes of higher education institutions 2022

The placements in ECEC settings are organised as a separate course. During the time they spend at the workplace, students receive support from a Mentor, who should have at least five years

<sup>3</sup> Some study programmes are offered exclusively in the format of in-service professional development and additional practica are not included in the study programme.



of working experience. This is the only requirement for taking on the role as Mentor. Specific qualifications or working conditions for this position have not been developed. The mentor is expected to support the work of the student through planning, preparing and evaluating the student's activities. The 'Student Mentor' position is awarded 3 points in the process of the professional promotion of ECEC Teachers (Ordinance on the manner and conditions for the promotion in the profession of ECEC Teachers and other professionals in kindergartens, Official Gazette, No. 133/1997; 20/2005).

During the practicum period, students are expected to become familiar with the organisational, legal and pedagogical aspects of kindergartens, as well as with all aspects of their future work.

Learning outcomes are defined in the course syllabus. For example, the Department of Teacher and Preschool Teacher Education of the University of Zadar, at the undergraduate level, envisages the following learning outcomes of student practice:

- Develop the skills of a reflective practitioner who continuously evaluates the effects of his or her achievements
- Demonstrate the ability to adapt to new and unexpected situations by actively applying the acquired knowledge, skills and abilities
- Recognise and evaluate the concepts of lifelong learning by advocating for personal professional development
- Explain the latest scientific knowledge about children's learning in early childhood and ways of supporting it
- Independently construct, implement and evaluate an integrated curriculum in the totality of all developmental areas (kinesiological, music, art, language-communication and research-cognitive) using activities and materials in accordance with modern development theories that interpret child development.

The learning outcomes of student internship at the graduate level are:

- Devise and examine new strategies in designing an integrated curriculum that will be a response to current knowledge about the developmental effects of extrafamilial ECEC as a child-friendly environment
- Identify opportunities to improve the quality of educational work and organise and manage research projects by selecting appropriate research paradigms (methods and techniques), as well as analyse and interpret research results
- Compare and critically evaluate the relationship between knowledge and its application in specific educational practices and assess the possible impacts on the quality of centre-based ECEC
- Develop the ability to lead at the level of independent action and teamwork in interdisciplinary teams of experts working in the field of ECEC.

It can be concluded that workplace-based learning in the IPE of core pedagogues in Croatia is not coordinated and in some aspects not sufficiently defined. This can be deduced from differences in the number of ECTS credits allocated for this part of IPE at different HEI, from the lack of formal procedures for organising and evaluating these processes, and from the lack of qualification requirements for field-based Mentors, who are not well recognised and supported.



## 6. Continuing professional development (CPD) of ECEC staff

The following regulations are relevant for CPD:

- the **Preschool Education Act** (Official Gazette, No. 10/1997, 107/2007, 94/2013, 98/2019; 57/2022), which stipulates the obligation of ECEC Teachers and specialist support staff in terms of CPD and the related possibility of promotion, according to the *Ordinance on the manner and conditions for promotion in the ECEC Teacher profession and for other professionals in kindergartens* (Official Gazette, No. 133/1997; 20/2005)
- the **Act on the Education and Teacher Training Agency** (Official Gazette, No. 85/2006) which prescribes that the Agency organises and conducts professional training of educational workers and principals.

CPD is one of the three criteria for the promotion of ECEC Teachers and specialist support staff in their professional advancement. It includes participation in (a) professional development sessions organised by the Ministry of Science and Education, and (b) CPD conducted by professional institutions and associations.

CPD is planned by the principal of the kindergarten on an annual basis. It includes formal seminars and courses, as well as center-based CPD activities, and depends on the capabilities and priorities of individual institutions and their contractors.

Professional development of ECEC Teachers and specialist support staff is one of the many obligations that are implemented during the non-contact time, but the exact share of professional development is not defined (State Pedagogical Standard of ECEC, Official Gazette, No. 63/2008, 90/2010).

Professional training organised by the Education and Teacher Training Agency is free of charge for participants, while other forms of CPD are paid for – either through project funds or by the institutions, or by the participants themselves. In addition to the Agency, ECEC professional development courses are offered by civil society organisations (e.g. Step by Step) and the lifelong learning centres of various university faculties. The Agency planned to hold 187 professional sessions in 2021, and around 50 meetings were related to ECEC (Education and Teacher Training Agency 2021).

The topics of professional development are diverse, and most often focus on general pedagogical topics related to curricula (Bouillet 2018a). In terms of quality, the programmes implemented by *Step by Step* stand out, such as: “Interculturalism and living diversity”, “The right to an appropriate upbringing and education”, “Developmentally appropriate practices” and “Quality and development”. They are, however, only available to a small number of ECEC Teachers and are not part of the regular programme offered of the Education and Teacher Training Agency.

During their professional career, ECEC Teachers can advance to the status of a **Mentor, Counsellor** or **Superior Counsellor**<sup>4</sup>, dependent to a certain extent on their participation in CPD courses. Precise criteria on the content, manner and forms of professional training have not been determined yet.

Such a situation leads to the conclusion that CPD depends on the individual aspirations of individuals and the capacities and willingness of the kindergarten to organise CPD activities at the institutional level. This is indicated by the results of a recent national survey (Matković et al.

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<sup>4</sup> The status of superior counsellor is an innovation based on the amendments of the Preschool Education Act from the year 2022.



2020) which showed in a representative sample for Croatia (N=2,023 qualified ECEC staff) that the most common form of professional development is training at work (colloquia, learning communities, etc.), with 82.5% of respondents referring to such a form of CDP. In second place were professional training courses or sessions organised by the Education and Teacher Training Agency, in which 52.3% of respondents participated during the year. In third place comes advanced professional training paid or provided by the employer (50.2% of respondents), and the lowest number of respondents participated in professional training funded by themselves (27.0%).

Approximately a quarter of the professional staff had not participated in any form of CPD during the previous year. This indicates that although two complementary mechanisms of professional development are provided (by the state or the employer), this joint coverage still does not reach a quarter of professionals employed in kindergartens (Matković et al. 2020).

Most ECEC Teachers participate in CPD only for one day or less a year. Centre Leaders and special support staff are more likely to participate in CPD than ECEC Teachers. Staff in ECEC settings in rural communities and temporary employees are less likely to engage in professional development activities than their contemporaries in urban areas. Obstacles to access are diverse: from lack of capacity in existing CPD options in terms of cost, distance, lack of time, lack of employer support and non-transparent training allocation practices, to inadequacy of the form or content of training (Matković et al. 2020).

The findings presented here come from the research project “Working in kindergartens: results of the research on working conditions in early and preschool education”, conducted in 2019 by the research team (Matković et al. 2020) as part of the activities of the Trade Union of Education, Media and Culture. The research was funded by the European Social Fund. This is the only extensive research on CDP in ECEC that has recently been conducted in Croatia.

## 7. Working conditions and current workforce issues

### 7.1 Remuneration

Salaries in ECEC, as elsewhere in the public sector, are largely determined by the level of education and length of service of employees. However, the ECEC system is significantly more decentralised than the rest of the public sector. Thus, defining the amount of salaries is in the domain of the setting providers, i.e. individual local self-government units in the case of public kindergartens, otherwise private and church-affiliated ECEC programme providers.

Seniority is a relevant salary factor because a salary supplement of 0.5% is allocated for each completed year of service. Staff also receive a higher salary for posts of responsibility (e.g. as Centre Leader, Deputy Leader, Student Mentor/Supervisor), as well as for the formal level of professional status (e.g. Mentor; Counsellor). Some founders of ECEC institutions (e.g. the City of Zagreb) provide 15% higher salaries to ECEC Teachers who have earned a Master's degree in ECEC.

Most ECEC Teachers earn a net salary of between €660 and €1,250 per month<sup>5</sup>. The monthly salary for the entry level is between €650 and €997. After five years of professional experience, their net salary increases to between €753 and €1,110 per month.

<sup>5</sup> Croatia adopted the euro as its currency in January 2023.



The average salaries of employees in kindergartens in the City of Zagreb are higher than in the rest of Croatia, regardless of the category of job. The average salaries of ECEC Teachers are about €134-160 higher and in the rest of Croatia they differ relatively little. The lowest average salary outside the City of Zagreb was around €753, and the highest around €1099 (MojaPlaća 2023). The same is true for other staff: the average salary of other staff in the City of Zagreb is about €107-120 higher than the rest of Croatia, and the average salaries of other staff in the rest of Croatia are almost the same. In public kindergartens, the possibility of different salaries is legally open depending on the local self-government in which the kindergarten is located, although the application of regulations on salaries for primary school teachers is determined if they are more favourable for ECEC Teachers.

The average monthly net salary per employee in the legal entities of the Republic of Croatia was €1,178 in October 2023, which was 1.9% higher in nominal terms and 1.4% higher in real terms compared to September 2023 (CBS 2023b).

In the fourth quarter of 2021, the average monthly payment in Education was €1,047 (CBS 2022). Matković et al. (2020) did not find differences in the reported difficulties in “making ends meet” on a household level, compared to all ECEC employees and all public sector employees.

## 7.2 Full-time and part-time employment

According to the Croatian Bureau of Statistics (2023a), in 2022/23, 25,380 persons were working in ECEC settings in total. Among them, 23,545 or 92.8% are full-time employees.

Most part-time employees work in shorter programmes that are conducted outside kindergartens (preschool programmes, shorter preschool programmes, sports programmes, etc.). Thus, in kindergartens 1.08% of employees work part-time, while of those employed by other providers of ECEC programmes, 65.3% work full-time and 34.7% part-time. ECEC Teachers in kindergartens generally work full time, which is 40 hours per week. Some specialist support staff work part-time in one kindergarten and part-time in another.

A precarious form of employment in the ECEC system is temporary employment. According to the Labour Act (Official Gazette, No. 93/2014; 127/2017; 98/2019), an employment contract may exceptionally be concluded for a definite period of time, for the establishment of an employment relationship whose termination is determined in advance by a deadline, performance of a certain job or performance of a certain events. This form of employment includes 20% of all ECEC Teachers (Matković et al., 2020), which is significantly higher compared to the representation of such employment in the public sector, which amounts to 7%.

## 7.3 Support measures in the workplace for newly qualified staff

Support measures in the workplace for newly qualified staff (probationers) are prescribed by the Ordinance on the manner and conditions of taking the professional exam of ECEC Teachers and other professionals in preschool institutions (Official Gazette, No. 133/1997). According to that ordinance, a probationer’s internship lasts for 12 months and is completed by passing a professional exam.

Completion of the professional exam is a prerequisite for independent work in the ECEC setting, and is taken before the state exam committee. The exam is taken by all employees in ECEC institutions who are qualified for educational work (ECEC Teachers and specialist support staff).

The internship of trainees is realised based on a programme proposed by the internship committee, and adopted by the authorised professional body of the kindergarten (educational council). The task of the committee is to draft a proposal for an internship programme, provide the

trainee with pedagogical, methodological and any other assistance, and monitor his/her progress. The internship committee consists of the Centre Principal (as president of the Committee), a specified mentor, and one specialist (e.g. Pedagogue, Psychologist, experts in the field of education and rehabilitation). The committee is appointed by the Principal of the kindergarten.

Mandatory contents of the internship programme are:

- The legal framework of their work (the Constitution of the Republic of Croatia, Preschool Education Act, National Curriculum for Early Childhood and Preschool Education, as well as other legislation and regulations)
- General and profession-related regulations
- Specific characteristics, needs and dynamics of a child's development up to compulsory school age
- Aims and procedures of the care, education and upbringing of young children
- Organising resources for educational processes with young children
- Relationships and communication among professional staff, children and parents
- Planning, programming, preparation, realisation and evaluation of educational programmes
- Pedagogical documentation.

#### 7.4 Non-contact time

Out of the 40 working hours per week, only 12.5 hours are allocated to non-contact time. These tasks include planning, programming and evaluation of work, preparation of the environment, co-operation and counselling work with parents and others, and professional development tasks (State Pedagogical Standard of ECEC, Official Gazette, No. 63/2008, 90/2010).

#### 7.5 Current staffing issues

ECEC Teachers and specialist support staff belong to the group of occupations in Croatia with a surplus of vacant posts. For example, in Croatia in 2010 there were 975 vacancies for ECEC Teachers, in 2011 this number increased to 1,364, in 2020 to 4,140, and in 2021 the total number share dropped to 2,195. Therefore, ECEC Teachers have no difficulty in finding work, but there is a problem of ensuring compliance with the State Pedagogical Standard of ECEC (Official Gazette, No. 63/2008, 90/2010) because many kindergartens cannot recruit the required number of ECEC Teachers, so the maximum number of children in educational groups is exceeded or the number of children who remain not enrolled in ECEC increases.

The ministry is trying to overcome this problem by expanding the possibilities of employing primary school teachers in ECEC settings. The founders/providers of ECEC institutions do not have the opportunity to actively contribute to solving this problem because it is the responsibility of the Ministry of Science and Education and higher educational institutions.

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

The continuing professional development of those directly involved in educational work, professional co-workers and principals is one of the goals of the National Development Strategy of the Republic of Croatia until 2030 (Official Gazette, No. 30/2021). The basis of a sustainable future

is a system of upbringing and education that will provide every child with a systematic education, acquisition of basic competencies for lifelong learning, acquisition of vocational and higher education qualifications in quality educational institutions and provide employees with career paths in accordance with the needs of the economy, labour market and personal preferences and abilities. ECEC is the basis of lifelong learning, so the accessibility of ECEC is among the important goals of the Strategy.

The availability of quality ECEC to every child presupposes the reduction of regional differences in the quality and costs of ECEC, a sufficient number of ECEC Teachers and their further professional development, upgrading existing and building new kindergartens, as well as developing standards to ensure high-quality education for every child in Croatia from an early age, and helped families raise and educate their children in an increasingly demanding living environment.

The National Strategy is the most important document that builds on previously defined strategic documents, such as the Strategy of Education, Science and Technology (Official Gazette, No. 124/2014) and represents a framework for the development of Croatian society in the coming period. However, the goals of the National Development Strategy have not yet been codified by law: the latest amendments of the Preschool Education Act do not prescribe the conditions needed for their implementation.

Croatia is participating in the Child Guarantee initiative of the European Parliament and European Commission. The Child Guarantee programme in Croatia aims to increase the participation of children in ECEC, in cooperation with UNICEF's Office for Croatia, national and sub-national authorities and a selection of civil society organisations.

High expectations are placed on Croatia's Recovery and Resilience Plan (2021-2026) (Croatian Government 2021) which foresees investments in the ECEC system with the objective of improving enrolment rates. This implies investments in capacities, including an increasing number of available services and qualified staff. It is a demanding process that cannot be achieved without a complex reform of the whole educational system in Croatia.

For this reason, the Government of the Republic of Croatia has adopted the National Development Plan for the Education System for the period up to 2027 (Croatian Government 2023, 9) in March 2023, which stipulates the following:

"Initial training of ECEC and opportunities for professional development are considered to be advantages of the Croatian ECEC system. However, ... it is necessary to develop strategies for replacing and increasing the number of ECEC Teachers. An increasing number of pedagogical professionals is needed (ECEC Teachers and professional staff such as Psychologists, Rehabilitators, Speech Therapists, Social Pedagogues, Pedagogues) and health personnel in the areas where new kindergartens are to be opened, which are often rural, less developed local and regional self-government units... Newly qualified ECEC Teachers need more intensive training and more support to ensure the highest possible quality of pedagogical work with children according to their needs and differences. It will be particularly important to ensure that educators and professionals have the skills to work with disadvantaged children. The success rate that the government will achieve in training and employing new educators in the required areas in a timely manner will be critical to increasing the number of children participating in ECEC."

The realisation of this plan is expected in the near future.



## 9. Recent country-specific research studies focusing on ECEC staff

During recent years, a number of representative research studies within ECEC have been carried out in Croatia. Some examples are:

- *First Steps towards Quality.*  
Zagreb: National Centre for External Evaluation of Education, 2017, authors S. Antulić Majcen and S. Pribela-Hodap
- *An Analysis of the Accessibility, Quality, Capacities and Financing of the ECEC System in Croatia.*  
Zagreb: Ministry of Demography, Family, Youth and Social Policy, 2018, authors: I. Dobrotić, T. Matković, and V. Menger
- *Another Site of Inclusion of Children in Early and Preschool Age: Report on Analysis on Equity Issues regarding Access to Quality Early and Preschool Education to Children in Vulnerable Situations in Croatia.*  
Zagreb: UNICEF Office for Croatia, 2018, author: D. Bouillet
- *How to get a kindergarten for everyone? ECEC funding opportunities.*  
Zagreb: UNICEF Office for Croatia, 2020. Editor: I. Ćosić, head of the education program, UNICEF

These studies provide an analysis of ECEC in general and ECEC staff are included but are not the main focus.

Here are the most important research studies which focus on ECEC staff.

### Working in kindergartens: research findings into working conditions in ECEC

**Source:** Matković, T., J. Ostojić, M. Lucić, K. Jaklin, and I. Ivšić 2020 (for more details see *References*)

**Aims:** The aim of the research was to gain insight into the situation within the system with regard to the basic dimensions of the quality of working conditions: physical environment, work intensity, working hours, work environment, skills and autonomy (with emphasis on training availability and worker participation), career prospects and salary.

**Methods:** The research was conducted during 2019 with a nationally representative sample of kindergartens in two phases. During the first phase, quantitative data were compiled, for which ECEC employees filled out a survey questionnaire, and in the second phase qualitative data were obtained through a semi-structured interview with those participants who expressed interest in participating in the interview. The final sample included 79 kindergartens and 2,023 ECEC staff.

**Selected findings:** One of the key problems pointed out by employees in kindergartens in recent years is non-compliance with the criteria prescribed by the State Pedagogical Standard regarding the number of children allowed in groups and adequate materials, personnel and space conditions for the operation of kindergartens. Work in kindergartens is characterised by a higher intensity of work than in the rest of the public sector, and employees in kindergartens on average report almost twice as many health problems compared to employees in other public sector occupations. 49% of employees in kindergartens said that their work has a negative impact on their health. Likewise, less than half of employees say they will be able to do the same or similar work until they are 60 years old.



**Implications:** This research contributes to existing analyses with the aim of approaching future system development planning based on comprehensive, comparable and evidence-based knowledge of working conditions in ECEC system. The development of the system should enable dignified work, sustainable for current employees and attractive for future employees, and provide a quality start in educating future generations. Improving working conditions in ECEC is also crucial for the expansion of the number of employees needed so that all children of kindergarten age can realise their right to high-quality ECEC.

### Improvement of inclusion focus in initial teacher education for early childhood education and care in Croatia

**Source:** Bouillet, D., D. Hren, T. Maglica, and E. Sunko 2021 (for more details see *References*)

**Aims:** The aim of the analysis is to determine the level and content of inclusiveness of ECEC study programmes at higher education institutions in Croatia.

**Methods:** Interviews were conducted with students, ECEC Teachers and university professors, and in all study programmes (6 undergraduate and 5 graduate) for the initial education of ECEC Teachers that were offered in 2019/2020 at Croatian higher education institutions (in Osijek, Pula, Rijeka, Split, Zadar and Zagreb). Study programmes were thematically analysed with regard to the level to which they contribute to the development of sets of competences related to inclusive education.

**Selected findings:** The results of the analysis show that despite the focus of all study programmes on achieving the same number of ECTS credits (180 at undergraduate and 120 at graduate level) and striving to develop competences for the same qualification (ECEC Teachers), they are very diverse in the number and content in terms of defined learning outcomes. All analysed sets of competences are in some way represented in study programmes and their subjects, but with a large inconsistency in the connection of learning outcomes at the level of programmes and individual subjects, as well as inconsistency of descriptions of individual subjects, which indicates insufficient constructive alignment of study programmes and their subjects. This situation adversely affects the competences of ECEC Teachers for the practical implementation of inclusive education in professional work. This is confirmed by the analysis of interviews with students, ECEC Teachers and university professors. The results of the analysis point to the conclusion that there is a need to improve the inclusiveness of study programmes for the initial education of ECEC Teachers. Measures and activities to achieve this goal are formulated in the recommendations that form an integral part of this analysis.

**Implications:** Providing an analytical basis for the harmonisation of ECEC study programmes with the Croatian Qualifications Framework and other relevant documents that frame the European system of higher education.

Additionally, the programme “**Improvement of inclusivity of initial teacher education for early childhood education and care in Croatia**” was realised in 2020 and 2021, in cooperation with UNICEF’s office for Croatia and five higher education institutions: University of Zagreb; Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek; University of Split; University of Rijeka; Juraj Dobrila University of Pula. This programme is designed to address teachers’ competences for inclusive practice during their initial professional education because inadequate staff education for implementing inclusive educational practices is recognised as an important obstacle to inclusive ECEC. The main results of the programme are:

- University teachers from 5 HEIs providing initial teacher education for ECEC have increased capacities for delivering educational inclusion (conceptually and in practice) to their students.
- All university teachers at 5 HEIs who teach initial ECEC have access to inclusive learning resources and inclusive learning environments.

## 10. Workforce challenges – country expert assessment

The main strengths of the Croatian ECEC system are:

- ECEC is an integral and fundamental part of the education system.
- The required qualification level for ECEC Teachers is at Bachelor level across the entire ECEC system 0-6 years.
- The number of Master’s study programmes for ECEC Teachers is increasing.
- The number of national research studies in the field of ECEC is growing.

The most important ECEC workforce challenges in Croatia are:

- The lack of standardisation of the qualification of the ECEC Teacher profession at the national level, a consequence of significant differences between study programmes of various higher education institutions for ECEC Teachers (the plan is to overcome this challenge through entering the qualifications in the Croatian registry of qualifications, and through improved coordination of study programmes).
- The lack of co-ordinated forms, programmes and topics of in-service CPD (the improvement of the quality and effectiveness of in-service training and the development of mechanisms that will ensure that all ECEC staff are required to participate in CPD activities throughout their career is needed).
- The lack of comprehensive reforms of the ECEC system which would provide an accessible and quality ECEC for all children (the goal is to overcome this challenge through the realisation of the National Development Plan for the Education System for the period up to 2027).
- A high level of ECEC system decentralisation, leading to significant differences and inequalities within all aspects of ECEC. This is why the less developed towns and municipalities are not able to secure appropriate conditions for the staff or children in ECEC, with some parts of Croatia severely lacking in ECEC accessibility (the plan is to overcome this challenge through the realisation of Croatia’s Recovery and Resilience Plan).

It can be concluded that the ECEC system in Croatia has become a national policy priority. However, the significant changes needed to improve the quality and availability of ECEC still remain to be achieved.





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