

SERBIA

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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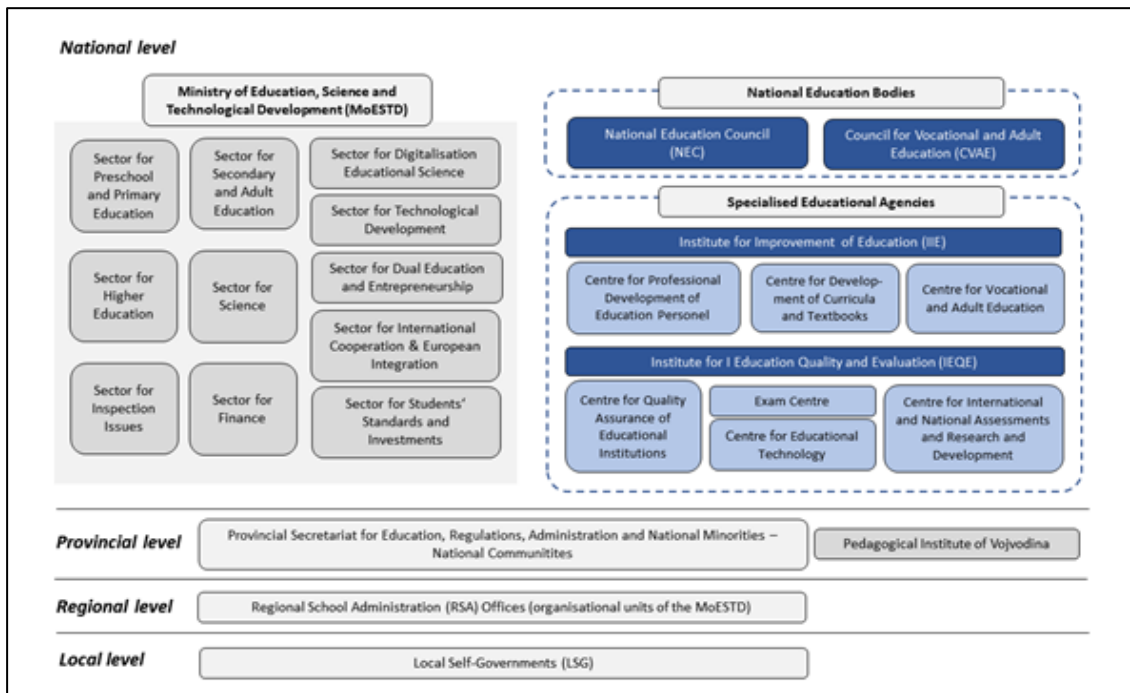


1. ECEC governance in Serbia

Serbia has an administratively integrated system¹ of Early Childhood Education and Care – ECEC (*predškolsko vaspitanje*) under the responsibility of the Ministry of Education (MoE). Since the adoption of the Law on the Foundations of the Education System (LFES) in 2003 (Official Gazette 2021g – 2003 with amendments in 2021), ECEC is an integral part of the education system and the first phase of formal education.

The jurisdiction over ECEC at the national level is unified under the MoE (*Figure 1*) (LFES, Official Gazette 2021g), with specialized units within the Ministry. Agencies and institutes with special jurisdictions in monitoring, development and advancement of the education system at the national level are the National Education Council – for Preschool, Primary and Secondary General and Artistic Education (NEC), the Institute for Improvement of Education (IIE) and the Institute for Education Quality and Evaluation (IEQE). Institutes are responsible for “developmental, advisory, research and professional activities in preschool education at the national level” (Official Gazette 2021g).

Figure 1
Serbia: System of Education Governance



Source: MoESTD 2018

Beside general regulations applied to each level of education (see *Figure 2*), the Law defines the ECEC curricular framework as well as guidelines for diversified types of services and programmes, duration of ECEC, enrolment of children, roles of ECEC teachers and other staff in the ECEC sector, their qualifications, working conditions and professional development. Under the

¹ At the same time, the ECEC settings are separately organised and the qualification requirements for staff working with children up to three years of age differ from those for staff working with 3 to 6 year-olds.

Law on Preschool Education (LPE, Official Gazette 2021h), the work of ECEC institutions is multifunctional and besides early education and care, which is its main function, it includes child nourishment, prevention and health care, and social care of the child and family.

Early childhood education and care in Serbia is delivered by ECEC institutions (*predškolska ustanova*) that are founded on the municipality level by the government, provincial government or local-self government (LSG), with the status of public ECEC institutions, or by other public or private bodies with the status of private ECEC institutions. ECEC institutions can comprise a number of facilities in which ECEC centres are established. The number of centres within one ECEC institution can differ (from one to more than twenty), depending on the number of preschool children, family needs and local resources. As an exception, ECEC can be realised in the primary school if there is no other ECEC facility in the local community.

Figure 2

Serbia: Structure of the Education System including ECEC

ISCED 2011	Age	Level	STRUCTURE OF THE EDUCATION SYSTEM IN SERBIA					
8		Higher Education	III Cycle	PhD Studies (180 ECTS)				
7	19-23/24		II Cycle	Master Academic Studies (60-120 ECTS)	Integrated Academic Studies (First and second Cycle)	Specialist Academic Studies (60 ECTS)	Master Applied Studies (120 ECTS)	Specialist Applied Studies (60 ECTS)
6	19-22/23		I Cycle	Bachelor Academic Studies (180-240 ECTS)		Bachelor Applied Studies (180 ECTS)		
4	18-19					Post-secondary education (Specialist/Craft Education)		
3	15-19	Secondary Education	Secondary 4-year education (Grammar schools and secondary vocational schools)					
	15-18		Secondary 3-year education (Secondary vocational schools)					
2	11-15	Primary & Lower Secondary Education (Compulsory)	Primary school Grades 5-8 (Subject-based teaching)			Total duration 8 years		
1	7-11		Grades 1-4 (Class-based and subject-based teaching)					
0	5.5-6.5/7	Early Childhood Education and Care	Pre-primary Programme (Compulsory)			Duration: minimum 9 months		
	3-5.5		Kindergarten (<i>vrtić</i>)					
	0.5-3		Nursery (<i>jaslice</i>)					

Source: Baucal, A. et al. 2016

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) covers children from 6 months to 6½ years of age. The only obligatory part is the year before starting school for children aged 5½ to 6½ years.

An ECEC centre can be organised in the following way in terms of the hours of attendance:

- All-day – from 9 to 12 hours per day
- Half-day – 4 hours per day in the obligatory year before starting school
- Half-day – up to 6 hours per day in regular settings
- Half-day – up to 6 hours per day, up to three times a week
- 24-hour service – overnight stays over a period of several days (Official Gazette 2021h).

ECEC for children from 6 months up to 3 years are organised in nurseries (*jaslice*), for children from 3 up to 6½ years of age in kindergartens (*vrtić*) and compulsory attendance for children from 5½ to 6½ years of age in a kindergarten (full day or half day) or, in some cases, in a primary school on a half-day basis.

The same curricular framework, adopted in 2018 (“Years of Ascent“, Official Gazette 2018a), applies to all ECEC setting types (see Key Contextual Data report for more details).

2. Who belongs to the early years workforce?

2.1 Regular contact staff in ECEC provision

In Serbia, different professionals are eligible to work in ECEC institutions. The legislative framework regulates their educational background, qualifications and professional development. Pursuant to the Law on Preschool Education, Teachers, Nurses/ Nursery Teachers, Expert Associates, Associates and Pedagogical Assistants are eligible to work in ECEC institutions (LPE, Official Gazette 2021h). Professionals engaged in ECEC are:

- ECEC Nurses (working with children aged 6 months – 3 years)
- ECEC Teachers (working with children aged 3 – 6.6 years)
- Expert Associates (specialist support staff: Pedagogue, Psychologist, Speech Therapist, Pedagogue for visual/music arts and physical education);
- Associates (Social Worker, Nutritionist, Nurses for preventive health care; Defectologist (in developmental – special needs – educational groups).

A breakdown of the employees’ professional profiles, areas of work and qualifications is presented in *Table 1*, which also categorises the core professionals (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 chapter).

Table 1

Serbia: ECEC staff in centre-based settings

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
ECEC Nurse <i>Medicinska sestra vaspitač</i> <i>Profile:</i> Health Care Professional	<i>Predškolske ustanove</i> Nurseries 6 months–2 years ²	Core professional with group responsibility	6 months–2 years	Completed vocational secondary school education, paramedical track ECTS credits: n/a ³ EQF level: 3 ISCED 2011: 3
ECEC Teacher (sometimes called Kindergarten Teacher) <i>Vaspitač</i> <i>Profile:</i> Pre-Primary Education Professional	<i>Predškolske ustanove</i> Kindergartens 3–6 years	Core professional with group responsibility	3–6 years	3 or 4 years at a higher education institution <i>Award:</i> Bachelor's degree (professional/applied) <i>or (optional)</i> Second degree of university studies <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Master's degree • Specialist academic degree • Specialist professional studies ECTS credits: 180/240/300 EQF level: 6/7 ISCED 2011: 6/7
Special Needs Teacher <i>Defektolog-vaspitač</i>	<i>Predškolske ustanove</i> Kindergartens 3–6 years	Education of children with disabilities	3–6 years	Master's degree (4+1 years, university) ECTS credits: 300 EQF level: 7 ISCED 2011: 7
Pedagogist (Expert associate) <i>Stručni saradnik – pedagog</i>	<i>Predškolske ustanove</i> ECEC centres 6 months–6 years	Enhancement and support of educational work and provision of expert assistance to	Broad focus (children and adults)	Master's degree (4 +1 years, university) ECTS credits: 300 EQF Level: 7 ISCED 2011: 7

² **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 Serbia, these formats are **0–2** and **3–6** years because school generally starts at age 7.

³ n/a not applicable

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
		children, parents, caregivers and teachers		
Psychologist <i>Stručni saradnik – psiholog</i>	<i>Predškolske ustanove</i> ECEC centres 6 months–6 years	Enhancement of educational work and provision of expert assistance to children, parents, caregivers and teachers	Broad focus (children and adults)	Master's degree (4 +1 years, university) ECTS credits: 300 EQF level: 7 ISCED 2011: 7
Speech Therapist <i>Stručni saradnik – logoped</i>	<i>Predškolske ustanove</i> ECEC centres 6 months–6 years	Specialist support staff	Broad focus (children and adults)	Master's degree (4+1 years, university) ECTS credits: 300 EQF level: 7 ISCED 2011: 7
Pedagogue for visual arts / musical arts / physical education <i>Stručni saradnik –</i>	<i>Predškolske ustanove</i> ECEC centres 6 months–6 years	Enhancement and support the field of creativity / physical development	Broad focus (children and adults)	Master's degree (4+1 years, university) ECTS credits: 300 EQF level: 7 ISCED 2011: 7
Social Worker <i>Saradnik – socijalni radnik</i>	<i>Predškolske ustanove</i> ECEC centres 6 months–6 years	Enhancement and support in child and family social welfare	Broad focus (children and adults)	Master's degree (4+1 years, university) ECTS credits: 300 EQF level: 7 ISCED 2011: 7
Nutritionist <i>Saradnik – nutricionista</i>	<i>Predškolske ustanove</i> ECEC centres 6 months–6 years	Enhancement and support regarding preventive medical protection and nutrition	Broad focus (children and adults)	Master's degree (4+1 years university) ECTS credits: 300 EQF level: 7 ISCED 2011: 7
Nurse <i>Medicinska sestra</i>	<i>Predškolske ustanove</i> ECEC centres 6 months–6 years	Qualified co-worker, particularly in care and preventive protection	Broad focus (children and adults)	3 years at university <i>Award: Bachelor's degree</i> ECTS credits: 180 EQF: Level 6 ISCED 2011: 6
Pedagogical Assistant <i>Pedagoški asistent</i>	<i>Predškolske ustanove</i> ECEC centres 6 months–6 years	Additional assistance and support to children	Broad focus (children and adults)	Completed secondary school education

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>plus</i> completion of a further education programme 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)

Table 1 illustrates how many different professionals work in Serbian ECEC institutions, but the core professional staff specifically qualified for working with children up to 6½ years of age and who work with them full-time are the ECEC Teachers (*vaspitači*).

The activities of ECEC are conducted by a teacher and expert associates, while the activities regarding nutrition, care, preventive health and social protection, are conducted by associates.

Everyday pedagogical work is conducted by ECEC Teachers (*vaspitači*), ECEC Nurses and Special Needs Teachers. Specialist support staff – Pedagogists, Psychologists, Pedagogues for visual arts, musical arts and physical education and Speech Therapists, implement quality-improving activities. Their task is to enhance educational processes through advisory work and other activities, to provide professional support to children, parents, legal guardians and teachers on education issues, and to engage in other forms of support.

Activities regarding child care, nutrition, health and social care in a preschool institution are performed by a Health Care Professional, Nutritionist and Social Worker.

Pedagogical Assistants provide help and additional support to children concerning their needs, cooperate with the teachers and professional staff, parents and legal guardians.

Teachers and expert associates holding relevant educational degrees and a completed work induction programme and those who have passed the license exam are entitled to a work license in ECEC (Official Gazette 2021g). Pursuant to the Law on the Foundations of the Education System, after a minimum of one year and/or a maximum of two years of internship, teachers and expert associates employed in an ECEC institution or those who completed an internship in an ECEC institution are eligible to take the license exam. The Rulebook on Work Permits for Teachers, ECEC Teachers and Expert Associates (Official Gazette 2022) regulates the following: the work induction programme for ECEC teachers and expert associates, the verification method and procedure for candidates’ mastering the programme, the programme for acquiring the work

permit (license), the method for verification of the candidate's command of that programme, the licensing exam costs and the administrative authority before which the licensing exam is to be taken, licensed teachers' register content and method of register keeping, and the license form for ECEC Teachers and expert associates.

Persons with an illegal or criminal record are banned from working with young children.

2.2 Centre leader

Qualifications, election and duties of the director of the ECEC institution are defined by the Law on the Foundations of the Education System (Official Gazette 2021g).

The director of an ECEC institution can be a person who has:

- An appropriate education as an ECEC teacher or expert associate (Master's academic studies, Master's professional studies, Specialist academic studies in the field of pedagogical sciences or interdisciplinary; multidisciplinary, transdisciplinary second-degree studies that combine units and corresponding scientific, i.e. professional, or pedagogical sciences fields)
- Completed training and has successfully passed an exam for becoming the director of an ECEC institution
- At least eight years of work in the institution in the field of education.

In accordance with the LFES, the standards are applied to the licensing procedure for directors. They are also the basis for developing training programmes, examination programmes for directors and for self-evaluation.

In the Rulebook on Competence Standards of Directors of Educational Institutions, directors' competences are defined as "functionally integrated knowledge, capacities, skills and a system of values which are the basis for carrying out work and tasks in ECEC institutions, primary and secondary schools" (Official Gazette 2013). According to the Rulebook, competence standards for directors were designed to establish criteria which would provide successful management, organisation, implementation and supervision of work in the education institutions.

The standards are divided into six groups: (1) Managing the process of care and learning of children in an ECEC centre/institution, i.e. managing the pedagogical and educational process; (2) Planning, organisation and supervision of work at an education institution; (3) Monitoring and improving the work of the employees; (4) Developing cooperation with parents/carers, the executive body, the relevant workers' union and the wider community; (5) Managing the finances and administration of the education institution; (6) Ensuring that the educational institution is run according to the law. There is a short description of every standard and a list of indicators which define competences in more detail. Assessment of whether the standards have been met depends on the fulfilment of the indicators.

The standards and indicators are designed for the Heads of all types of education institutions. A distinction between standards for the directors of ECEC institutions and school principals is made only in the first group of standards, which outline differences between working in the different types of education institutions.

2.3 Centre-based posts of responsibility

Posts of responsibility are defined by the Law of Preschool Education (Official Gazette 2021h). They refer to tasks regarding work with children with special educational needs and disabilities (ECEC Teacher with the support of expert associates and a Special Needs Teacher), with children of national minority groups or children from migrant families (ECEC Teacher together with social welfare associates).

Social work in an ECEC institution includes the following tasks: prevention activities, identification of the child’s social context; support to parents so that they can adequately realise their parental function and improve the quality of family relations; monitoring of family needs for adequate forms of ECEC in their local communities; creating conditions for increasing the coverage of children in local communities with various diversified programmes; support to parents and children with developmental difficulties in their exercising of rights to protection and support in all the social welfare systems (social protection, child protection, medical care, etc.) and in the process of their inclusion in ECEC institutions; participation in the process of developing an inclusive approach in ECEC institutions and in the community; coordination of the implementation of the General and Special Protocol on Child Protection from Violence, Abuse and Neglect; work with families in which domestic violence, abuse and neglect have been detected; cooperation with local self-government and relevant institutions on all the issues related to the realisation of the social function of ECEC institutions.

2.4 Co-ordinating and supervisory staff

Inspection and expert pedagogical supervision of education institutions and institutes are defined by the LFES. Inspection and expert pedagogical supervision of education institutions, including ECEC, are carried out by the MoE. Regional School Administration Offices are established within the MoE, “for the purpose of performing expert pedagogical supervision, external evaluation of the work of institutions, support for development planning and improvement of the quality of the work of institutions, planning and quality assurance” (Official Gazette 2021g, art. 31). There are 16 Regional School Administration Offices in Serbia, and each office has jurisdiction over one to three administrative units (districts). A community or municipal education authority carries out inspection and supervision of ECEC centres and schools within the authority and jurisdiction stipulated by the law. This means that inspection and supervision are performed by an education inspector.

2.5 Specialist support staff

Expert associates – Pedagogists, Psychologists, Pedagogues for visual arts, musical arts and physical education and Speech Therapists – implement professional activities to improve the educational work of the ECEC institution. According to the Rulebook on the programme for all forms of work as an expert associate in an ECEC institution (Official Gazette 2021b) the goal of the work of an expert associate in an ECEC institution is to develop the culture of the preschool institution as a learning community and the quality of educational practice.

Qualification requirements for expert associates are defined by the Law on Preschool Education: Master-level studies, postgraduate academic studies and postgraduate specialist studies (Official Gazette 2021h).

The number of expert associates engaged by an ECEC institution is determined in the Rulebook on Detailed Conditions for the Beginning of Work and Pursuit of Activities in ECEC Institutions (Official Gazette 2019a). According to this Rulebook, **each ECEC institution should have an expert associate** – a Pedagogist or a Psychologist. ECEC settings comprising between 24-48 educational groups, full or half day, may engage an additional Pedagogist or Psychologist. ECEC institutions with more than 48 groups, full or half day, may engage another expert associate with a different profile: Speech Therapist or a Pedagogue for visual arts, musical arts and physical education. According to the Catalogue of jobs and titles in the public sector (Official Gazette 2018c), the role of a Speech Therapist as an expert associate in a preschool institution is defined as follows: “The Speech Therapist, by applying theoretical and practical knowledge, contributes

to the realisation and improvement of educational work in the institution in accordance with the goals and principles of ECEC.“

The Rulebook on Competence Standards for expert associates in ECEC institutions and their professional development defines expert associates' competences as the unity of knowledge, skills and values. "Knowing, doing and being are dimensions that are integrated in the daily professional practice of an expert associate" (Official Gazette 2021a). In the same document, the competence of an expert associate is defined through the following areas: (1) strategic (developmental) planning and monitoring of ECEC practices; (2) cooperation and togetherness; (3) development of reflective practices in ECEC institutions; (4) developing the quality of the current real programme; (5) own professional activity and professional development.

The presence of highly qualified Pedagogists and Psychologists as expert associates in ECEC institutions provides the possibility of improving the quality of ECEC. However, practice has shown that the existing situation of a single expert having to cover a large number of groups, combined with the spatial "dispersion" of settings of a single service provider and deficiencies in the initial professional education of expert associates impedes the potential of these specialist support staff for enhancing quality (Baucal et al. 2016).

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

In the 17 municipalities of the capital city of Belgrade, there are 17 ECEC institutions. All other cities and municipalities have one ECEC institution per city/municipality. According to national data for 2022/23, there are currently 461 ECEC institutions (163 state-owned and 298 private) with 2,853 facilities (2,417 state-owned and 418 private) in 11,511 educational groups (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia 2023).

In these 461 ECEC institutions, there are 32,084 employees, including 15,775 ECEC Teachers and 5,362 ECEC Nurses. By way of contrast, in 2014 there were about 25,000 employees who were employed to deliver ECEC services to 189,304 children. Alongside the Teachers and ECEC Nurses, 3% of the workforce comprised expert associates and 31.1% other employees.

The ECEC profession is still predominantly female. The data is indicative of an insufficient number of male teachers in the ECEC institutions, which account for less than 2% of employed teachers. The structural composition of ECEC employees in Serbia is presented in *Table 2*.

Since the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia does not follow all the data related to different kinds of ECEC employees, the data shown in *Tables 2* and *3* represent the number of persons employed in public ECEC institutions.

Table 2

Serbia: Persons employed in public ECEC institutions, by staff qualifications and gender, 2022/23

Staff categories	Total	Women, in %	Men, in %
ECEC Teachers	15,775	98.2	1.8
ECEC Nurses	5,362	99.8	0.2
ECEC Special Needs Teachers	120	93.3	6.7
Expert associates	972	91.3	8.7
Associates	813	86.1	13.9

Staff categories	Total	Women, in %	Men, in %
Pedagogical and other assistants	201	85.6	14.4
Administrative staff	1,386	82.1	17.9
Technical support staff	7,455	90.1	9.9
Total	32,084	95.3	4.7

Source: Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia 2023, own calculations

Due to the fact that the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia does not follow all the data related to the structural composition of the ECEC workforce and no reliable national data is available on the qualifications of staff in public ECEC institutions, the data shown in *Table 3* represent only the total number of staff in each category for 2015 (no more recent data available). Staff with a vocational education work predominantly as ECEC Nurses, administrative and technical staff. Support staff such as cooks, cleaners or janitors are predominantly non-qualified persons.

Table 3

Serbia: Structural composition of ECEC workforce in public ECEC institutions, 2015

Staff categories	Total
Staff with higher education degree	17,834
Staff with specialist higher qualification	10,181
Staff with specialist vocational qualification (post-secondary)	889
Staff with secondary vocational school (upper secondary)	9,444
Staff with non-specialist qualification	3,118
Male staff (including male administrative staff)	
Staff with a background of migration	No systematically compiled national data

Source: Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia 2023, own calculations

4. Initial professional education (IPE)

4.1 Initial qualifying routes (higher education and vocational)

ECEC Teachers (*Vaspitač*)

According to the Law on Higher Education (LHE), ECEC Teachers acquire the necessary education to work with children through academic and applied studies based on accredited study programmes (Official Gazette 2021c). Study programmes for the first degree level are basic academic studies, basic applied studies and specialist applied studies. Study programmes for the second degree level are master academic studies, master applied studies and specialist academic studies. Tertiary institutions carrying out higher education for the ECEC Teacher profession are the following: Academies of Applied Studies, Colleges and Colleges of Applied Studies and University Faculties. An Academy of Applied Studies may provide basic applied studies, master applied studies and specialist applied studies if having at least five accredited study programmes for applied studies in at least two fields. Colleges of Applied Studies refer to independent higher education institution that provide basic applied studies, specialist applied studies and



master applied studies. University Faculty refers to higher education units within a university carrying out academic study programmes and developing scientific and artistic research, i.e. professional work in one or more areas.

Since 2005, studies for prospective ECEC Teachers in Serbia 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.

Since then, Serbia has a binary higher education system, meaning that initial education of ECEC Teachers is realised through two different types of studies:

(a) applied studies consisting of programmes leading to a professional qualification offered by 5 colleges (*Visoka škola strukovnih studija*) and 5 academies of applied studies (*Akademija strukovnih studija*); and

(b) academic studies are conducted solely at six faculties in five universities.

Applied studies for ECEC Teachers are divided into the following categories (LHE, Official Gazette 2021c):

- Undergraduate applied studies lasting three years and granting, upon their completion, 180 ECTS credits
- Master applied studies, lasting two years and awarding at least 120 ECTS credits if the scope of the first degree course of studies of at least 180 ECTS credits has been realised (total 300 ECTS credits)
- Specialist applied studies, lasting at least one year and granting, upon their completion, at least 60 ECTS credits.

Academic studies for ECEC Teachers are divided into the following categories (LHE, Official Gazette 2021c):

- First cycle undergraduate academic studies, lasting four years and granting, upon their completion, 240 ECTS credits. A student who completes first-degree academic studies with at least 240 ECTS credits acquires the professional title of Bachelor with Honours.
- Master academic studies, lasting at least one year and granting, upon their completion, at least 60 ECTS credits. A student who completes these second-degree academic studies acquires the academic title of Master.

This practice has resulted in a great variety of educational profiles and titles. Additionally, it has resulted in inconsistencies among the study programmes according to their types, duration and content, as well as in the quality, taking into account the available staffing potential compared with a large number of schools and faculties (see *Tables 4a* and *4b*). In a recent situational analysis (Baucal et al. 2016), this issue was emphasised as one of the weaknesses of the ECEC system, as was the necessity to introduce measures aimed at the mutual alignment of study programmes and defining competencies that the students need to acquire to become professional teachers.



Table 4a

Serbia: Initial education for ECEC Teachers in colleges and academies by types of study programme⁴

Colleges and Academies of Applied Studies	Type and duration of study programme	ECTS credits	Title upon completion of studies
Preschool Teacher Training College, Novi Sad	Basic applied studies 3 years (6 semesters)	180	Bachelor of Applied Science Vocational ECEC Teacher EQF/ISCED 6
	Master 2 years (4 semesters)	120	Master of Applied Science Master ECEC Teacher EQF/ISCED 7
College of Applied Studies for the Education of Preschool Teachers and Sports Trainers (Nutritionists and Professional ECEC Nurses), Subotica	Basic applied studies 3 years (6 semesters)	180	Bachelor of Applied Science Vocational ECEC Teacher Vocational ECEC Nurse EQF/ISCED 6
	Master applied studies 2 years (4 semesters)	120	Master of Applied Science Master Vocational ECEC Teacher EQF/ISCED 7
Academy of Educational-Medical Vocational Studies, Department in Aleksinac	Basic applied studies 3 years (6 semesters)	180	Bachelor of Applied Science ECEC Teacher ECEC Nurse EQF/ISCED 6
	Specialist applied studies 1 year (2 semesters)	60	Specialist of Applied Science ECEC Teacher – Specialist for Pre-Primary Programme EQF/ISCED 6
	Master applied studies 2 years (4 semesters)	120	Master of Applied Science Master vocational ECEC Teacher EQF/ISCED 7
Academy of Educational-Medical Vocational Studies, Department in Kruševac	Basic applied studies 3 years (6 semesters)	180	Bachelor of Applied Science ECEC Teacher Vocational teacher in infant nurseries EQF/ISCED 6
	Specialist applied studies 1 year (2 semesters)	60	Specialist of Applied Science ECEC Teacher – Specialist for work with children from vulnerable groups ECEC Teacher – Specialist for Pre-Primary Programme EQF/ISCED 6
	Master applied studies 2 years (4 semesters)	120	Master of Applied Science Master ECEC Teacher EQF/ISCED 7
Preschool Teacher Training and Business Informatics College of Applied Studies – Sirmium, Sremska Mitrovica	Basic applied studies 3 years (6 semesters)	180	Bachelor of Applied Science ECEC Teacher ECEC Nurse EQF 6
	Specialist applied studies	60	Specialist of Applied Science

⁴ The data shown in the table represent data from the official websites of the Colleges/Faculties



Colleges and Academies of Applied Studies	Type and duration of study programme	ECTS credits	Title upon completion of studies
	1 year (2 semesters) Master applied studies 2 years (4 semesters)	120	Vocational specialist ECEC Teacher for early inclusion EQF 6 Master of Applied Science Master ECEC Teacher EQF 7
Academy of Applied Studies – Department of studies for Preschool Teachers and Nursery Teachers, Šabac	Basic applied studies 3 years (6 semesters) Master applied studies 2 years (4 semesters)	180 120	Bachelor of Applied Science Vocational ECEC Teacher, Vocational ECEC Nurse EQF 6 Master of Applied Science Master Professional ECEC Teacher EQF/ISCED 7
Academy of Technical – Preschool Teacher Education Applied Studies – Department in Pirot	Basic applied studies 3 years (6 semesters) Specialist applied studies 1 year (2 semesters) Master applied studies 2 years (4 semesters)	180 60 120	Bachelor of Applied Science Teacher in ECEC institutions EQF/ISCED 6 Specialist of Applied Science Vocational specialist ECEC Teacher EQF/ISCED 6 Master of Applied Science Master Professional ECEC Teacher EQF/ISCED 7
Academy of Vocational Studies South Serbia, Department of the College of Applied Studies for the Education of Preschool Teachers, Bujanovac	Basic applied studies 3 years (6 semesters) Specialist applied studies 1 year (2 semesters)	180 60	Bachelor of Applied Science Vocational ECEC Teacher EQF/ISCED 6 Specialist of Applied Science Vocational specialist ECEC Teacher for Pre-primary Programme EQF/ISCED 6
Preschool Teacher Training College „Mihailo Palov“, Vršac	Basic applied studies 3 years (6 semesters) Master applied studies 2 years (4 semesters)	180 120	Bachelor of Applied Science Professional ECEC Teacher Professional ECEC teacher with specific competencies for work with toddlers Professional ECEC Teacher with specific competencies for work with socially deprived children Professional ECEC Teacher with specific competencies for work with children in the English language EQF/ISCED 6 Master of Applied Science Master Professional Preschool Teacher EQF/ISCED 7
College of Applied Studies for Teacher Education in Kikinda	Basic applied studies 3 years (6 semesters)	180	Bachelor of Applied Science Vocational ECEC Teacher Teacher of traditional games EQF/ISCED 6



Colleges and Academies of Applied Studies	Type and duration of study programme	ECTS credits	Title upon completion of studies
	Master applied studies 2 years (4 semesters)	120	Master of Applied Science Master Professional ECEC Teacher EQF/ISCED 7

Table 4b

Serbia: Initial education for ECEC Teachers in universities by types of study programme⁵

Faculties	Type and duration of study programme	ECTS credits	Title upon completion of studies
Faculty of Education in Jagodina, University of Kragujevac	Basic academic studies, 4 years (8 semesters)	240	Bachelor's degree: Teacher in ECEC institutions EQF/ISCED 6
	Master academic studies, 1 year (2 semesters)	60	Master's degree Master Preschool Teacher in ECEC institutions EQF/ISCED 7
Faculty of Education in Užice, University of Kragujevac	Basic academic studies, 4 years (8 semesters)	240	Bachelor's degree ECEC Teacher EQF/ISCED 6
	Master academic studies, 1 year (2 semesters)	60	Master's degree Master ECEC Teacher EQF/ISCED 7
Teacher Education Faculty Belgrade, University of Belgrade	Basic Academic studies, 4 years (8 semesters)	240	Bachelor's degree ECEC Teacher EQF/ISCED 6
	Master academic studies, 1 year (2 semesters)	60	Master's degree Master ECEC Teacher EQF/ISCED 7
Faculty of Education in Sombor, University of Novi Sad	Basic academic studies, 4 years (8 semesters)	240	Bachelor's degree ECEC Teacher EQF/ISCED 6
	Master academic studies, 1 year (2 semesters)	60	Master's degree Master of Arts in ECEC Teacher Education EQF/ISCED 7
Faculty of Teacher Education in Prizren – Leposavić University of Priština – Kosovska Mitrovica	Basic academic studies, 4 years (8 semesters)	240	Bachelor's degree Teacher in ECEC institutions EQF/ISCED 6
	Master academic studies, 1 year (2 semesters)	60	Master's degree Master Teacher in ECEC institutions EQF/ISCED 7
Pedagogical faculty in Vranje, University of Niš	Basic academic studies, 4 years (8 semesters)	240	Bachelor's degree ECEC Teacher EQF/ISCED 6
	Master academic studies, 1 year (2 semesters)	60	Master's degree Master ECEC Teacher EQF/ISCED 7

⁵ The data shown in the table represent data from the official websites of the Colleges/Faculties



For all above-mentioned undergraduate studies, an entrance condition for enrolment in a Bachelor's study programme is to have a high school leaving certificate, approved entrance examination scores, and acceptance to the study programme. Rules for entrance examinations and admission are set in connection with the Statute of College/Academy or Faculty (at most faculties and colleges the entrance exam contains a test of general knowledge and testing speech, physical and musical abilities. The capability testing is eliminatory).

An entrance condition for enrolment in a follow-up Specialised Professional Studies or Master's study programme is the completion of study in a Bachelor's programme (180 or 240 ECTS credits). Rules for entrance examinations and admission are set in connection with the College or Faculty statutes.

Table 5

Serbia: ECEC Nurse

Job title in Serbian: <i>Medicinska sestra vaspitač</i> Profile: Health Care Professional
<p>Entry requirements: Completed compulsory education or completion of 4 years at vocational secondary school and final exam</p> <p>Professional studies: 4 years upper secondary/vocational qualification, ending with vocational baccalauréat</p> <p><i>Optional:</i> 3 years applied studies at a college</p> <p>Award: ECEC Nurse</p> <p><i>Optional:</i> Bachelor – Vocational nursery teacher in infant nurseries</p> <p>ECTS credits: n/a (with Bachelor – 180 ECTS)</p> <p>EQF level: 3 (with Bachelor – EQF 6)</p> <p>Main ECEC workplace: ECEC settings, 6 months–2 years</p>

Table 6

Serbia: Specialist support staff (1)

Job title in Serbian: <i>Stručni saradnik</i>
<p>Entry requirements: completion of 4 years at gymnasium or vocational secondary school and final exam</p> <p>Basic Academic Studies: 5 years of study at a university (undergraduate and graduate study programme in Pedagogy, Psychology, Visual Arts, Musical Arts, Physical Education or Education and Rehabilitation Sciences)</p> <p>Award: Master's degree</p> <p>Total ECTS credits: 300 (240 + 60)</p> <p>EQF level: 7</p> <p>ISCED 2011: 7</p> <p>Main ECEC workplaces: As Pedagogues, Psychologists, Pedagogue for visual arts, musical arts and physical education, Experts in inclusive education and rehabilitation or Speech Therapists in ECEC institutions, 6 months–6½ years old. Graduates also may work in schools, public sector services, state institutions and local and regional self-governing institutions (with children, youth and adults).</p>

Table 7

Serbia: Specialist support staff (2)

Job title in Serbian: <i>Saradnik</i>
<p>Entry requirements: completion of 4 years at gymnasium or vocational secondary school and final exam</p> <p>Professional studies: 5 years of study at university (undergraduate and graduate study programme in Social Work, Health Prevention and Nutrition)</p> <p>Award: Master's degree</p> <p>Total ECTS credits: 300 (240 + 60)</p> <p>EQF level: 7</p> <p>ISCED 2011: 7</p>



Job title in Serbian: <i>Saradnik</i>
Main ECEC workplaces: As Social Worker or Nutritionist in ECEC institutions, 6 months – 6½ years old. Graduates also may work in public sector services, state institutions and local and regional self-governing institutions (with children, youth and adults).

Table 8

Serbia: Nurse

Job title in Serbian: <i>Viša medicinska sestra na preventivi</i>
<p>Entry requirements: completion of 4 years at gymnasium or vocational secondary school and final exam (= university entrance exam)</p> <p>Professional studies: 3 years of study at a college of applied sciences</p> <p>Award: Bachelor</p> <p>Total ECTS credits: 180</p> <p>EQF level: 6</p> <p>ISCED 2011: 6</p> <p>Main ECEC workplaces: Working with children, parents and professionals in the field of protection of children’s health and a healthy environment.</p>

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

In Serbia, all institutions of higher education must have a work permit for pursuing higher education and comply with the standards and procedures defined by the Law of Higher Education and Regulation for Accreditation of Higher Education Institutions.

The list of general and subject-specific competences is the integral part of Standards for Accreditation of study programmes of the first and second levels of higher education (National Council for Higher Education 2019).

<p>Standard 4. Competences of graduated students By mastering the study programme, students acquire general and course-specific skills needed for good quality professional, scientific and artistic activities. The qualification description stemming from the study programme corresponds to a certain level of the National Qualifications Framework.</p>
<p>Guidelines for the application of standard 4:</p> <p>4.1 By mastering the study programme, the student acquires the following general abilities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Analysis, synthesis and foreseeing/predicting solutions and consequences – Mastering methods, procedures, and research processes – Development of critical and self-critical thinking and approaches – Application of knowledge in practice – Development of communication skills and abilities, as well as cooperation with a narrower social and international environment – Professional ethics <p>4.2 By mastering the study programme, the student acquires the following course-specific abilities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Basic knowledge and understanding of the discipline of the relevant profession – Solving concrete problems using scientific methods and procedures – Linking basic knowledge from different fields and their application – Monitoring and application of new development in the profession – Development of skills and abilities in the use of knowledge in the appropriate field – The use of information and communication technologies in mastering the knowledge of the respective area <p>4.3. Learning outcomes are described according to descriptors of learning outcomes of the National Qualifications Framework (ibid)</p>



Ten Colleges and Academies of Applied Sciences (*Visoka škola strukovnih studija/Akademija strukovnih studija*) and six Faculties (5 Universities) (listed in *Table 4a*) provide Bachelor-level studies for future ECEC Teachers. All colleges and faculties in Serbia have adapted the list and publish their own list of competence specifications for graduates. Most study programmes emphasise professional and subject-specific competences to enable students to acquire concrete and applicable knowledge and skills in a particular field.

The conceptual frameworks for individual study programmes in colleges and faculties (goals and mission, competence specifications, intended outcomes) for most of them are presented on the institution websites. One example is given for each type of study here. The others can be accessed via direct links.

ECEC Teachers (*Vaspitač*) – Bachelor Applied programme

Competency specifications

Preschool Teacher Training College „Mihailo Palov“ Vršac

This college offers a study programme for future ECEC Teachers which was designed and accredited within the Teach programme *Harmonization of Preschool Teacher Education Curricula in Serbia 2013 – 2016*, supported by the European Commission (EACEA) within the Tempus project (VSS 2016).

General competence specifications (VSS 2019)

The basic competence that future educators need to develop is **self-reflexivity**; this enables self-evaluation and the adaptation of practice to the context and changes in it and aims at modifying practice in line with changes in pedagogical concepts and current social opportunities.

At the end of their course of studies, graduates are expected to apply knowledge in educational work with children of preschool age and to refer to the appropriate professional literature. Specified general competences are to:

- Analyse, synthesise and foreseeing solutions and consequences
- Compile and interpret contemporary theoretical knowledge in the field of pedagogy, psychology, methodology, and have the ability to reflect on relevant social, scientific or ethical issues related to pedagogical processes
- Master the methods, procedures and processes of research
- Develop critical and self-critical thinking and approaches
- Link basic knowledge from different fields and their applications in working with children of preschool age
- Have developed the capability for teamwork and be able to transfer knowledge to others
- Solve concrete educational problems using scientific methods and procedures.

Subject-specific competence specifications (ibid)

By mastering the study programme, the student acquires the following subject-specific abilities:

- Knowledge of the appropriate profession
- Application of scientific methods and procedures in solving certain problems
- Planning educational work
- Efficient and flexible organisation of time and space: the layout of the classroom for a variety of activities (places for play and for quiet activities), the appropriate choice of teaching and didactic materials, flexible scheduling of activities and transitions between them
- Organisation of learning and teaching
- Pedagogical guidance of the group
- Monitoring effects of the educational process
- Applying and linking knowledge from different fields



- Applying and monitoring innovations in the profession
- Information and communication skills.

ECEC Teachers (*Vaspitač*) – Master (applied programme)

Academy of Technical – Preschool Teacher Education Applied Studies – Department in Pirot

“The purpose of the master's vocational study programme is to educate a Master Educator who will develop existing programmes through an integrated curriculum at the institutional level by organising ... activities in accordance with the life context of the child, changes in society, kindergarten and to the family, thus creating a stimulating the environment for achieving the planned goals. Based on framework documents, the future Master Educator will to be able to produce original and constructive solutions to specific problems in educational practice.” (Academy of Technical Educational Vocational Studies 2022).

General competence specifications (ibid)

Upon completion of a Master Applied programme students will achieve following competences:

- The ability, knowledge and skills of leading, organising and coordinating educational activities and developing an integrated curriculum in a preschool institution and competence for innovative and modern ways of solving specific problems in educational practice
- The ability to plan, design, create, implement and evaluate an open curriculum model for educational work based on an integrated and holistic approach
- Communication skills and the ability to communicate analytical and research results from the domain of the organisation of educational work
- Knowledge and skills about the teacher's professional ethics and active contribution to the development of the social community
- Knowledge of methodology, pedagogy, psychology and methods in order to conduct research and use research methods in educational work.

Specific competence specifications (ibid)

Upon completion of a Master Applied programme students will achieve following competences:

- Knowledge and skills related to the coordination of work with children with developmental disabilities and approaches for encouraging creative expression
- Interpret evaluation data and be able to implement the implications for further work
- Critically observe and interpret the latest trends in the theory and practice of their profession, linking new scientific knowledge to the previously acquired and applying them in practice
- The ability to spot problems or the need for changes, plan changes, organise a team and provide adequate conditions for implementing changes, coordinate individual activities within the team, create an action plan and, based on objective possibilities, ensure the necessary conditions for its implementation
- Knowledge and skills of transforming and modelling content, activities and different strategies in order to construct an integrative curriculum
- Develop skills in conducting research projects and approaching the methodology of research, interpretation and conclusions; the ability to write and publish articles.



ECEC Teachers (*Vaspitač*) – Bachelor Academic programme

Competency specifications

Faculty of Education in Jagodina, University of Kragujevac (2020)

„The study programmes at the Faculty of Education of the University of Kragujevac, Jagodina are designed according to examples of good practice in European higher education institutions (following primarily the Finnish educational system, but also the Slovenian and Greek ones). The main goal of the study programme is to provide the necessary knowledge about modern theoretical concepts about childhood, learning and children’s development in the early years and professional competences that will enable teachers to carry out high-quality educational work in preschool institutions.”

General competence specifications (ibid)

The student:

- Knows and understands the theoretical achievements in the field of preschool education
- Develops skills and flexibility in the use of knowledge from the field of preschool education
- Is capable of solving specific educational problems using scientific methods and procedures
- Uses information and communication technologies to master the necessary professional knowledge
- Monitors and implements innovations from the profession.

ECEC Teachers (*Vaspitač*) – Master (academic programme)

Faculty of Education in Sombor, University of Novi Sad (2022)

The Master of Arts in Preschool Teacher Education study programme aims at providing students with extensive knowledge of relevant scientific and professional fields, as well as the implementation of contemporary didactic and teaching methodologies in their independent research and scientific work. They are aware of the need to master various modes of independent study and permanent professional development.

Competence specifications (ibid)

The general competences of ECEC Teachers include developing critical and self-critical thinking, analysis, synthesis and foreseeing solutions to any problem in the educational process, development of communicative skills and cooperation with the narrow social and international environment, as well as mastering the methods, procedures and processes of scientific and professional research.

The following general and subject-specific competences of the Master of Arts in Preschool Teacher Education result from the above mentioned objectives of this study programme:

- Ability to independently obtain knowledge and profoundly understand relevant concepts of the broader domain of didactic and teaching methodology sciences in the area of preschool education
- Ability to competently and rationally plan, create and successfully implement educational activities in an ECEC institution
- Ability to plan as a team and organise teaching methodology research (to generalise results and improve educational activities of an ECEC institution)
- Keeping up with and implementation of innovations in the area of didactic and teaching methodology science in solving educational problems in teach preschool children;
- Successful usage of contemporary IT in the process of education

- Establishing successful cooperation and communication with the environment of the ECEC institution (cooperation with parents in order to keep them well-informed and improve the level of the children’s education culture).

Curricular areas

The credit system at the colleges and faculties conforms to the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS). One academic year corresponds to 60 ECTS credits. The study courses correspond to 3 – 14 ECTS credits, while the elective section of the study programme corresponds to 48 ECTS credits, which is 20% of the entire study programme. Study programmes consist of compulsory and elective subjects. The study programme contains subjects from the group of academic-general (approximately 15%), theoretical-methodological (approximately 20%), scientific and professional (approximately 35%) and professional-applicative (approximately 30%).

A total of 60 ECTS credits per year corresponds to the average total student engagement within the 40-hour working week during a school year. Student engagement consists of:

- Active classes (lectures, exercises, practica, seminars, practical lessons, mentoring, consultations, presentations, projects, etc.)
- Independent work
- Colloquium
- Exam
- Other forms of engagement in accordance with the general statutes of the College/Faculty (methodical and professional practice, publishing activity, etc.).

Approximately, 45% of the programmes are made up of lectures, 15% seminars, while 40% are allocated to practical experiences in ECEC settings. However, each faculty has its own study programme, with specific courses, learning outcomes, structures and quality criteria.

Table 9 presents a selection of curricular areas from the 16 higher education institutions in Serbia.

Table 9

Serbia: Curricular areas of relevant study programmes (selection)

	Group of courses
Bachelor applied studies	
Compulsory courses	Academic General General Pedagogy, Preschool Pedagogy, General Psychology, Developmental Psychology, Psychology of Childhood and Adolescence, Inclusive Pedagogy, Serbian Language and Communication, Children’s Literature, Professional Identity, Philosophy, Foreign Language, Ethics, ICT in early education, Health Education, Physical and Medical Education, etc.
	Theoretical-Methodological Organisation and Structure of the Educational Process, Methodology of Pedagogy Research, Introduction to Scientific Work, Integrated Preschool Curriculum, Integrative Approach to Educational Content, Children’s Play, etc.
	Scientific, e.g., Artistic-professional Sociology of Childhood, Anthropology of Childhood, Visual Arts, Music Arts, Kinesiology, Drama in Education, Vocal-instrumental teaching, Orchestra, etc.
	Professional Applicative Methods of Arts Education, Methods of Speech Development, Methods of Introducing Environment, Methods of Music Education, Methods of Physical Education, Methods of Initial Mathematical Concepts, etc.
Elective subjects	Art workshop, Child and Computer, Visual Culture, Games Workshop, Drama Workshop, Preschool as an Open System, The Inclusion of Socially Deprived



	Group of courses
	Children, Pedagogic Documentation, Child Subculture, Team Work, Models of Preschool Teacher Professional Development, etc.
Bachelor academic studies	
Compulsory courses	Academic General General Pedagogy, General Psychology, Serbian Language and Communication, Foreign Language, Preschool Pedagogy, Developmental Psychology, Family Pedagogy, Inclusive Pedagogy, Philosophy, Health Education, Physical and Medical Education, Philosophy of education, etc.
	Theoretical-Methodological Pedagogy/ didactics, Theory of Education, Basics of Methodology of Pedagogical Research, Pedagogical Methodology, Research in Pedagogy, Action Research in Preschool Education, Methodology of Qualitative and Quantitative Pedagogical Research, etc.
	Scientific, e.g., Artistic-professional Sociology, Visual Arts, Music Arts, Kinesiology of a child, Drama in Education, Vocal-instrumental teaching, Orchestra, Vocal-instrumental practicum, etc.
	Professional Applicative Didactics of Art Activities, Preschool Didactic, Methods of Arts Education, Methods of Speech Development, Methods of Introducing Environment, Methods of Music Education, Methods of Physical Education, Methods of Initial Mathematical Concepts, etc.
Elective subjects	Ethics, ICT in Early Education, Media Education, Culture of Speech and Communication, Fundamentals of Natural Sciences and Ecology, Play and Dance, Puppet and Stage Art, Multimedia Techniques in Education, etc.
Specialist/Master Applied studies	
Compulsory courses	Educational work with children with developmental disorders, Observing Children's Development, Organisation and Structure of the Child's Play, Inclusion of Children in Need of Health Support, Methodology of Pedagogy Research, Introduction to Research Work, Methods of Arts Education, Methods of Speech Development, Methods of Introducing Environment, Methods of Music Education, Methods of Physical Education, Methods of Initial Mathematical Concepts, Specialist/Master Thesis, etc.
Elective subjects	Performing Arts with children, School Readiness, Self-evaluation and development planning in inclusive practice, Values of childhood, Corrective Gymnastics, Spatial Expression Capabilities of Preschool Children, Comparative Study of Education, Academic Writing, etc.
Master academic studies	
Compulsory courses	Theoretical Problems of Didactics, Comparative Approach to Methodology in Primary and Preschool Education, Methodology of scientific and technical research, The curriculum of preschool education, ICT in teaching, Foreign language learning, Methodology for the development of scientific and technical work, Contemporary methodology of preschool education, Research work, Master's thesis, etc.
Elective subjects	Selected thematic units on (adapted): Teaching methods of speech development, teaching Preschool Mathematics, methods of Presentation and Display, methodology of Music Teaching, methodology of Visual Arts Teaching, Academic Writing, methods of physical education, ICT as a Didactic Tool, etc.

Pedagogic-didactic approaches

Based on insights from the study programmes presented, we can conclude that there is a defined list of competences as isolated sets of knowledge, skills and attitudes and emphasis is on their accumulation. Competency acquisition is the individual responsibility of students and



subject teachers. Student assignments become more demanding during each year of study, but the competences to be developed remain more or less the same. This reflects the technocratic approach to the practice of education based on the discourse of competences based “on the division of theory and practice which involves the production of a professional knowledge corpus through theoretical considerations and research transmission of knowledge (through initial education and training) and then appliance in practice, which is seen as regulated and controlled on the basis of scientific evidence (evidence-based practice)” (Pavlović Breneselović 2014). However, competency should not be seen as the sum of isolated knowledge, skills and attitudes, but as praxieological theory built through a reflexive reconsideration of theory, practice, and interpretative framework in a given context. “The basis of competency is autonomy and critical reflection, so competency develops primarily through research of one's own practice, professional networking, collaborative actions in the practice, and not through external training by experts” (Pavlović Breneselović 2014).

Moreover, curricular areas of study programmes are structured according to the disciplinary model, which is not in line with contemporary approaches, theoretical settings and programmes of early childhood education based on a holistic approach to the child, integrated and situational learning aimed at promoting the well-being of the child (Krnjaja and Pavlović Breneselović 2013). Disciplinary knowledge is translated into curriculum subjects through educational outcomes and is not in line with competences defined for the whole study programme.

The content and methods (pedagogy) of the study programmes for the initial professional education of ECEC teachers in Serbia has not been aligned with the postulates of the professional roles of teachers, with the concept of the ECEC educational programme given in the ESD goals 2020 and in the National ECEC Curriculum Framework, according to which: the teacher is the creator and researcher of the programme; the curriculum is to be developed and evolved and not prescribed; the emphasis is placed on the openness of the ECEC setting to the local community and to families; the need to diversify the programme and the forms of ECEC is of primary interest (Baucal et al. 2016).

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 Serbia. ECEC workers can continue their professional development by entering advanced formal education study routes or through life-long learning activities, without possibilities of changing their professional position or work-place.

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

Since the profession of an ECEC Teacher is a regulated profession, the minimum amount of field-based studies is set by law and has to be taken into account when drawing up the curriculum and in the accreditation process of the programme in general. The Law on Higher Education (LHE, Official Gazette 2021c – 2005 and amendments in 2008, 2010, 2012, 2017 and 2021) provides a legal basis for the full implementation of the Bologna Declaration and the Lisbon Convention. The curriculum of each higher education institution for each study programme is defined at the institutional level according to criteria for the accreditation of study programmes for teacher education.



The mandatory accreditation system for study programmes of colleges and faculties in Serbia is implemented by the Commission for Accreditation and Quality Assurance (CAQA). The CAQA was formed in 2006 as an independent body of the National Council for Higher Education. It is the only formally recognised body responsible for the external quality assurance for higher education in Serbia. The CAQA carries out two types of evaluation processes: the accreditation of higher education institutions and study programmes and the external quality control of higher education institutions (auditing). The CAQA prepares the standards for all evaluation processes (accreditation at institutional and study programme level, auditing, initial accreditation, and self-evaluation of HEIs) that have been adopted by the National Council for Higher Education.

The Law on Higher Education introduced the ECTS as the mandatory credit system to be used by all higher education institutions in all degree programmes, for both credit transfer and accumulation. The ECTS system is fully implemented in all HEIs. Every study programme contains a precise description of the courses and the number of ECTS. This is based on the student workload required to achieve the expected learning outcomes. Each methodology course has some classes directed to field-based learning (between 15 and 45 per semester).

There are two main forms of placement, which vary slightly according to the HEI:

- *Integrated practice* takes place throughout the three or four years under the supervision and monitoring of higher education teachers. Students are expected to be in an ECEC setting one day per week and undertake specific assignments (e.g. observation of different aspects of educational processes, analysing, visits, interviews)
- *Block practika* take place during each semester (from one to four weeks during the final year).

These placements in ECEC settings are organised as a separate course which takes place outside the regular teaching process. Students choose the setting for the practicum individually. The time they spend at the workplace is supervised and evaluated by an experienced teacher (mentor) in the ECEC setting and by higher education teachers at the college/faculty. The mentor is expected to support the work of the student through planning, preparing and evaluating the student's activities. Specific qualifications or working conditions for this position have not been developed. This mentoring role is taken on by motivated ECEC teachers who coach students voluntarily, i.e. without additional payment.

All students are obliged to provide documentation as 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 higher education teacher, who checks whether all obligations have been fulfilled. This is the only formalised procedure of self-evaluation and evaluation of the student's practice. However, each higher education teachers can give the students special assignments connected with specific lectures or courses.

Despite the differences that exist in defining competences that students should develop during professional practice, common to all is to provide students with the practical application of acquired knowledge, skills, strategies and working methods related to the future occupation. Students are expected to:

- Carry out educational work in the ECEC setting independently (organise the physical and social environment, plan and perform activities with children)
- Demonstrate their ability to monitor and evaluate children's activities and well-being
- Apply the knowledge and skills acquired during their IPE in an integrated way
- Develop a capacity for continuously evaluating and self-evaluating their own work and that of the teachers
- Demonstrate their sensitivity for children, parents, colleagues and other professionals who work in the ECEC setting.



Work placements are also part of some Specialist and Master applied and Master's academic study programmes. The main aim at this stage is for students to qualify themselves for independent working with specialist methodological knowledge and skills, as well as for the reflection and improvement of ECEC theory and practice. For example, at the Faculty of Education in Užice, University of Kragujevac (2020), during the second year of study, students spend 165 hours (4 weeks or 20 days) in an ECEC setting (6 ECTS credits). During the practicum, students are expected to develop the ability to:

- Implement activities in pre-school institutions independently and critically reflect on their own pedagogical practice
- Improve their own work based on the results of their own research and research of others
- Master the techniques and "tools" of further personal education and training using modern IT tools and
- Master academic writing skills.

It can be concluded that workplace-based learning in the IPE of core practitioners is not sufficiently defined in Serbia. This can be deduced from the low and unsynchronised number of ECTS credits allocated for this part of IPE, 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.

Based on some particular insights, available research and analyses, we can conclude the following:

- ECEC teacher education reflects the weaknesses of the education system in general in Serbia: it is based on decontextualised learning and on a division between theory and practice, where the emphasis is placed on acquiring theoretical knowledge instead of competency development. The research study entitled "Harmonization of Educational Programs for Educators in Western Balkans Countries" (Panić 2008) has confirmed insufficient levels of practicum in the study programmes for educators (from 10% to 15%), assessed as inadequate for the development of professional competences.
- The current structuring of the programmes of initial professional education according to a disciplinary model and teaching methodologies and the lack of integration of field-based experiences are not in compliance with contemporary approaches, theoretical postulates and programmes of preschool education based on a holistic approach and on integrated and situational learning aimed at strengthening the child's well-being and the development of learning dispositions.

6. Continuing professional development (CPD) of ECEC staff

The Law on the Foundations of the Education System (2003) defined the system of professional development in Serbia for the first time (LFES, Official Gazette 2021g – 2003 with amendments in 2004 and 2009 with amendments in 2010, 2013 and 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020 and 2021.). The Law also created an institutional framework for PD by establishing a Centre for Professional Development (CPD), which initially functioned as an independent institution. Through the amend-

ments of the LFES in 2004 it has now become an organisational unit of the Institute for Improvement of Education (IIE). Regional Centres still have an important place in the system of professional development.

PD reflects the concept of lifelong learning and the EU priorities relating to PD, Key Competences⁶, and Education and Training 2020⁷ (Eur-Lex 2016).

Under the Law, there are three main institutions that have the mandate to conceptualise and implement the system of professional development:

- MoE: Development of the regulatory framework
- Institute for Improvement in Education: Strengthening of the continuous competence improvement and professional development system of employees working in ECEC, elementary and secondary education
- Regional Centres: Investment in the delivery systems of CPD and other services.

The professional development system has the following main components:

- **Accreditation** of CPD activities and other skills-building interventions
- **Standards for teachers' licensing** which require teachers to participate in CPD activities
- A **mentoring system** to support newly-qualified teachers
- A **career advancement system**, which provides incentives for teachers to progress.

The framework for the CPD system is set up by the Rulebook on the Continuing Professional Development and Career Advancement of Teachers, Educators and Expert Associates (Official Gazette 2021d).

Main principles

- CPD is obligatory
- CPD is part of career advancement and personal development
- The teacher has autonomy in the planning of professional development
- The CPD system is market-oriented.

Main forms of CPD

- (1) Professional training programmes
- (2) Specialist meetings, such as: congresses, one-day meetings, conferences, counselling, symposia, roundtables, webinars
- (3) Summer and winter schools
- (4) Professional study trips.

The concept of professional development consists of professional training courses and career advancement to acquire a certain professional title: Pedagogical Counsellor, Independent Pedagogical Counsellor, Senior Pedagogical Counsellor and Superior Pedagogical Counsellor. Hence, the concept is reliant on the educators themselves and their "individual professionalism" (Hargreaves 2000). This concept sets professional development apart from the development of practice in an ECEC centre and apart from changes in the system shaped by educational policies.

⁶ Key competences in the shape of knowledge, skills and attitudes appropriate to each context are fundamental for each individual in a knowledge-based society. They provide added value for the labour market, social cohesion and active citizenship by offering flexibility and adaptability, satisfaction and motivation. Because they should be acquired by everyone, this recommendation proposes a reference tool for the European Union (EU) countries to ensure that these key competences are fully integrated into their strategies and infrastructures, particularly in the context of lifelong learning.

⁷ "Education and Training 2020" (ET 2020) is a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training (Eur-Lex 2009). It provides common strategic objectives for Member States, including a set of principles for achieving these objectives, as well as common working methods with priority areas for each periodic work cycle.

In general, there are no specific forms of CPD for different core practitioners and qualified co-workers (Nurses, Teachers, Expert associates, Associates). The forms for the qualified workers who do not have regular contact with children in the classrooms (such as Psychologists, Pedagogues, Social Workers etc.) are the same as those mentioned above. In many cases, CPD is provided for all of them at the same time, especially if the CPD activity is **workplace-based** and out of working hours. In the case of CPD activities outside the workplace, ECEC providers have to cope with certain problems regarding the replacement of staff during CPD attendance and the costs for travelling.

The Rulebook defines professional development as the “continuous development of competences of teachers, preschool teachers and expert associates to improve the quality of their work, the advancement of children’s and students’ development and the levels of students’ outcomes” (Rulebook on Continuing Professional Development and Career Advancement of Teachers, Educators and Expert Associates, Official Gazette 2021d). This definition ignores the four pillars of professional development, which have been defined as: (1) Reflective practitioners who develop by and through continuously reflecting on their practices; (2) Professional development as part of the education system which is in a continuous state of transformation; (3) Professional development as the development of partnerships and different roles; (4) The ECEC centre as a learning community where professional development takes place and at the same time contributes to the development of the ECEC centre as a community (Krnjaja and Pavlović Breneselović 2013).

The Rulebook promotes formal CPD programmes, as these are the only kind which can award credit points. This means that ECEC Teachers and Expert Associates cannot earn points for any form of CPD which they undertake together with their colleagues within the context of their practice.

According to the Rulebook, compulsory CPD activities are defined in the first and second group of forms (see Main forms of CPD). Within a five-year period, an ECEC teacher is obliged to earn at least 100 points by participating in different CPD activities, out of which at least 80 points should be earned by completing accredited formal programmes (Official Gazette 2021d). To fulfil this requirement, an ECEC teacher has the right to a 24-hour paid leave from work within a one-year period. According to the Rulebook, various forms of CPD at the ECEC centre are considered to be the duty of every ECEC teacher and Expert Associate within the 40-hour working week.

For the formal training programmes, quality criteria have been set out and the procedure of programme accreditation is carried out by the Institute for the Improvement of Education (IIE) in compliance with the Standards for In-service Training Programmes’ Accreditation and issues a Programme Catalogue for teachers, ECEC teachers, expert associates and principals.

In accordance with the Rulebook, an ECEC Teacher cannot earn any points by undergoing forms of CPD focused on developing an ECEC setting into an open system and which emphasise the importance of reflective practice embedded in action research, projects, study visits, creating a pilot ECEC centre or developing innovative approaches in the ECEC settings. This means in effect that the Rulebook and the Programme Catalogue are not in compliance with the Law on Pre-school Education.

The Rulebook is also not in compliance with the concept of mentoring, envisaged as a stage in professional development, with a process which includes critical thinking about one’s own work, or with developing partnerships and experience-based and reflexive learning. Transformation of the roles of the mentor and the inductee into work, which is a vital part of the mentoring concept, is not supported through the points system of CPD as set out in the Rulebook. It means that learning together with other colleagues is devalued.



7. Working conditions and current workforce issues

7.1 Remuneration

There are two main differences between ECEC Teachers and other teachers in Serbia. Firstly, the qualification requirement for primary and secondary school teachers is a Master's degree, whereas for ECEC Teachers it is a Bachelor's degree. Secondly, the salaries of teachers in schools are the same across the country, whereas the salaries of ECEC teachers are highly variable.

Traditionally and according to public perception, the social status of the ECEC Teachers' profession is ranked lower than that of the school teachers and professors. Teachers in schools (primary and secondary) are paid at a nationally agreed level, whereas ECEC Teachers are paid according to local regulations (because municipalities are responsible for ECEC in Serbia). This means that the source of salaries for teachers in schools is the national budget, while the sources of salaries for ECEC teachers are municipal budgets which fund the specific ECEC institution. In both Strategies of Education Development 2020 and 2030, the poor social standing and low economic status of the profession were pointed out as key issues producing additional ramifications on the quality of candidates interested in taking up this profession.

Provisions of the Law on Preschool Education lay down that the basis for salary calculations and payment in ECEC institutions cannot be lower than those for primary school education, but that they could be increased from the funds of the institution or of the local self-government unit. Since ECEC teachers' salaries are provided by the local self-government, substantial inequalities at the regional level mean that the net salaries of ECEC Teachers range from RSD 50,234 (approx. €428) to RSD 75,030 (approx. €640) (Infoplate Serbia 2023).

Pursuant to the Regulation on Coefficients for Calculation and Payment of Employees' Salaries in Public Services (Official Gazette 2021e), the Government prescribed the wage rates and coefficients for educational degree levels and jobs in ECEC in the same way as for the primary and secondary education teachers' professions.

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

A full-time job in Serbia amounts to 40 hours per week. The structure of the working hours of teachers, expert associates and associates in ECEC institutions are regulated by the Law on the Foundations of the System of Education and bylaws. According to this law, within the framework of weekly full-time work, the pedagogical norm for ECEC teachers is 30 hours per week pedagogical and educational work and activities with children (75% of the working hours).

The structure and schedule of ECEC Teachers', Pedagogues' and Psychologists' obligations within the working week are determined by the institution in its annual work plan. 82% of teachers in ECEC settings across Serbia work full-time.

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

Pursuant to the LFES (Official Gazette 2021g), upon expiry of a minimum of one year and/or a maximum of two years of internship, teachers and expert associates employed in the ECEC institution or those who completed internship in the ECEC institution may take the license exam.



The Rulebook on Work Permits for Teachers, ECEC Teachers and Expert Associates (Official Gazette 2022) regulates the following: the work induction programme for ECEC Teachers and expert associates, the verification method and procedure for the candidate's mastering of the programme, the programme for acquiring the work permit (license), the licensing exam costs and the administrative authority before which the licensing exam is to be taken, the licensed teachers' register content and the method of register keeping for ECEC Teachers and expert associates and the license form.

A mentor is appointed to work with the trainee. A senior teacher or expert associate with the same degree and type of education as the intern, who has a license and one of the prescribed titles or at least five years of work experience in the field of education and training, can be appointed as a mentor by the director of the institution. The mentor introduces the trainee to the job by providing assistance in the preparation and implementation of educational work; by observing educational work for at least 12 hours during the internship; by analysing the educational work in order to monitor the trainee's progress; by providing assistance in preparation for checking the mastery of the programme (Official Gazette 2022).

Pursuant to the Rulebook, the licensing exam is taken before a commission of four members comprising a representative of the relevant higher education institution, two education advisors of the Ministry or an advisor-coordinator of the Institute for the Improvement of Education/Institute for Quality Evaluation of Education, or an advisor or expert associate and a person from the legal profession employed by the MoESTD. The exam comprises a written account of an activity with children in the case of a teacher or an essay in the case of an expert associate. It also includes an oral exam to verify the acquired knowledge, skills and capacities levels for independent educational work, the ability to cope with concrete situations in practice, as well as the candidate's knowledge of the relevant legislation in the field of education.

7.4 Non-contact time

As stated previously, according to LFES, ECEC Teachers work in direct contact with children for 30 hours per week. The rest of the time (ten hours) is allocated for the planning, programming and evaluating of work, preparation, organisational and material resources, collaboration with parents and other participants of ECEC processes and for professional development.

7.5 Current staffing issues

Reliable national data regarding staff shortages, recruitment and the age distribution in the workforce are not available.

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

Even though the initial professional education (IPE) of teachers in the Western Balkans has gained importance in previous years and has been undergoing substantial reforms, colleges for ECEC Teacher Education in Serbia have not fully entered into these processes. As a result, this educational sector faces numerous challenges in aligning its study programmes to the European education area and is failing to introduce the necessary innovations in teaching methodology and practical learning. The sector is characterised by heterogeneous curricula and substantial differences in approaches to teaching methodology and training.

Policy reforms and initiatives relating to IPE

One fairly recent reform initiative was realised through the TEACH project *Harmonization of Pre-school Teacher Education Curricula in Serbia 2013 – 2016*, supported by the European Commission (EACEA) (VSS 2016). The TEACH project focused on the harmonisation of the IPE programmes of four colleges of applied studies for ECEC teacher education in Serbia. Specific project objectives were: to harmonise curricula and have them certified at all participating colleges through re-accreditation and the enrolment of a new student intake; to improve the transversal skills of teachers through the training of trainers and improve the teaching methodology and entrepreneurial competences of teachers through identifying learning outcomes and methods of achieving them.

In June 2021, the Government of Serbia adopted the Strategy for the Development of Education (SDE) in Serbia by 2030, which is a step towards the harmonisation of education policies with policies relating to science, technical and technological development in contemporary society. The SDE in Serbia 2030 has two general goals. The first refers to pre-university education, and the second to higher education:

- Increasing the quality of teaching and learning, equity and accessibility of pre-university education and upbringing, and strengthening the effectiveness of educational institutions
- Increasing the quality and improving the relevance and equity of higher education.

In 2021, the Law on the National Qualifications Framework was adopted. The National Qualifications Framework of Serbia (NQFS) has 8 levels and 4 sublevels and defines four qualification types:

- General basic education and secondary education
- Vocational education and adult education
- Academic higher education
- Vocational higher education.

The National Qualifications Framework enables the regulation of the system of qualifications in the Republic of Serbia for all levels and areas of education, thus achieving greater flexibility and accessibility, above all within different levels of education. Establishing a National Qualifications Framework ensured the comparability and recognition of qualifications obtained in the Republic of Serbia with those in other countries.

Despite this, more serious reforms of the initial professional education of ECEC Teachers have not been made. There is a need to reform the system and curricular framework for the IPE of ECEC teachers (both in structure and content) in accordance with contemporary approaches towards early childhood education, the profession of an ECEC Teacher, the practices in ECEC institutions and the ECEC programme. At the curricular level, changes in content and pedagogical approach in initial education of teachers need to be aligned with contemporary postulates on key competences of professionals in education for the 21st century (e.g. through practitioner inquiry and ongoing exchange, enhancing the capacity for self-evaluation as a continuous process of developing the quality of practice and not as a technical issue according to the model of external evaluation, transforming the culture of the preschool institution into a community of learning), as well as with contemporary understandings of childhood, children and learning.

Policy reforms and initiatives relating to ECEC staff

Piloting the new ECEC Curriculum Framework “The Years of Ascent” (2016 – 2018) (Official Gazette 2018a), conducted by the Institute of Pedagogy and Andragogy at Belgrade University, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development, the Institute for the Improvement the Education and UNICEF.



The project's objective was to improve the quality of early childhood education through the development of a new ECEC Curriculum Framework. It is being piloted in three ECEC settings (Novi Sad, Čačak, Zemun) with the following aims and stated outcomes:

- Developing and finalising the ECEC Curriculum Framework
- Developing training programmes for teachers and centre leaders regarding the implementation of the new curriculum
- Developing competence standards for ECEC Teachers
- Preparing guidelines for the implementation of “The Years of Ascent”.

The initiative **Support to preschool education system reform – SUPER (2019 – 2021)** (Vlada Republike Srbije 2019) was commissioned by the Serbian Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development, implemented by Particip GmbH in a consortium with IB (Internationaler Bund), VBJK in Belgium and the Centre for Interactive Pedagogy (CIP), and financed by EU funds. The purpose of this project was to contribute to the reform of the ECEC system by providing support to the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development and Local Self Governments to develop ECEC as part of lifelong learning through planning and managing ECEC more effectively at the local level and implementing modern pedagogical approaches. The stated outcomes are:

- Strengthening the professional capacities of local governments to plan and manage early childhood education and care
- Strengthening the professional competences of ECEC staff for delivering high-quality and inclusive pre-primary education and
- Advancing the legislative framework in the field of early childhood education and care.

The Inclusive Early Childhood Education and Care project (2019 – 2022) (MoESTD 2022) is being implemented by the Ministry of Education and financed from loan proceeds of the World Bank. The objective of the project is to improve access to quality early childhood education and care services for all children aged 3 to 6½ years, especially those from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds. The project is expected to directly benefit children aged 0 to 6½ years and their families, ECEC institutions, local communities (local self-governments, health care centres, social work centres, etc.), government institutions involved in preschool education and care, etc. Major components of the ECEC project are: Expanding the supply of available places; strengthening the quality of ECEC services; and supporting young children and families. The component on strengthening the quality of ECEC services is focused on enhancing the quality of the ECEC system, characterised by a holistic approach to supporting the learning, development and well-being of children. It comprises the following activities:

- Support to the implementation of the new ECEC Curriculum Framework
- Improvement of the initial professional education of ECEC Teachers, professional development and advancement opportunities for practitioners in ECEC settings, as well as the improvement of leadership competence in the settings
- Improvement of monitoring and evaluation, aimed at better informed data-based decision-making, including the improvement of the Education Management Information System (EMIS), of self-evaluation and external evaluation procedures, of technical assistance in developing a strategy for offering more diverse ECEC services and regulating them at the local level.



9. Recent country-specific research focusing on ECEC staff

There are three research institutes in Serbia primarily pursuing educational research: the Institute for Pedagogical Research in Belgrade⁸, the Institute for Psychology at the University of Belgrade – Faculty of Philosophy, and the Institute for Pedagogy and Andragogy at the University of Belgrade – Faculty of Philosophy. Research projects in the field of education are also implemented within the Department for Pedagogy of the Faculty of Philosophy at the University of Novi Sad, the Teacher Education Faculty in Užice, the Centre for Pedagogical Research at the Department for Pedagogy of the Faculty of Philosophy in Nis, and the Teacher Education Faculty in Belgrade.

However, there is no consolidated database on institutions and organisations conducting research in the field of ECEC, or a consolidated database on the projects implemented in this field. This is a consequence of a non-transparent system and the lack of a single ECEC portal; the weak recognition of developmental projects in the field of scientific research; the lack of transparency in the work of the research institutions; and insufficient networking among the research institutions and projects.

There are few research studies to report on that were conducted during the past five years. These first three studies therefore draw on slightly older research focusing on ECEC staff, whereas the three projects presented in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic are more recent.

Children as co-researchers in ECEC settings

Source: Pavlović Breneselović 2015, conducted by the Institute of Pedagogy and Andragogy (see *References* for full details)

Aims: To investigate children’s perspectives on the quality of kindergarten practices and to develop a child-led perspective of quality.

Procedure: A participatory research methodology that involved children as co-researchers using the Mosaic approach. The research relied on participative research techniques and involved 50 children (30 girls and 20 boys) aged 5–7 years from 30 ECEC centres in different regions of Serbia and in Belgrade (25 children from 11 Belgrade kindergarten and 25 from 19 kindergartens throughout Serbia).

Selected results: The study presented a synthesis of kindergarten practice quality, taking into account data obtained through consulting with children, regarding kindergarten ‘schoolification’, segregation, child well-being and (non)differences. The study identified the school-oriented kindergarten practice both ideologically (kindergarten as preparation for school) and pedagogically (clear division of play and learning activities and reducing the understanding of learning to teaching). The analysis indicated that contemporary kindergarten practices do not sufficiently support any of the three dimensions of well-being (subjective, psychological and social) and illustrated gender stereotypes and gender typology as well as discriminative practice regarding both boys and girls.

Implications: The study provides guidelines on quality development in ECEC setting practices through changes in the structural dimensions (group size, child/teacher ratio and space), through an enhanced curricular framework, through a change in the culture of the institution in

⁸ Projects realised by the Institute for Pedagogical Research are predominantly focused on school education. There is no data on the Institute’s web site on any projects implemented in the field of early childhood education and care.



the direction of a learning community, through strengthening child participation, through the joint participation of children and adults and through reflexive practice.

Mentorship as practitioner collaboration

Source: Miškeljin 2016, conducted by the Institute of Pedagogy and Andragogy (see *References* for full details)

Aims: Perceiving and understanding the perspective of the mentors involved in the project “Kindergarten without borders 2 – quality inclusive pre-school education in Serbia” at several levels: the practice of preschool upbringing and education, their role in the team in the ECEC institution and in the local community, their role in the programme and the project, and the given concept of mentors in the project.

Procedure: Research methodology involved nine mentors using a focus group interview and a semi-structured questionnaire.

Selected results: The study showed that mentors recognise a developed mentoring and support system for ECEC centres as important in the processes of introducing and initiating changes in everyday ECEC and developing quality.

Implications: The conclusion states that it is necessary to change the concept of professional development in order to ensure support in the process of changing practices and developing quality in all dimensions of ECEC settings.

ECEC Teachers’ perspectives on professional development

Source: Pavlović-Breneselović, and Krnjaja 2012, conducted by the Institute of Pedagogy and Andragogy in partnership with the Serbian Association of Preschool Teachers (see *References* for full details)

Aims: To analyse the perspective of educators on the practice of professional development from the point of view of a systemic approach and develop a model of transformation of the professional development system.

Procedure: A survey technique using a questionnaire containing closed and open-ended questions and an assessment scale (total of 11 items). Questionnaires were filled out by 130 teachers from kindergartens throughout Serbia, randomly selected during student internships and at a professional meeting of ECEC teachers.

Selected results: The study showed that the existing system of professional training (CPD) in Serbia has the characteristics of a mechanistic approach to the improvement of essential skills. It is being realised solely through seminars; it is detached from teachers’ everyday practice; it is characterised by a patronising approach on the part of the experts; and it is detached from implementation and the improvement of practices.

Implications: The existing system of professional training in Serbia has essential characteristics of the industrial model of training: implementation through seminars, separation from practice, expert patronage, individual responsibility and lack of connection with changing and improving the practice of kindergartens. The improvement of the system of professional training is a matter of comprehensively defining and establishing four mutually connected and conditional dimensions: (1) professional training, (2) professional progress, (3) improvement of practice and (4) education policies that promote a culture of change and development at the level of the entire education system. Proper professional development is not a matter of personal achievement – it is inseparable from improving kindergarten practice. It is possible only if change, development and improvement are the backbones of education policy in all segments.



Projects related to the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak

In the midst of the global crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Faculty of Philosophy in Belgrade launched the research project "Humans and Society in Times of Crisis" in 2020 with the aim of examining the implications of the current crisis on various aspects of human life and different spheres of social reality. In addition, based on the consideration of crises that have occurred in the recent or distant past and in different social contexts, the aim of the project is to reflect on possible solutions to the current crisis and formulate visions of the so-called post-COVID society. The "times of crisis" in the project heading can thus equally represent time that has passed, the time in which we live, but also the time that awaits us. One of them – "Education in the time of the COVID-crisis: where we are and where to go next" (University of Belgrade 2021) – consists of 16 research papers authored by teachers and researchers of the Study Group for Pedagogy of the Faculty of Philosophy. It focuses on the field of education in the time of the COVID-19 crisis, a time that in a drastic way shows the sensitivity and vulnerability of education as a social practice, the weaknesses of existing educational systems and the limitations of institutional educational practices. At the same time, it has reanimated the awareness of the vital importance and potential of education that we count on precisely in times of crisis.

Regarding ECEC there are four significant research projects:

ECEC in the time of the corona virus crisis: physical isolation and the "tunnel effect"

Source: Krnjaja 2021 (see *References* for full details)

Aims: The paper analyses the attitude towards children in ECEC settings during the corona crisis.

Procedure: Thematic analysis was used in the research conducted by 23 students of the third year of bachelor studies in Pedagogy together with their subject teacher, as part of the research student work on the subject Preschool Pedagogy during March and April 2021. The research collected various e-publications and materials in a digital form intended for children, which deal with the coronavirus and which were prepared or recommended by educators and professional associates: worksheets/picture books for children (5), manuals for children (2), a poster for children (1), songs written by educators (5), suggestions for games/experiments for parents and children to play together (3), stories written or recommended by educators (4) and video clips (3). In the study, e-publications for children were analysed: *Korona's playroom in the „Forest Villa“*, *The story of the shell and the butterfly: the coronavirus and me*, *Petra against the virus*, *Korona's picture book* and *The day when everything stopped*.

Selected results: Incoherence and absence of conceptualisation regarding a consistent and correct interpretation of the term "coronavirus" were observed in four of the five analysed e-publications. In only one e-publication, the coronavirus is interpreted as "an invisible organism transmitted between people". In terms of the participation of teachers/authors, insufficient willingness was observed to share their feelings and experience with the child as participants in the community facing a problematic situation and then to provide protection and support for the child's safety. Only in one picture book are children instructed to strengthen self-regulation to feel safe. The participation of the teachers/author is dominantly accompanied by an advisory and didactic attitude towards the child.

Implications: Facing the unexpected during the corona crisis in preschool education, we see the necessity of critically reviewing attitudes towards children and identifying ways to overcome perceived weaknesses. The culture of using e-publications requires a clear articulation of what we strive for in education and what we expect from the child.

Remote kindergarten in the time of the COVID-19 crisis from the children's perspective

Source: Mitranić 2021 (see *References* for full details)



Aims: To explore the children's perspective on the "remote" kindergarten during the corona pandemic through activities in which the children were engaged; peer relations; relations with the teacher.

Procedure: Consultations with 13 children: 6 boys and 7 girls – aged 5–7 years, from different kindergartens and cities in Serbia, on the issues of activities that were realised through digital platforms in the specified period, the ways in which relationships with peers and kindergarten teachers were established and the suggestions that children would make for a possible transformation of work in a digital environment.

Selected results: Most of the activities realised for the children were not meaningful – neither did they decide on the activities, nor did they find meaning and purpose in them. Even in certain activities that thematically touched on the pandemic situation (such as the lengthy "Everything will be fine"), children did not recognise the connection with life experience – with their environment, their understanding of the world and the current situation. By talking about the possibilities in the event of re-isolation, the children indicate the necessity of breaking out of established patterns and "quick solutions" when devising ways of working and the importance of creating, imagining, researching, and playing as experiences that they want to experience and share with us.

Implications: The children's perspective of the "remote" kindergarten in the time of crisis shows us, again and again, the intertwining of actions with the question of the quality of relationships. In relationships with others, children create and express themselves and develop a sense of purpose and meaning. This research raises the following question: Is the lack of purpose and meaning that children show about the "remote" kindergarten experience mainly due to the lack of feedback and reactions from peers and adults and the absolute lack of dialogue about what we can do and why. From the conversation with the children, it is recognised that "it is not the same" when the peers and the teacher are not there – the kindergarten group is not just an organisational unit. It is a community and learns as such, living and transforming.

Approaches of educational policy to preschool education in times of crisis

Source: Miškeljin 2021 (see *References* for full details)

Aims: Starting from an understanding of early childhood education as a holistic process of care, education and support involving the development of individual potentials and achieving continuity of human culture and social progress, the paper analyses the policy approaches to preschool education during the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of two key measures taken by education policymakers: closing and opening ECEC institutions.

Procedure: In order to understand the approaches, as well as their variations in the design of immediate measures in relation to preschool education and education, the research focuses on looking at the broader European context through a cross-national presentation of educational policy measures for the prevention of the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in relation to preschool education in Norway, Sweden, Finland, Germany and Italy.

The criteria for selecting countries were: an integrated approach to ECEC, an approach based on the principles of equality and respect for diversity, unified jurisdiction for ECEC and availability of data on official websites. In the second part of the study, the educational policy approaches regarding preschool education and education during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis are analysed through the adopted measures of the educational policymakers in Serbia.

The approach in the research is based on the settings of the narrative analysis of the educational policy in a time of crisis concerning two key events: the closing and opening of preschool institutions.



Selected results: In a cross-national presentation of educational policy measures in relation to the closure and opening of ECEC institutions, the following approaches are distinguished: equal opportunities and the right to preschool upbringing and education; caring for children of working parents; medical model of care; and accessibility. In adopting a set of recommendations and guidelines specifically intended for ECEC institutions, educational policymakers in Serbia, focusing on procedural issues such as disinfection of spaces, accessories and equipment, not using toys that cannot be washed and disinfected, delegated expertise to practitioners, which provided little help in deciding of the implementation of direct educational work in the changed circumstances caused by the current situation.

Implications: Emphasising "lost learning opportunities" and the transmissive model of information and knowledge transfer, "a well-known and safe pedagogical format", leads to schooling, and not to promoting support, care for others, connection and "living together" as essential functions of early childhood education.

10. Workforce challenges – country expert assessment

Based on the analyses presented, one of the key workforce challenges in the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) system in the Republic of Serbia is related to the great variety and confusion among different educational profiles and job titles of staff in ECEC. Furthermore, the discrepancy between educational practice on the one hand, and the initial professional education of future ECEC teachers on the other, shows that norms that are a measure of the relationship between theory and practice are expressed in diametrically opposite meanings, e.g. abstract or concrete, universal or specific, generalised or situational, true or unverifiable, objective or subjective, formal or informal, proven or possible (Korthagen 2010 cited in Krnjaja 2019). As presented in one research study (Krnjaja 2019), practitioners and students often feel they are not offered the theory they need to prepare for their practice and often seem unable to integrate the provided theory with their approach. Hence, the theory remains an incomprehensible language for them with no direct relation to their daily practice (Krnjaja 2019).

On that note, one more challenge is directly related to the above and refers to the guided workplace experience (practicum) in the initial professional education of ECEC Teachers. This is an essential dimension of the professional development of both students and their teacher-mentors. It is an integral part of the practice of ECEC, where prospective teachers get to know their profession practically through active participation in various daily activities in the ECEC institution. However, this topic is insufficiently researched, and little is written about it in our professional and scientific community. Bearing in mind that quality in ECEC is seen as a system (Pavlović Breneselović 2014), the proposals could go in the direction of establishing a dialogue between the ECEC institution and the colleges/faculties in which they strive to build a joint, shared vision of the role of professional practice in the initial education of ECEC teachers.

As a final challenge, but by no means the least important, we would like to highlight the inertness and slowness in the process of transformation and harmonisation of the initial professional education of ECEC Teachers in accordance with contemporary approaches to preschool education and the profession of an ECEC Teacher as outlined in the ECEC Curriculum Framework "Years of Ascent" (Official Gazette 2018a) as well as in the Standards of competences of ECEC teachers and their professional development (Official Gazette 2018b).



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