

Challenges and prospects in the EU: Quality of life and public services ^[1]

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Author:

Anderson, R., Dubois, H., Ortiz, E. F., Foti, K., Jungblut, J-M., Kulic, N., Leocikas, T., Ludwinek, A., Molinuevo, D., Sandor, E., & van der Schans, C.

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Early childhood education and care services: Affordability and quality

Introduction

The AGS 2019 points out that wider access to high-quality childcare services ‘would ensure more opportunities for women to enter or stay in employment and reduce the risk of poverty and social exclusion among children and vulnerable groups’ (European Commission, 2018a, p. 12). The country-specific recommendations given to seven Member States in 2019 dealing with childcare (Austria, Cyprus, Czechia, Ireland, Italy, Poland, Slovakia) reiterate this message. Most of these countries were reminded that accessible and affordable childcare contributes to the narrowing of the gender gap in the labour market. Similarly, the 2019 Draft joint employment report points out that lack of or unequal access to childcare worsens the effect of parenthood on women’s employment (European Commission, 2018b).

Cost stands out as the main barrier to use of early childhood education and care (ECEC) services. The EQLS 2011 and the EU-SILC 2016 ad hoc module identify cost as a greater source of difficulty in making use of services than lack of places, distance or opening hours. The importance of cost is reflected in the European Pillar of Social Rights, which includes the statement ‘children have the right to affordable early childhood education and care of good quality’. The main initiative at the EU level in relation to quality is the Council Recommendation on High Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems (Council of the European Union, 2019). The implementation of the recommendation by Member States is supported by the Working Group on Early Childhood Education and Care, established in late 2018. This working group, which will end its mandate in 2020, focuses on the professionalisation of staff and the accessibility and inclusiveness of services.

EQLS 2016 data on affordability and user satisfaction can contribute to monitoring the implementation of this Council recommendation. This chapter presents findings from other research on the situation in Member States to contextualise the findings of the EQLS on affordability, quality and user satisfaction with ECEC services. The first part presents information from the EQLS and other sources about the affordability of services. The second part presents research on factors influencing quality and how it is linked to parents’ satisfaction with services.

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