EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION & CARE IN MALTA

THE WAY FORWARD

Acknowledgements

List of Acronyms

CACHE   Council for Awards in Care, Health and Education

CMeLD   Curriculum Management and e-Learning Department

DES   Directorate for Educational Services

DQSE   Directorate for Quality Standards in Education

DSWS   Department of Social Welfare Standards

ECEC   Early Childhood Education and Care

EO   Education Officer

ETC   Employment Training Corporation

FES   Foundation for Educational Services

HND   Higher National Diploma

KGA   Kindergarten Assistants

MCAST   Malta College for Arts, Science & Technology

MQC   Malta Qualifications Council

MQF   Malta Qualifications Framework

MUT   Malta Union of Teachers

NCF   National Curriculum Framework

NCFHE   National Commission for Further & Higher Education

NMC   National Minimum Curriculum

OS   Occupational Standards

RSDU   Research & Standards Development Unit

TTB   Trade Testing Board

WSAU   Welfare Services Assessment Unit

Table of contents

List of Tables

Executive Summary

This document was drawn up to summarise the development of early childhood education and care in Malta and make recommendations towards promoting high quality provision across early years services in light of the Government's 2013 electoral manifesto proposal to extend services through free child-care services for families.

Providing childcare services for under-threes in order to facilitate women's return to employment is one way of perceiving and addressing economic issues and narrowing the gap between gender opportunities. However, internationally the early years sector has attracted attention in its own right because of the well-documented and researched evidence which indicates that investment in good quality care is one of the best investments with highest returns (Heckman, 2008, 2012); there are long-lasting positive and significant cognitive and socio-emotional effects on children who experience rich, stimulating environments and programmes which incorporate the child as an active agent in his/her own learning as well as reach out to the family and community in which he/she is being brought up (EPPE, 2003; Wylie & Hodgen, 2011, Raikes, Brooks-Gunn & Love, 2013). There is therefore a necessity to advocate for good quality provision in early years not only to encourage mothers to return to the workforce but primarily because of the short-term and long-term implications such investment has on children's achievements and consequently on society.

Good-quality early years services require the engagement of highly-qualified staff who work in supportive environments. Such environments assist children and parents; facilitate transitions between home and settings; monitor progress; encourage collaborative work within multi-disciplinary teams; and promote the development of confident, young learners. Good quality early years settings contribute towards developing the foundations of competent individuals who can think carefully and creatively, communicate in an articulate manner and act in socially just and morally sound ways.

To borrow the metaphor used by Elliot (2006) in her review of early childhood education and care services in Australia, Malta is at the cross-roads. A number of challenges and issues which were highlighted in the 2006 policy document (Sollars, Attard, Borg & Craus) are still to be considered. At the time when early years provision for under-threes is to be extended, the challenges need to be addressed within a context which promotes a holistic perspective to early years rather than contribute and perpetuate the ever-increasing anomalies which have resulted as a consequence of the ad-hoc manner through which the sector has grown.

> *The early childhood literature is clear about the close connections between care and education and the inseparable nature of development and learning. Despite this, the separate histories and traditions of early childhood 'care' programs and 'education' programs have resulted in substantially different goals, purposes and practices in 'child care' and in 'preschools' and 'kindergartens'. These differences are reinforced by policy, funding and administrative divisions within and between the sectors ... And the care–education divide appears to be growing.*

(Elliot, 2006, p. 1)

A thorough review of the development of the early years sector in Malta together with an analysis of the current state of affairs led to seven main recommendations towards improving the quality of available and prospective services:

Recommendation 1: (Re) conceptualising early years

Discussing and agreeing to a shared understanding about early years and expectations regarding achievements in early years with all stakeholders is imperative. A broader understanding of the early years and what these first years imply for early childhood education and care ought to lead to a better understanding of why and where early years matter; what constitutes quality experiences in early years and how such experiences make a difference to children's lives. It is imperative that this understanding is shared by policy makers, practitioners and families in light of the responsibilities they have towards promoting and ensuring the provision of appropriate expectations across the early years sector.

Recommendation 2: Providing for an integrated rather than a split system

A holistic approach to early childhood education and care can be conceived where there is a firm commitment towards setting up an integrated rather than a split system. This implies incorporating early years services under the auspices of one ministry; eliminating the artificial distinction between child-care and kindergarten settings; improving and agreeing on the general conceptualisation of and expectations about early years; ensuring that practitioners in early years share and work within the same regulatory framework, promoting the learning outcomes for the sector as proposed by the National Curriculum Framework (2012); addressing the need for seamless transitions as children progress through early years settings in non-compulsory services through the first years of compulsory education; and ensuring that the professional training of all staff working in the early years sector is of a high standard.

A split system is characterised by having:

- an early years sector which is divided according to children's ages, typically having under three-year-olds in childcare and three to five, six or seven year-olds in pre-school or kindergarten (KG) settings until the age when compulsory education starts;
- split governance, with childcare being the responsibility of the Ministry of Social Policy and KG seen as the responsibility of the Ministry of Education.
- a service that perceives 'care' and 'child-minding' as the rationale for childcare settings for under three year olds and 'education' and 'socialisation' as the rationale for pres-school and KG-aged children;
- unqualified staff or staff with low-qualifications associated to child-care whereas staff with higher qualifications and initial university degrees linked to settings for the 'older' cohorts amongst the early years group as the latter are prepared for primary school.

Recommendation 3: Registration and accreditation of early years settings

An obligation for all early years settings to be registered and accredited. To date, provision for under-threes is a semi-regulated sector where settings are not obliged to register with an authorised entity. In allowing for such a situation, this gives rise to potential health and safety concerns for one of the most vulnerable age groups.

Recommendation 4: Quality matters

Quality matters need to be addressed at a number of levels.

- Trained assessors and professional staff are required to help monitor programmes and activities within settings in order to give advice, provide support and assist practitioners at all levels. This is of paramount importance in the absence of (highly) qualified practitioners and/or service managers especially in childcare.
- Appropriate assessment and evaluation of children's learning ought to be mandatory to ensure that settings are providing relevant programmes and broad experiences which are appropriate for the children and which strive to achieve the learning outcomes recommended in the National Curriculum Framework (2012).
- National systematic data gathering from all early years settings to inform planning; facilitate the identification of gaps in training and/or qualifications of staff; generally monitor the quality of provision available and consequently provide appropriate support to improve services; ensure availability and affordability of quality services for all children, especially for those who are at-risk or at a disadvantage.
- The development of a research agenda to identify the national characteristics associated with quality services as well as trace factors which contribute to later achievements and prevent early school leaving.

Recommendation 5: Staff training and qualifications

Staff training and qualifications need to be revised and addressed. An ambitious situation towards which Malta must aim and reach is one where all practitioners have a minimum amount of training and a corresponding qualification whilst at least 50% of staff working in early years settings have a relevant tertiary qualification.

The level of education expected of personnel applying for professional training in the early years sector and the level of training and final qualification awarded to the practitioners are challenges which need to be addressed if the quality of the early years programmes and experiences are to be addressed. International literature has convincingly demonstrated that highly-educated and well-trained professional practitioners play a key role in supporting children's growth, learning and development.

Recommendation 6: Accreditation of courses

A more uniform and standardised process of accreditation is advisable. There appear to be a number of anomalies in the accreditation of courses which are offered by different entities. Distinctions exist between courses which were available prior to the publication of National Occupational Standards and those which came about or are being proposed following the publication of the Occupational Standards. Some courses are accredited by the local national agency; others are accredited by foreign entities. Holders of unaccredited programmes are tested by yet a third entity. There needs to be a better match between the content of the training programmes and the expectations of the occupational standards. These occupational standards need to be revisited to reflect a better match between the interpretation and expectation of the standards themselves, the content of the training programmes and the on-going development and conclusions about child development and its impact on education and care practices and policies.

Recommendation 7: Curricular programmes and activities

Continuous professional development should be mandatory. Keeping in mind that several practitioners have no formal qualifications or are in possession of a low-level qualification, CPD should be mandatory to support practitioners in the development of appropriate programmes of activities. This needs to be done in light of the outcomes of the National Curriculum Framework (NCF, 2012) as well as other curricular documents which can be considered as best practice examples. Anecdotal evidence and a small number of research

studies in early years settings indicate that some practices adopted in several early years settings are not addressing fundamental principles of how young children learn best with the result that the experiences offered, do not maximise the potential development of each child. The relatively low or even total absence of qualifications of staff, coupled with years of unregulated services, minimal direction in terms of the development of frameworks, programmes and activities and in some instances, misguided expectations of parents, are all factors which have contributed to a situation of inappropriate practices.

Preamble

Equitable access to good quality early years provision is a vision which subsequent Government administrations are aiming to achieve. The political manifesto of the Labour Party (2013)[1] (p.40) associates the provision of free child-care with opportunities for parents, especially mothers, to join the work-force. The proposal is presented from a labour-market/economy-driver perspective rather than the social and educational well-being or development of young children and the benefits which good quality services can contribute to children's development.

This proposal in itself is not unique or unusual and in recent years, the discussion in favour of widespread provision for accessible and affordable child-care settings especially across Europe has been associated with a viable way of increasing the rate of female employment. For example, in the executive summary to the document focusing of the provision of child-care services in 30 EU countries (2009), published by the European Commission's Expert Group on Gender and Employment Issues (EGGE)[2], the nature of the importance attributed to child-care is evident:

> *There are several reasons why countries might invest in childcare services. A classical argument refers to the fact that the availability of good-quality childcare services has a positive impact on the female participation rate. A higher participation rate may increase gender equality, foster economic growth and help improve the sustainability of the present day welfare state, especially in the light of an ageing population. ...*

Within the Barcellona targets (2002)[3], EU member states agreed to:

> *remove disincentives to female labour force participation and strive, taking into account the demand for childcare facilities and in line with national patterns of provision, to provide childcare by 2010 to at least 90% of children between 3 years old and the mandatory school age and at least 33% of children under 3 years of age. (p. 12)*

Indeed, one of the EU's Country Specific Recommendations for Malta, as reported in *Malta's National Reform Progamme* (April, 2013) is to *Enhance the provision and affordability of more childcare and out-of-school centres, with the aim of reducing the gender employment gap* (p. 16). The document outlines three initiatives which the Government had already taken in order to encourage and support families to use child-care services as well as makes reference to two plans with the same aim (Table 1). Subsequently, the *EU Council recommendation on Malta's 2013 national reform programme and delivering a Council opinion on Malta's stability programme for 2012-2016* (29th May 2013)[4]:

> *RECOMMENDS that Malta should take action within the period 2013-2014 to ... Continue supporting the improving labour market participation of women by promoting flexible working arrangements, in particular by enhancing the provision and affordability of child-care and out-of school centres.*   (p. 6-7)

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[1] http://election.josephmuscat.com/manifest.pdf

[2] European Commission's Expert Group on Gender and Employment Issues (EGGE) (2009). *The provision of childcare services. A comparative review of 30 European countries*. Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities

[3] *Presidency Conclusions. Barcellona European Council 15 & 16th March 2002*. Available: http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/ec/71025.pdf

[4] http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/pdf/nd/csr2013_malta_en.pdf

Current measures	Planned measures
Parents who paid fees for childcare services to centres which are registered/approved by the DSWS, DQSE or is a service provided by the FES in respect of their children who are below the age of 3, are eligible for a deduction equal to the lower of €1,300 for every child or the amount of fees paid during 2012 upon the filing of the income tax return.	Families in Malta and Gozo will have the opportunity to send their children to childcare centres free of charge. This project will be carried out with the involvement of the private sector.
Through the childcare subsidy scheme, the ETC offers a subsidy of €1.50 per hour on childcare services availed of by individuals during the period of training offered by the Corporation. ...the subsidy shall only apply for the days and times during which a parent or guardian is attending for an ETC training course.	Families who opt to send their children to private childcare centres will benefit from an income tax deduction of €2,000 on childcare centre fees.
To further increase the number of women employees and women returning to work, with effect from the year of assessment 2011, employers can claim a deduction, upon the filing of their income tax return, in respect of expenditure incurred as from 1 January 2010 on the construction of a childcare facility or the acquisition of childcare equipment at the workplace. This deduction is capped at €20,000....	

Table 1 Current and planned measures to promote use of childcare
(Malta's National Reform Programme 2013)

Whilst the plans to extend free childcare to all families is laudable, this white paper proposes an alternative focus to an early years policy, namely one which puts the child and the well-being of children who are in child-care services at the centre of the policy. It argues for a coherent early years policy based on an agreed definition of early years, a rethinking of cultural expectations linked to the rationale for the provision of early years settings and the articulation of clear, strategic direction for policy through a firm understanding of the implications arising from a child-centred policy for the early years sector.

A historical overview of the sector in Malta, including the changes within it since 1975, will be off-set against developments in early years contexts and policies internationally, providing an analytic basis for the current state of affairs which needs to be undertaken ahead of considering proposals for the future development of the sector. There are two main objectives to this paper:

- documenting the state of affairs in the Early Years sector as it has developed in Malta;
- outlining the way forward with a view to extending the provision of the service whilst ensuring that provision will be affordable, accessible and of high quality. Recommendations for the way forward will highlight and identify the challenges which Malta faces in order to address the demand for, as well as the supply of affordable, good quality services.

Defining early childhood education and care

The term *early childhood* is the period of time in the life of an individual which incorporates birth through to the age of seven (WHO, 2009; OECD, 2001). This phase has been recognised as crucial in the development of human beings (Naudeau, Kataoka, Valerio, Neuman, Elder & Kennedy, 2011; Evangelou, Sylva, Kyriacou, Wild & Glenny, 2009; Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2008). Most of what is learnt and more importantly, how it is acquired and learnt, sows the seeds for short-term and long term achievements and development. Research into child-development (Donaldson, 1992 and Nutbrown 2006), neuro-science and brain development in the early years (OECD, 2007; Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2011; Cypel, 2013) and studies looking at the interaction of adults with very young children (Trevarthen, 2010; Jordan, 2004; Pramling Samuelsson & Sheridan, 2009), all contribute to an appreciation that a child has the potential to develop fully through on-going, direct, meaningful and active participation in a responsive environment. Babies, toddlers and infants are active agents and not passive recipients in their own learning and development, thus sharing in constructing and understanding knowledge and information as presented by the world around them.

Internationally, there is agreement that early childhood education and care (ECEC) matters because of the wide-range of benefits (OECD, 2012), including:

- *social and economic benefits;*
- *better child well-being and learning outcomes as a foundation for lifelong learning;*
- *more equitable outcomes and reduction of poverty;*
- *increased intergenerational social mobility*

(OECD, 2012, p. 17)

Agreeing to a definition and accepting the importance of the early years has massive implications for the responsibilities and roles of adults in supporting the development and growth of learning and understanding of young children. Adults' in-depth understanding of how young children learn, coupled with a high degree of education which emphasises a reflective and responsive person, leads to the provision of high quality experiences which can shape children's development and later success in life. Leach & Trevarthen (2012) argue that:

> *Outcome studies are making it clear that the most important aspiration for any child is not precocious pre-academics at three or four or even excellent language at two but a secure attachment to parents or people who stand in for parents, from the very beginning and joyful companionship with them. ....From the start, a child is a creative person who responds with inventive expressions to live company. This is how knowledge of the human world ...is passed on, with the child as both learner and teacher, in a small, trustful community.*

(Nursery World, October 2012, p. 14-15)

A rich conceptualisation of children's learning has implications for the policies which will guide the sector: rather than perceiving the provision of the service as a means of simply minding and caring for young children, policies can focus on the long-term investment which early years' experiences foster, through education **and** care. To this end, and on the basis of findings from international literature reviews, the OECD (2012) (p.15) has identified five key policy levers to encourage quality in ECEC:

- *Policy Lever 1: Setting out quality goals and regulations*
- *Policy Lever 2: Designing and implementing curriculum and standards*

- *Policy Lever 3: Improving qualifications, training and working conditions*
- *Policy Lever 4: Engaging families and communities*
- *Policy Lever 5: Advancing data collection, research and monitoring*

Early Childhood Education and care policies: an international perspective

Early childhood education and care has captured the attention of most governments around the world. The OECD (2001) reports that:

> early childhood education and care has experienced a surge of policy attention in OECD countries over the past decade. Policy makers have recognised that equitable access to quality early childhood education and care can strengthen the foundations of lifelong learning for all children and support the broad educational and social needs of families (OECD, 2001, p. 7).

In their proposed framework for analysing early childhood development policies and programmes cross-nationally, Neuman and Devercelli (2013) identify a number of reasons which support the need for investing in early childhood development (ECD).

- *Experiences in early childhood shape the architecture and wiring of the brain;*
- *Investments in ECD can address early gaps in opportunity;*
- *Investments in ECD yield long-lasting high returns;*
- *As policymakers weigh the costs of investment in ECD, it is becoming increasingly clear that the potential returns far exceed costs;*
- *Investments in ECD have proven highly cost-effective and a wise use of limited Government resources;*
- *Investments in ECD can maximize both efficiency and equity; and*
- *The potential returns to investments in ECD extend beyond direct benefits to children, and ECD investments can help achieve a range of policy objectives.*

Internationally, early years policies which have developed are indeed varied reflecting the complex interplay of factors which impinge on this sector. In-depth analyses of provision and policies in 20 countries, suggest that there are four broad-based contextual challenges in the provision of child-care:

- *the rise of the service economy and the influx of women into salaried employment;*
- *the necessary reconciliation of work and family responsibilities in a manner more equitable for women;*
- *the demographic challenges of falling fertility and increased immigration, particularly in European countries; and*
- *the need to break the cycle of poverty and inequality that begins in early childhood.*

(OECD, 2006, p. 20)

In several contexts, rather than a specific policy which targets early childhood education, several policies exist which address but divide early years into 'child-care' and 'pre-school education'. This has led to a disregard of the developing child for whom the setting up of provision should be of utmost benefit. Since 'child-care' and 'pre-school education have had very different roots, this has led to inequalities and what Moss (2012) argues has led to a 'dysfunctional' and 'split system'. The separation between 'care' and 'education', which to date persists in several countries, leads to inequalities on a number of levels, especially when 'care' is associated with the welfare system and social policy whilst 'early education' is considered to be the remit of education. Moss (2012) articulates a list of difficulties, disadvantages and challenges which are caused by a split system resulting in a dysfunctional system with adverse effects on children, parents and workers in the field:

inequalities (in education and pay between teachers and childcare workers; in what parents pay for services; in gaining access to provision); divisiveness (some services for children of working parents, some for 'children in need', others providing education for over 3s); and discontinuities as children have to switch between sectors. The split encourages compartmentalised thinking and provision, and weakens the early childhood field overall, leaving it more open to 'schoolification', as the often conservative and narrowly focused school system pushes down on early childhood. The thread running through is a bad deal for under 3s and those who work with them, split systems leaving services for these children at a real disadvantage.

(Moss, Sept.2012, *Nursery World*)

Clearly, a split system does not contribute to a holistic understanding of early years and children's development during these years. Rather it perpetuates and reinforces divisions which are reflected at policy level, governance, access to the services, funding, regulation, overall quality provided, the curriculum and nature of the programme offered, staff training and qualifications.

Typically, the two sectors in these split systems are governed, in terms of policy making and administration, by social welfare and education ministries respectively, and are also structured in very different ways with respect to types of service, workforce, access criteria, funding and regulation (including curriculum). Given their distinct historical roots, 'childcare' and 'early education' services in these split systems embody different visions and understandings of children, programme goals, approaches and contents.

(Kaga, Bennett & Moss, 2010, p. 7)

The solution which a number of countries have adopted is one of administrative integration. In addition to the four Nordic countries, the OECD (2006) reports that countries such as Iceland, New Zealand, Slovenia and Spain have all integrated their early childhood services under one ministry. There are several advantages associated with having one lead ministry responsible for policy-making in the sector:

- *More coherent policy and greater consistency across sectors in terms of regulation, funding and staffing regimes, curriculum and assessment, costs and opening hours, in contrast to high fragmentation of policy and services.*
- *More effective investment in young children, and higher quality services for them. In a 'split' system, younger children are often defined primarily as dependent on parents or simply in need of child care services. ... their services have often to make do with insufficient investment, non-accredited child-minding and unqualified staff.*
- *Enhanced continuity of children's early childhood experiences as variations in access and quality are lessened under one ministry, and links at the services level – across age groups and settings – are more easily created.*
- *Improved public management of services, leading to better quality and greater access by parents.*

(OECD, 2006, p. 49)

Moss (2011) argues that integration can be seen as something of a continuum and a country could opt for partial integration although this is not recommended.

For full integration to be achieved, the following eight separate dimensions need to be attended to: a conceptual dimension and seven structural ones, including: policy making and administration, regulation, curriculum, access, workforce, type of provision, and funding.

Depending on the circumstances prevailing in any country, it would appear wise to approach the planning and realisation of a coherent, integrated and all-encompassing early years policy in a strategic manner.

> *In many countries, public policies remain deeply inadequate to provide all children with opportunities to fully develop and thrive. ECD presents a particular challenge to policymakers due to its multi-sectoral nature and the necessity of reaching a variety of stakeholders to influence outcomes. Despite the clear evidence of the benefits of investments in ECD, there is not an existing consensus on how policymakers can holistically design ECD policies. Yet, there is a growing body of evidence on what policies matter most for developing strong ECD systems.*
>
> Neuman and Devercelli (2013)

Early Childhood Education in Malta: a historical account

Section 1: Availability and provision of a divided service

Early years provision in the local context is divided into at least two distinct but invariably overlapping sectors: the non-compulsory sector, which is further sub-divided into two aspects - child-care for under three-year-olds and kindergarten (KG) for three to five-year-olds - and the first two years of compulsory primary education comprising five to seven-year-olds (NCF, 2013).
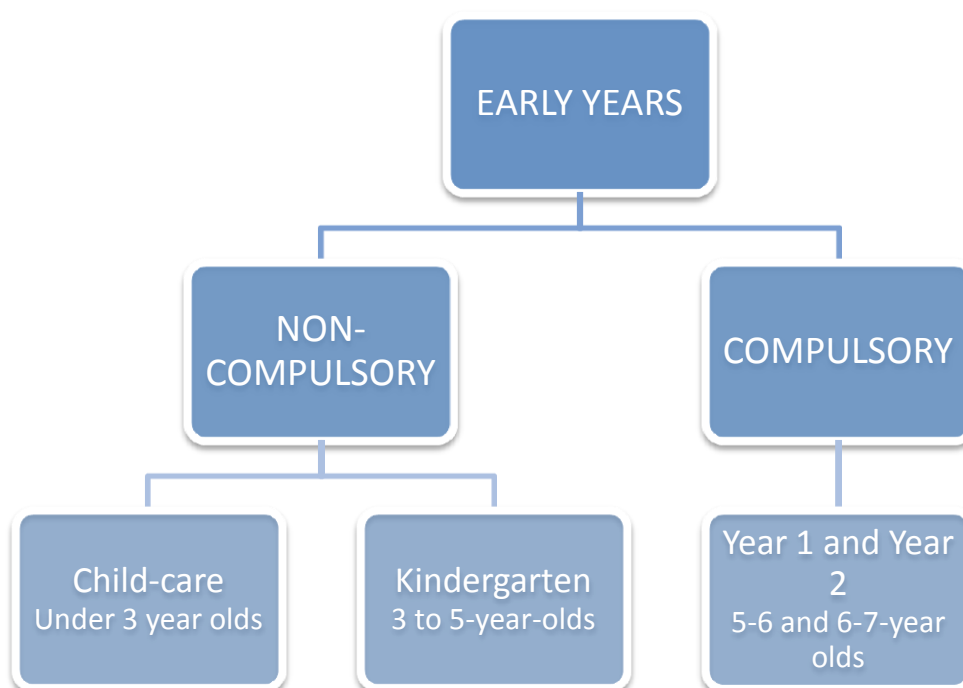
Figure 1: Early childhood education & care in Malta (2013)

Starting compulsory school age in the year a child turns five, places Malta amongst a small group of European countries where formal education starts early. According to Eurydice (2013) data, in the majority of European counties, compulsory education starts at the age of six. However, in several countries, pre-primary education (ISCED 0) is compulsory and children start school before it is mandatory.

Age	Country
4	Northern Ireland
5	Cyprus, England, Malta, Scotland, Wales
6	Austria, Belgium, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Republic of Ireland[9], Italy, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Switzerland, Turkey
7	Bulgaria, Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Serbia, Sweden

The split system between compulsory and non-compulsory sectors causes difficulties. Locally, the division of sectors according to children's ages, is especially problematic within the non-compulsory sector:

I.   Although child-care is associated with under-threes and KG settings are for three to five-year olds, and although *National Standards for Child Day Care Facilities* (2006) cater for children aged from birth to 36 months, since attendance is not obligatory in either sector, in reality children can be in child-care at any age until the year they turn five (see Table 3). On the other hand, admittance to KG is accepted only from the age of two-years nine months. This results in child-care settings enrolling children who fall under the responsibility of two different agencies; child-care is monitored by the Department of Social Welfare Standards (DSWS) within the Ministry for Social Policy; kindergarten falls under the remit of the Ministry of Education and Employment. This split leads to divergent understandings about children and their development and reinforces the divide between 'care' and 'education'.

	Number of child-care settings (N=69)	% of age group enrolled in settings
Less than 3 months	34	49.3
04 – 11 months	48	69.6
12-17 months	55	79.7
18-23 months	61	88.4
24-36 months	65	94.2
Three year olds	37	53.6
Accepting 4 year olds	20	29.0

Table 3 Age groups admitted at child-care settings in 2013 (N=69 settings) [6]

II.   To date, individuals or entities wanting to set-up a child-care centre are not obliged to apply for or obtain registration and therefore some settings could very well exist without any official status or monitoring. On the other hand, KG settings must be registered and licensed with the Education sector. This situation has arisen as a result of the unregulated and ad hoc manner in which child-care settings started to operate. This issue is of concern considering that if such unregistered settings exist, nothing is known about the safety, protection and practices with vulnerable children.

III.   The history and conceptualisation associated with child-care and KG is very different although both sectors address early years services. The former have had working parents as the target clients, thus viewing services as places where children can be cared for in a safe environment; the latter have been conceptualised as places where children socialise and prepare for school (Sollars, Attard, Borg & Craus, 2006, p. 24). This has led to a clear divide between 'care' and 'education' rather than a

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[5] (2013). Eurydice at NFER unit for England, Wales & Northern Ireland. *Compulsory age of starting school in European countries.* Available at:
http://www.nfer.ac.uk/shadomx/apps/fms/fmsdownload.cfm?file_uuid=3B48895C-E497-6F68-A237-BCD7AB934443&siteName=nfer

[6] The 69 child-care settings which provided the data represent 95% of the available settings. Data collected by the Research & Standards Development Unit (RSDU) within the Department of Social Welfare Standards (DSWS) (2013)

conceptualisation of the early years as a rich and continuous opportunity for 'educare'.

IV. Occupational standards (OS)[7] have recently been made available but whilst these are applicable to staff working in child-care settings they are not applicable to staff working at KG centres. Ironically, the OS document purports to cover child-care settings which accept children between the ages of 0 to 5 years, thus reinforcing the divide between the two sectors and the governing agencies.

These and other challenges related to a split sector will be elaborated further in subsequent parts of this document. They will be presented as arguments to support an integrated system referring to *early childhood education and care (ECEC).* This integrated system incorporates birth to seven-year-olds, as advocated in the National Curriculum Framework (NCF, 2012) and requires one entity to govern, monitor and regulate provision for the early years.

Types of KG settings

Within the public early years sector, provision for Kindergarten in Malta can be traced back to 1975 with the introduction of settings for four-year-old children and the downward extension of the service to include three-year-olds in 1988. Within the private sector, provision for kindergarten settings existed prior to 1975 predominantly through services offered by some religious orders. KGI and KGII became part of the terminology widely adopted to refer to children aged 3 to 4-years and 4 to 5-years respectively. KG provision is currently available within all State primary schools, most of the Independent schools and several Church schools. During the scholastic year 2012/2013, there were 105 KG settings in Malta and Gozo which were used by 8,360 three and four-year-old children. Registration and attendance are quite high (Table 5). According to EUROSTAT (July, 2013) Malta has reached 100% attendance level amongst four-year-olds.

	State	Church	Independent	TOTAL
Malta	51	17	19	87
Gozo	11	7	---	18
Total	**62**	**24**	**19**	**105**

Table 4 Number of pre-primary (KG) settings in 2012-2013[8]

	State	Church	Independent	TOTAL
Malta	5,913	573	1,320	7,806
Gozo	341	213	---	554
Total	**6,254**	**786**	**1,320**	**8,360**

Table 5 Number of children attending pre-primary (KG) schools 2012-2013

Whilst KG settings had always catered for three to five-year-old children, since the 2007 Government agreement with the Malta Union of Teachers (MUT)[9], Kindergarten services in the state sector started welcoming children from the age of two years nine months. This was done in a bid to iron out the transition difficulties arising from the practice of having three

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[7] (2013) *Occupational standards for child-care workers and managers in Malta*. Available at:
https://secure3.gov.mt/socialpolicy/admin/contentlibrary/Uploads/MediaFile/occupational_standards_child_care.pdf

[8] Source: DQSE

[9] (2007). Ministry of Education, Youth & Employment. *Agreement between the Government and Malta Union of Teachers.* Available at: http://www.schoolnet.gov.mt

intakes of children in every scholastic year: the first intake would occur in October and include children who would have already turned three; the second intake would occur in February, thus admitting children who would have turned three during the last three months of the previous year and the third intake would occur after Easter time, generally in April, for children who would have turned three during the first three months of the year. Considering that this last cohort would spend a very short time at Kindergarten during the scholastic year in which they would have been admitted, when schools re-opened in October for the subsequent scholastic year, they would remain with the three-year-olds and unhappily were even referred to as the 'repeaters'.

Availability, accessibility and affordability do not appear to be issues for families to enrol children at Kindergarten. The State-funded settings are attached to every primary school located in all the towns and villages in Malta and are free of charge. Nobody can be turned away from the State settings when parents register their children. Apart from State provision, KG settings are also available within Church and Independent school settings. Admission to the former is by ballot whilst admission to the latter requires formal application and registration. Making use of provision within Independent settings presupposes financial security and stability.

Irrespective of which sector provides the service, all KG settings have a standard ratio of one adult to 15 three-year-old children and one adult to twenty four-year-old children. These ratios are another issue to be considered and need to be re-visited especially in light of the literature and research findings which promote responsive adults as a key factor of quality programmes. Adults need to have time to give their undivided attention to children in their care, to communicate with them effectively and efficiently in a bid to respond to children's changing needs and interests.

The actual number of children registered at KG settings varies. Within the state sector, the size of the KG setting reflects the demographic characteristics of the town or village. Table 6 illustrates the variation in the size of settings which exists in the State sector. Data are taken from the largest and smallest settings in both Malta and Gozo to illustrate the variation. What is considered to be 'small' or 'average' in terms of early years school population in Malta is quite different to early years settings in Gozo.

The distribution of the early years school population in Independent and Church-run settings are provided in separate tables (Table 7 and Table 8 respectively). Several Church schools offer KG provision for four-year-olds only and tend to refer to this group as the 'pre-grade class'. Where KG provision is provided in the church sector, most settings are attached to schools which include the primary and/or secondary cycle.

		MALTA			GOZO		
		KG I (3-year-olds)	KG II (4-year-olds)	TOTAL	KGI (3-year-olds)	KG II (4- year-olds)	TOTAL
Small settings		13	7	**20**	2	7	**9**
		11	12	**23**	9	7	**16**
		20	14	**34**	9	8	**17**
		23	13	**36**	9	9	**18**
		16	21	**37**	14	14	**28**
Average-sized		29	31	**60**	16	24	**40**
		38	28	**66**	17	23	**40**
		35	40	**75**	27	19	**46**

	47	34	**81**	33	39	**72**
	54	45	**99**			
Large Settings	137	100	**237**			
	132	125	**257**			
	152	106	**258**			
	164	123	**287**			
	180	130	**310**			

Table 6 Distribution of children at KG settings within some State settings (2012/2013)

			Kinder I	Kinder II	TOTAL
KG services in schools which include primary & secondary cycles		School 1	78	89	**167**
		School 2	64	80	**144**
		School 3	93	103	**196**
		School 4	120	111	**231**
		School 5	32	22	**54**
		School 6	49	56	**105**
		School 7	24	11	**35**
		School 8	75	65	**140**
		School 9	15	17	**32**
KG services in schools with primary cycle only		School 1	52	36	**88**
		School 2	62	50	**112**
Independent KG settings. No school affiliations		KG setting 1	12	12	**24**
		KG setting 2	20	25	**45**
		KG setting 3	19		**19**
		KG setting 4	14	6	**20**
		KG setting 5	20	18	**38**
		KG setting 6	15	3	**18**
		KG setting 7	18	18	**36**

Table 7 Distribution of KG aged children in Independent settings (2012/2013) [10]

	KG Settings	**KGI**	**KGII**	**TOTALS**
Church -run KG settings in Gozo	Setting 1	25	24	49
	Setting 2	19	8	27
	Setting 3	23	23	46
	Annex to Setting 3	9	6	15
	Annex to Setting 3	4	7	11
	Annex to Setting 3	12	5	17
	Setting 7	20	26	48
s e t	Setting 1	16	----	15

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[10] There are no Independent schools in Gozo.

	Setting 2	14	19	33
	Setting 3	14	20	34
	Setting 4	14	18	32
	Setting 5	----	33	33
	Setting 6	15	18	33
	Setting 7 – girls only	----	39	39
	Setting 8 – boys only	----	54	54
	Setting 9 – girls only	----	36	36
	Setting 10 – girls only	----	38	38
	Setting 11 – girls only	----	18	18
	Setting 12 – girls only	----	20	20
	Setting 13 – girls only	----	36	36
	Setting 14 – girls only	----	18	18
	Setting 15 – girls only	----	36	36
	Setting 16	28	39	67
	Setting 17	14	17	31

Table 8 Distribution of KG aged children in Church-run schools in Malta & Gozo (2012/2013)[11]

Child-care settings

Since the late 1990s and over the past thirteen years or so, there has been an increase in child-day-care centres for under three-year-olds. The first early years policy document for Malta (Sollars et al., 2006) reported thirty-five child-care settings under-taking a gap-analysis exercise with the DSWS. The handful of child-care settings available in 2001 have now mushroomed into 59 fully-registered[12] child-care centres with a further 14 centres with a temporary registration, awaiting their provisional registration. Most of these centres will have obtained a provisional registration by the end of 2013. In what had been a largely unregulated sector, following the publication of the National Child-Day Care Standards (2006), the owners of child-care settings were invited, (but not obliged) to register their facility with the DSWS. To date, there remains no legal obligation to register a child-care facility with the result that there could be services in operation that are administratively 'invisible' and not subject to the monitoring undertaken by assessors from the DSWS.

Types of child-care services

Provision of child-care can be divided into five categories:

I. **Government-run settings**: Organised through the Foundation for Educational Services (FES), the first government child-care service started operating in 2001 and the remaining ones became available post-2007. To date 12 centres have been setup and run through FES.

II. **'Public' child-care services**: These are set-up and managed within public entities, are funded by the Government and used predominantly, but not exclusively by the employees of the entity. Currently, four such entities offer child-care services: the University of Malta, the Employment Training Corporation (ETC), the Malta College for Arts, Science & Technology (MCAST) and the Water

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[11] Several Church school settings are run by the same religious order: Settings 1 – 6, accepting boys & girls. Settings 9 & 10; settings 11 & 12; settings 13, 14 & 15; Setting 16 & 17, accepting boys & girls

[12] Fully-registered child-care settings are those which have obtained the provisional registration. In the absence of an appropriate or specific legal framework, there is no permanent registration for child-care centres.

Services Corporation. Subject to availability, three of the four services offer places to the general public once their own employees have been accommodated.

III. **Church-run child-care centres:** These were set up by religious communities and children are looked after by religious as well as by lay members of staff.

IV. **'Public-private-partnerships':** In some cases, the government has partnered with a private company to offer an affordable child-care service. To date, Government has provided the premises and a subsidy. The centres are managed as though they are private settings but rather than having parents pay the full-fees, these are subsidised by the government.

V. **Private set-ups**: Child-care settings have been and are predominantly run as independent, private business concerns. Prior to 2006, the centres were totally unregulated; the owners/managers had no specific training or qualifications in the early years sector and the work-force was largely unqualified, with owners/managers largely employing mothers considered to be good carers by virtue of having raised their own families (Sollars, 2002). No public entity was responsible for supporting, monitoring or assessing the quality of provision or service being provided. Some private settings are available within the larger Independent schools.

Table 9 provides an overview of the existing child-care centres which currently have a temporary or provisional registration by type of governance. The date column is indicative of the time when each setting achieved a provisional registration and does not equate to the year when the facility launched its operations. There is a six-month time lapse between being given a temporary and a provisional registration. Considering the number of settings available across the island, combined with the drop in birth rate (approximately 4,000 live births per annum) it would appear that supply is healthy and on the increase.

	Govt FES	Public	Church	Public-private partnerships	Private	TOTALS
2007	2	1	3		24	**30**[13]
2008					4	**4**
2009		3	1	3	2	**9**
2010					2	**2**
2011	4				2	**6**
2012	2				1	**3**
2013	4[14]				15[15]	**19**
TOTALS	**12** **16.4%**	**4** **5.5%**	**4** **5.5%**	**3** **4.1%**	**50** **68.5%**	**73** **100%**

Table 9 Distribution of child-day-care settings by management[16]

The majority of the child-care facilities are located within the Northern Harbour area with a substantial number of settings within the Southern Harbour region (Table 10)[17].

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[13] Some centres had been in operation for several years before seeking and getting the provisional registration with DSWS. The requirement to apply for provisional registration came about in 2006/2007, following the publication of the document *National Standards for Child Day-care facilities* published jointly by the Ministry for the Family & Social Solidarity and the Ministry of Education, Youth & Employment. Prior to this publication, the sector was totally unregulated.

[14] Includes two settings awaiting provisional registration.

[15] Includes 12 settings awaiting provisional registration

[16] DSWS & FES

	Southern Harbour	Northern Harbour	South Eastern	Western District	Northern District	Gozo
Govt FES	Birgu, Cospicua Floriana Marsa	B'Kara Pembroke St Venera Qormi San Gwann		Siggiewi	Qawra Naxxar	
PUBLIC	Luqa Paola	Msida	Hal Far			
CHURCH		Hamrun	Zejtun (2)		Mellieha	
PPP	Luqa Paola				Gharghur	
PRIVATE	Fgura (4) Tarxien Sta Lucija Luqa (2) Birgu	Pembroke (2) St. Julians Msida San Gwann (3) St Venera (3) Hamrun Sliema Swatar Gzira (2) B'Kara (2) Swieqi Qormi (2) Pieta' G'Mangia	Marsaskala Zurrieq (2) Zejtun B'Bugia	Balzan Attard (2) Zebbug Iklin	Burmarrad Mellieha Mgarr (2) Mosta Naxxar Qawra Gharghur	Gharb
TOTALS N=73	**17 23.3%**	**29 40%**	**8 11%**	**6 8.2%**	**12 16.4%**	**1 1.4%**

Table 10 Distribution of child-care centres across Malta and Gozo

The size of the settings varies. An indication of the variation in size of premises is given by data provided by FES (2013) for 11 of its 12 settings[18] as well as data collected by the RSDU within the DSWS (2013). Data collected from 69 of the 73 known settings, indicate that the minimum number of children in any one setting was two whilst the maximum stood at 118 children. The average number of children per centre was 33. Most childcare centres had 11-20 or 31-40 children registered with them; nine settings had between 1-10 children and five facilities had between 61-70 children in 2013. There was only one childcare centre which had around 118 registered children.

Patterns of service usage: accessibility and affordability

In spite of the availability of so many child-care centres, data about the number of children who regularly or frequently spend a reasonable length of time at the centre suggest that up-take and use made of the services is low and a far cry from the 33% proposed in the Barcellona (2002) targets. The indications are two-fold:

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[17] Localities are classified into districts according to the Malta Geographical Codes (MGC) as cited in *Demographic Review 2009* http://www.nso.gov.mt/statdoc/document_file.aspx?id=2840 and *Demographic Review 2010*. http://www.nso.gov.mt/statdoc/document_file.aspx?id=3173 published by the National Statistics Office.

[18] FES Centre 12 is not included since it started its operations recently and still building its capacity.

- Anecdotal evidence indicates that demand for child-care services seems to peak at certain hours of the day but demand for afternoon provision is lower although the services are open until late afternoon/early evening.
- The number of children registered in all settings as a % of the under-three-year olds born in Malta. Table 11 presents an approximate calculation on the basis of births recorded in 2009, 2010 and 2011 in comparison to the number of children registered at the various child-care settings.

Year of birth	Population	Children registered in child-care	
2009	4143 (actual)	2011	1500 (12.1%)
2010	4008 (actual)	2012	1778 (14.3%)
2011	4283 (actual)	2013	2279 (18.3%)
	12,434 (100%)		

Table 11 Uptake of available services as a % of population

This calculation is borne by data collected by the RSDU, DSWS & Caruana (2013). Questionnaires sent out to all mothers/female legal guardians currently making use of known[19] child-care services amounted to 2,261 families/children (April 2013). Distribution of children by type of child-care provision is shown in Table 12.

The setting up of systematic data gathering procedures to inform planning is crucial, especially where plans are being made to extend the sector and increase provision which ensures quality service for all children. If the current settings are under-utilised and take-up is low, what would be the purpose of setting up more child-care centres? Data are required to establish why settings are under-utilised. Is it because parents are availing themselves of family-friendly measures and thus finding a balance between their employment and family demands? Is there a lack of trust in putting children in child-care? Is there lack of knowledge or information about the benefits which good quality service can provide for young children, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds or who are at risk? Is child-care expensive and parents do not or cannot appreciate the benefit of investing in child-care?

Govt FES setting		Public + Church settings		Public private partnerships		Private		TOTAL	
N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
506	22.4	56	2.5	217	9.6	1482	65.5	2,261	100

Table 12 Distribution of children by child-care management

Availability and supply of services need to be matched by the affordability and the demand for these services. Considering that there are over 500 children on a waiting list expecting to be admitted to a service, would suggest that supply is not sufficient. However, in light of the fact that close to 80% of the waiting list rests with government-funded settings (Table 13), it would appear that the issue is one of affordability and not simply one of availability or supply according to the demand.

Sector offering service	Number of registered children		Children on a waiting list	
FES	484	21.2%	472	79.6%

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[19] Child care settings which have a provisional or temporary registration.

	47	34	**81**	33	39	**72**
	54	45	**99**			
Large Settings	137	100	**237**			
	132	125	**257**			
	152	106	**258**			
	164	123	**287**			
	180	130	**310**			

Table 6 Distribution of children at KG settings within some State settings (2012/2013)

			Kinder I	Kinder II	TOTAL
KG services in schools which include primary & secondary cycles		School 1	78	89	**167**
		School 2	64	80	**144**
		School 3	93	103	**196**
		School 4	120	111	**231**
		School 5	32	22	**54**
		School 6	49	56	**105**
		School 7	24	11	**35**
		School 8	75	65	**140**
		School 9	15	17	**32**
KG services in schools with primary cycle only		School 1	52	36	**88**
		School 2	62	50	**112**
Independent KG settings. No school affiliations		KG setting 1	12	12	**24**
		KG setting 2	20	25	**45**
		KG setting 3	19		**19**
		KG setting 4	14	6	**20**
		KG setting 5	20	18	**38**
		KG setting 6	15	3	**18**
		KG setting 7	18	18	**36**

Table 7 Distribution of KG aged children in Independent settings (2012/2013) [10]

	KG Settings	**KGI**	**KGII**	**TOTALS**
Church -run KG settings in Gozo	Setting 1	25	24	49
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	Setting 3	23	23	46
	Annex to Setting 3	9	6	15
	Annex to Setting 3	4	7	11
	Annex to Setting 3	12	5	17
	Setting 7	20	26	48
s e t	Setting 1	16	----	15

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[10] There are no Independent schools in Gozo.

the basis of the parents' convenience, (b) in the best interest of the child, (c) depending on the quality of the provision, or on (d) the basis of financial considerations?

	Employed		In education or training		Inactive		Unemployed		Missing data	Totals
Govt FES	181	70.2%	15	5.8%	23	8.9%	39	15.1%	0	258
PPP	69	79.3%	2	2.3%	9	10.3%	6	6.9%	1	87
Private[20]	463	73.5%	19	3.0%	87	13.8%	49	7.8%	12	630
Totals (Averaged)	73.1%		3.7%		12.2%		9.6%		1.3%	975

Table 15 Employment patterns of mothers using child-care services

An indication of the range of fees charged for services is provided in Section 2 below. It is important to note that all parents are entitled to a tax rebate on payments effected to child-care services as long as they are availing themselves of registered child-care settings (LN. 466[21], 2010).

The issue of supply and demand is of concern although it does not necessarily imply that there is or indeed there should be a simple relationship. From a children's rights perspective, places for all eligible children should be available and accessible. However, it must also be expected that there will be fluctuations in use of the services for a variety of reasons, namely:

I. Parents need to be able to make a real, rather than a perceived choice between looking after their very young children or making use of child-care settings. Parents must comfortably take a decision on whether they want to use formally approved child-care for their children or look after the children themselves, with or without the help of the extended family or other personal arrangements. If parents are to have a real choice, there should be options with strong family-friendly measures to support those who want to be with their children.

II. Parents must be convinced and educated to weigh the short and long-term benefits for children from participation in high quality child-care settings. The dilemma here is identifying and agreeing on what constitutes quality early years provision which promotes the well-being and development of children.

III. Affordability: whether parents can afford to have children in child-care or whether it is less expensive to give up employment and look after children at home is a particularly delicate issue as parents need to weigh the costs of child-care vs the family income.

IV. Amongst families who want to avail themselves of child-care, undoubtedly some would prefer to make use of the services in a flexible manner. Current information on patterns of usage within FES settings indicates this is a preferred option for many families. Services are not utilised to their maximum capacity all the time; although these settings are open from 07.30 until 16.00, very few families make use of the services after 14.00.

Government subsidised child-care settings deserve special attention in light of the developing situation. Although there are children on the waiting list in all FES settings (Table 16), thus supply appears not to be meeting demand, a senior member of the organisation

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[20] Private, church & public provision are grouped.

[21] LN 466 of the Income Tax Act (Cap. 123)
http://www.justiceservices.gov.mt/DownloadDocument.aspx?app=lp&itemid=21546&l=1

claims that six of the twelve settings have the capacity to admit more children and employ more carers.

Admission procedures ought to be reconsidered. If several centres can admit more children and employees, and there are children on a waiting list, the obvious solution would be to employ more practitioners in the sector and admit more children. Yet the current situation does not allow this since the number of staff that can be employed is dependent on the central budget allocated by the Government to each centre. This has resulted in a cumbersome system whereby FES has a list of criteria which is applied to each applicant to determine who will be admitted and how frequently each child/family can avail themselves of the programme.

FES childcare services are offered to children, aged between 3 months and 3 years, whose parents:

- work, or intend to return to work to improve their financial situation, or study or are in training;
- need respite due to family situation (e.g. health issues);
- work within or close to the locality;
- live within the College localities where the settings are located or where the authorized persons who pick up the children live;

and to children who:

- can benefit from spending time in the centre due to family circumstances;

- have developmental delays (e.g. communication needs) and need more individual attention before starting kindergarten (professionals are to submit a brief report when referring clients for childcare service)

So whilst selection criteria exist, although not applied in any particular order or weighting, given the restrictions on the number of practitioners that can be employed, a final judgement has to be made on who to admit and the number of days each child can spend at the setting each week. Thus, not all families can avail themselves fully of the service because this depends on whom they are competing with/against at application stage. A family might want to use the service 5 days a week but because of other exigencies (e.g. other 'more-deserving' children; ratios etc.), the setting would only be able to accommodate them, say, for 2 or 3 days a week. Prior to final decisions being communicated to the parents, the latter would have been invited by FES managers to discuss with them whether they have other networks (such as extended families) who can co share in the caring of the child. FES argues that in this way instead of helping one family FES could help two. However, when the family has no network whatsoever, a five day week placement is given. This seems to be a clear example of offering a service in order to accommodate the needs of the parents and discriminates against children by denying them maximum benefit that can be accrued through high quality programmes and services.

	Number of carers	Number of children attending setting[22]	Children on a waiting list
Centre 1	7	46	50
Centre 2	4	36	29
Centre 3	5	36	56
Centre 4	7	53	60
Centre 5	5	29	24

[22] Averaged over six months attendance

Centre 6	8	47	53
Centre 7	8	62	43
Centre 8	5	39	62
Centre 9	7	53	17
Centre 10	6	53	39
Centre 11	7	30	39
TOTAL	**69**	**484**	**472**

Table 16 Data re children and carers at FES centres

Such a system is a technicist response to a problem that instead requires a principled solution. The correct solution should be one that responds to the needs of children and families rather than simply contain a bureaucratic/administrative problem.

Section 2: Funding

Funding – KG settings

State Kindergarten settings are attached to primary schools and therefore funding is distributed directly to schools by the Education Directorate on a *per capita* basis. There are no specific budgets allocated for KG settings either at Directorate or at the school operational level. Funds cover *Capital costs*; *Maintenance & Supplies*; *Repair & Upkeep*. The distribution of specific funds to the KG sector depends on particular school projects or the business plan set by the school and according to needs as determined by the school administration.

Independent settings are funded through established fees paid by parents. Details of term fees charged during scholastic year 2012/2013 are presented in Table 17. Independent schools are obliged by law to keep the Education Directorate informed about the amounts they charge. They are also obliged to notify the Education Directorate about any changes in these fees prior to implementing them. Fund raising activities may also be organized by schools from time to time.

Independent schools are eligible to apply for refunds under two specific schemes. These are the *'Per Capita Grant Scheme'* (2012)[23] and the '*Capital Expenditure 15.25% Grant Scheme'* (2012)[24]. The *per capita* assistance for every KG child at an independent school amounts to €95 annually and is in force until the end of 2014. Higher per capita allocations are assigned to children in primary and secondary education. The Capital expenditure scheme is in force until the end of 2017. The reimbursement of salaries of Learning Support Assistants (LSAs) and of Supply Learning Support Assistants (SLSAs) in independent schools, including KGs, is covered by recurrent vote expenditure.

Church KG settings may accept private donations from parents and other philanthropists although they are supported financially by the State in accordance with the agreement between the Holy See and the Republic of Malta (1991). Reimbursement of salaries was an integral part of the 1991 Church-State agreement. Church schools' (including KGs) entitlement to resources was more clearly delineated through a document/agreement signed in July 2011. Similarly to Independent schools, Church schools are also entitled to

[23] Government Gazzette, 27th July 2012: *Per capita assistance to independent schools related to services and facilities required for the implementation of educational reforms for all children to succeed. http://www.doi-archived.gov.mt/EN/gazetteonline/2012/07/gazts/GG%2027.7.pdf*
[24] Government Gazzette, 22nd June 2012: *Assistance to church & independent schools related to capital expenditure in the implementation of educational reforms for all children to succeed. http://www.doi-archived.gov.mt/EN/gazetteonline/2012/06/gazts/GG%2022.6.pdf*

apply for a grant of 15.25% for expenses incurred on works of a capital nature. Church schools organise fund-raising activities from time to time.

		Kinder I FEES per term (€)	Kinder II FEES per term (€)
KG services in independent schools which include primary & secondary cycles	School 1	552	552
	School 2	381	621
	School 3	657	657
	School 4	455	455
	School 5	370	370
	School 6	510	555
	School 7	380	380
	School 8	410	530
	School 9	n/a	n/a
KG services in schools with primary cycle only	School 1	305	305
	School 2	355	370
Independent KG settings. No school affiliations	KG setting 1	500	500
	KG setting 2	450	450
	KG setting 3	450	
	KG setting 4	430	430
	KG setting 5	380	380
	KG setting 6	320	320
	KG setting 7	300	300

Table 17 Fees charged per term at Independent KG settings (2012/2013)

Funding – child-care settings[25]

Child-care centres employ different prices and payment frequencies, having hourly, weekly, monthly and/or term rates. The structure of the service provision is evident in the fees, with differences in pricing reflecting management and ownership of the settings.

The Government-run FES centres offer rates which are means-tested, based on family income. Rates range from a completely free service (for families whose income does not exceed €10,000) to €150 monthly (for families whose income is over €19,000). Rates are calculated per day of attendance and do not vary according to the number of hours for which the child attends. The average monthly cost is €86.25.

Church-run centres aim to provide child care which is affordable for people of all incomes. Three of the four centres charge a monthly rate (average €73.33 monthly). One centre charges €2 per hour. At all Church-run facilities the price is reduced for children of low-earners, resulting in a range of fees from €2.00 per hour to as little as 18 cents per hour. Sometimes, children are also able to participate free of charge.

Of the seven centres managed through public entities (4) or through public-private partnership (3), one setting has a term fee of €370; the remaining six settings charge hourly fees. The average hourly fee in these centres is €1.67. These child day care facilities also

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[25] Specific data about fees in child-care settings was provided by the RSDU.

offer other discounts and packages. Divided on an hourly basis, Government subsidised centres have fees which range from 38cents to €2.14 per hour. Government supports public-private partnerships by paying the sum of €60,000 to these entities and in return they have to charge a fixed price decided by government.

Private facilities are driven by market forces, and thus fees vary depending on several variables, such as the location of the centre and the household income of the target client group. Some childcare facilities (n=11) have a flat, hourly rate which parents pay at the end of the month, depending on actual childcare centre usage. These hourly rates vary from a minimum of €1.72 to a maximum of €4.70 (modal hourly fee is €2.00). However, most childcare centres offer different pre-paid packages, whereby families can benefit from cheaper rates if purchasing a bundle of services in advance (the higher the number of hours in the bundle the lower the hourly cost).

Weekly, fees are charged at two centres: €62.48 in one setting, €238.50 in another setting and a monthly rate of €244 in yet another setting. Thirteen settings charge fees per term. The minimum set fee is €315 whilst the maximum term fee is €504. On average, term fees amount to €396.21. Hourly rates (whether pre or post-paid) within the private sector range from €1.13 to €4.70 per hour (for one-off hours).

Table 18 provides a summary of the funding mechanisms for the different child-care settings.

FES	Public	Church	Public-private partnerships	Private
Funded almost entirely by Government: (premises; maintenance; salaries of staff; purchase of equipment)	Funded by funds of entity to which the centre belongs. Considered 'public' as these entities have a direct line budget.	Subsidised by church.	Run as a private entity but partially subsidised by the government. Government pays difference between 'reduced' fee and 'real' fee charged by the private enterprise.	No government funding.
Parents pay a fee. Fees are means tested. Fees account for 12% of recurrent expenditure.	Parents pay fees which do not cover the costs of running the centre. Fees set by entity.	Fees set by entity.	Parents pay reduced fees.	Fees set by entity and covered exclusively by parents.

Table 18 Summary of financing models in child-care settings

On the basis of Government financial estimates, Government expenditure on childcare in 2013 is equivalent to 0.02% of the GDP whilst expenditure on Kindergarten in 2010, on the basis of Eurostats, was 0.5% of the GDP. This discrepancy is yet another reason for considering the integration of early years services, with a view to improving the funding and subsidies more equitably across the entire sector. One of ten international benchmarks towards quality in early years recommends that Governments spend 1% of the GDP on early years services (Adamson, 2008).

Section 3: Governance, Regulation and Monitoring of the sectors

Regulation and monitoring in KG settings

KG settings forming part of State, Church or Independent schools are governed and monitored by the Directorate for Quality Standards in Education (DQSE) which is responsible for all schools at all levels. The Directorate for Educational Services (DES) is responsible for education services at all levels in the State sector only. The Secretariat for Catholic Education has its own Directorate for Educational Services in Church schools. Independent schools are autonomous and each school has its own governing board and/or administrative set-up.

Having KG centres attached to primary schools has certainly had the effect of extending 'schoolification' to the younger years. KG settings share the same length of day as primary schools: in the State and Church sectors they open for approximately six hours a day. Within the Independent sector, KG settings are open for shorter hours, generally three to three and a half hours. Some private settings offer extended services against additional payment. KG settings follow the school calendar and share the same holidays as older children. Having children in settings until noon, 12.30 or 14.30 raises employment issues for families where both parents work or where single-parent families are trying to maintain full-time employment whilst raising their family.

KG-aged children are in separate groups; a maximum of 15 three-year-olds constitute a classroom whilst a maximum of 20 four-year-olds make up a classroom among the older cohorts. In most Church and to a lesser extent Independent settings, academic work is promoted and four-year-olds have several workbooks, worksheets and topics to cover. Within the state sector, there seems to be more emphasis on play although practices promoting formal exposure to phonics and recognition of numbers are also promoted. The Early Years Unit within the Curriculum Management and e-Learning Department (CMeLD) strives to ensure that all children within Kindergarten classes are provided with quality education. This entails providing support and guidelines to School Heads and kindergarten assistants (KGAs) within schools.

Early Years Education Officers (EOs) conduct routine visits within KG settings, to support, advise and monitor the work of KGAs. Education Officers conduct in-class visits to assess identified KGAs and evaluate their practice depending on requests by Directors. Confirmation visits are regularly conducted at the end of the probationary period. However, the frequency of monitoring routine visits by EOs in Kindergarten classes is determined by the amount of time available due to other work commitments.

Regulation and monitoring of events, activities and experiences within KG settings largely depends on the governance of the school, the understanding of and objectives for early years as set by the school administration together with the expectations of parents. Practices and expectations vary across State, Church and Independent settings, as well as within sectors. This situation has arisen partly due to historical reasons: KG settings did not always form part of the Ministry of Education but started out as the responsibility of the Ministry for Social Policy. Consequently, although located in schools, KG staff were very much left to its own devices, with very little or no direct monitoring or guidance from the school administration. Even when KG became the responsibility of the Ministry of Education, the school administration was not in a strong position to support KG staff because the majority of Heads and Assistant Heads in schools were trained and had taught in the compulsory school sector and therefore, were ill-equipped to judge or give advice about what constitutes good practice in early years settings.

Regulation and monitoring in child-care settings

Irrespective of how they are funded, all registered child-care settings are monitored by the DSWS within the Ministry for the Family & Social Solidarity. The DSWS consists of a team of professionals, including individuals who have a social work background. Presently the team is made up of five assessors and a manager. Qualifications vary from holders of a first degree in social policy, social work, youth work and individuals in possession of a Masters degree in regulation, inspection and improvements, social research, social policy.

The responsibilities of the assessors include:

- providing assessment of settings when an application is submitted for temporary and provisional registration;
- renewal of the childcare registration with DSWS;
- providing consultation for MEPA on new childcare projects;
- investigation of complaints made by parents or other stakeholders;
- carrying out annual inspections in compliance with National Standards for Child Day Care Facilities (2006).

In light of the mandate given to the DSWS in the National Standards for Child Day Care Facilities (2006), the Welfare Services Assessment Unit (WSAU) within the said Department has been entrusted with the monitoring/inspection process of child day-care facilities for children aged 0-3.

Each childcare facility is annually inspected for compliance with the National Standards for Child Day Care Facilities (2006). Trends and development in the childcare sector for children 0-3years are monitored through announced and unannounced inspections, assessments and administrative procedures.

The applied monitoring/inspection process aims at:

- collecting data/information on the sector – to be able to suggest policy direction to government about trends and developments in the sector;
- helping service providers apply and implement set standards;
- ensuring that service provision is of high quality for the children and the parents making use of such services;
- Investigating complaints about childcare services for the under-threes from parents and the general public.

The approach adopted during the inspection process is guided by the following principles:

- making sure that the best interests and well-being of the children using childcare services are being met;
- promoting objectivity and consistency in line with set standards, legislation and regulation;
- gathering evidence-based information;
- ensuring fairness and confidentiality in dealing with and handling information relevant to the inspection process.

Each service provider is given a report of the findings of the inspection highlighting good practices adopted by the service and providing direction on areas for improvement. Data collected are further analysed by the RSDU of the same Department which serves to observe trends and project future directions in the sector.

In spite of the laudable attempts made to monitor and regulate the service, the academic background and qualifications of the assessors as well as their location within the social welfare sector, positions the childcare sector firmly within the 'care' aspect. In the

circumstances, little attention can be given to the 'education' which is on-going and which requires immediate attention to ensure good quality provision, especially for children who are at-risk or coming from dysfunctional family backgrounds. It is therefore strongly recommended that governance and monitoring of the sector be transferred to the Ministry of Education.

The assessment visits which are conducted by assessors from DSWS as well as reports which are drawn up, concentrate on compliance of the settings with national standards as had been stipulated in the 2006 document. This focus and emphasis is evident throughout the reports regularly compiled by the DSWS and the RSDU. Several documents which were made available for this paper include:

- two reports on the *Workforce Mapping Survey in Child Day Care Facilities* (2011) and (2012) to identify the extent of compliance to Standard 1;
- a report of carer to child ratios as stipulated in Standard 1 (2012);
- As part of the Department's inspection process in 2012 for all registered child day care facilities, all the facilities were requested to submit a copy of the plan of the child care premises verified by an architect and indicating requirements as stipulated in Standard 2 (2.1.1) of the National Standards i.e.: a) number of children the facility can accommodate as per space allowance of 5sqm per child; (b) outside play area is least 20% of the total space.
- a draft report on the *Affordability of Childcare Centres: a comparison between 2011 and 2013* data.
- a report of the implementation of Standard 6 of the National Standards for Child Day Care Facilities (2006): *An opinion survey among parents whose children attended child day care facilities in August-September 2012* (June 2013).
- a draft/work-in-progress report about *Care, Learning and Play* (2012) in line with Standard 5.

To date very limited data have been collected and no research undertaken at a national level to investigate the nature and quality of the experiences children and their families go through whilst making use of child-care services. Standard 5 and Standard 6 of the ten identified national standards focus specifically on *Care, Learning and Play* and *Working in Partnership with Parents*. Narrative research and observational studies across settings have yet to indicate results about the quality of practice, the nature of interaction and communication between the carers and the children in their care, the range of experiences being provided, the self-reflective stance of the practitioners and their own direct observations of the children in their care as a means of assessing their personal practice, listening to children's voices and addressing children's needs through subsequent modification of activities. In a case-study conducted within a local child-care setting and which focused on understanding of quality issues, Psaila (2009) concluded that,

> although the stakeholders' perceptions of quality reflect quality indicators identified in the literature, the adults are far from acknowledging children's agency in their own learning. Whilst the children in the study manifested highest levels of involvement and well-being in self-initiated activities, quality indicators such as children controlling their own learning and their participation rights tend to be overlooked. Practitioners' beliefs on quality were not reflected in their practice. Although the centre promotes several quality indicators such as learning through play and ample aesthetic and outdoor experiences, the centre falls short in engaging in professional development of practitioners, reflective practice and viewing children as individuals who can think and act for themselves. The management acknowledges that early childhood education is

an on-going process and there is always room for improvement but seem to fall short of taking proper action because of lack of direction.

The opinion-survey distributed to 1828 parents/families across 53 childcare settings (RSDU, 2012) had a 33.2% response rate with 608 questionnaires being completed. One major restriction of questionnaires as a means of collecting data from potentially large samples or populations, concerns the nature of the questions asked as well as the variation in perceptions and understandings of respondents. Whilst the overall perception of parents about the facility of their choice is positive (*parents believe that the staff members within child care centres keep all information about the family and the child confidential (99.46%); follow parents' instructions regarding child collection (99.32%) and help both parents and children to settle down within the centre (98.68%); parents feel welcome at the facility (98.35%), and feel that they have the opportunity to speak with the facility's staff on a daily basis (98.5%)*) there is very little, by way of information, about parents' knowledge about the nature of the activities, the complementary roles between home and childcare setting, the organisation of the day or even the value of participating in events and activities with other children and adults. Whilst 88.9% strongly agree/agree that the carers/manager support the family and the child in his/her transition to kindergarten or to some other educational facility, there is no way of knowing what transition policies are in place or even specifically how families and children are supported with the transition. Further data suggest that parents need to be more knowledgeable about what to expect and demand of child-care settings. Of the 608 respondents, only 44 parents suggested that there should be more tracking of child development and sharing of such information with parents; five mentioned the need *to know more about what the child is doing at the centre* and four parents expect there should be m*ore educational learning / basic learning (alphabet, numbers, and colours)*.

As a result of having assessors who predominantly have social work or social policy as their own initial training, a narrow vision about expectations for achievements in the early years is projected. Assessment of and support for early years practitioners and their practices need to incorporate the expert views of different professionals in order to reflect the complexity of the early years.

> Early childhood professionals bring diverse cultural, educational and social backgrounds and specialisations that include early childhood education, health, social and emotional development, special education, occupational therapy, speech pathology, psychology and inclusion support. No early childhood professional is able to support children's learning, development and health alone, and all professionals are responsible for seeking opportunities to work in partnership.
>
> (Flottman, McKernan, Tayler, 2011, p. 5)

Staff working in early years settings need strong support from individuals who have in-depth and varied training in early years, are knowledgeable about evolving theories and latest research findings which impact on good practice. Early years expertise at administration level is still required to support practitioners in recognising good practice and being able to apply their understanding, knowledge and skill in the day-to-day organisation of the child-care settings. Having support structures and personnel available is even more important in a situation where staff qualifications are minimal or non-existent.   Flottman, McKernan and Tayler (2011) argue that best practice can be achieved where early childhood professionals:

- communicate positively with one another to support children's learning and development;
- work collaboratively by planning and sharing information with each other;
- share a common goal in supporting the learning and development of children;

- respect and value the expertise of their peers, and know when to make referrals; and
- are committed to working together to advance knowledge about children's learning and development

Section 4: Staff training and qualifications

Early years services have developed in a rather ad-hoc and staccato manner over the years. There has never been a well-thought out, all-encompassing strategic policy for the early years, particularly for the under-fives. In addition to the difficulties arising from having a split system as outlined thus far, anomalies exist in connection with staff training and qualifications. Five aspects deserve consideration:

I.   the entry qualifications of individuals who are accepted to follow the courses;
II.   the level accredited to the recognised courses;
III. the accreditation procedures;
IV.   the content of the courses in relation to current research and understanding about young children and their development; and
V.   the on-going professional development of staff working in the sector.

To date, there has never been any clear direction about initial qualifications and training which are mandatory for practitioners to be eligible to work with young children. Courses have been developed and are becoming accredited after early years provision has been established. This state of affairs reflected the perceptions that early years education was akin to baby-sitting and being a mother was a sufficient qualification to be employed in early years settings (Sollars, 2002). A rationalisation of existing and prospective courses is highly recommended.

Staff training and qualifications for KG personnel

Academic entry requirements of staff working in the early years have always been low. Ever since KG settings were established, applicants aspiring to the post of KGAs required a pass at the Ordinary level with certification in 4 'O' levels, including Math, English and Maltese. During the initial years after the setting up of the sector, staff training was provided on the job predominantly during the first six to eight weeks[26].

Between 1991 and 2003, the Education Division offered a two-year full-time course leading to a pre-school certificate. The course focused on working with three- to five-year-olds. Although the two-year course had a regular annual intake of about 30 students and therefore over a span of ten years, about 300 students were awarded the certificate, at the time the national policy in early years was drawn up (Sollars et. al., 2006), of the 387KG assistants who were then employed within the state sector, only 14 of the KG assistants were in possession of this certification. Some KGAs who had completed the two-year course found employment in the Church or Independent sector; others moved out of the early years scene. Some furthered their studies through a University degree leading to teaching; others followed diploma courses to support children with special needs. No data is in hand to establish the career paths of these students.

The majority of KGAs still in employment in the State sector have been employed since 1975 or 1988 when successive Governments launched services for four-year-olds and extended them to three-year-olds. Very recently, an up-skilling course for KGAs in State schools was

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[26] Details about the setting up of KG settings and training of KG assistants are available in Sollars, V., Attard, M., Borg, C. & Craus, B. (2006). *Early childhood education & care: A National Policy*. Floriana: Ministry of Education, Youth & Employment.

held. This followed from a Memorandum of Understanding between the DES and Malta Union of Teachers (MUT)[27] which stipulated:

- an assimilation exercise of **unqualified** KGAs posted in state schools into grade of KGAII to be carried out on a voluntary basis; and
- The phasing out of the grade of KGA.

DES and DQSE agreed with MUT that all state KGAs in charge of a kindergarten group of children should be assimilated into the grade of KGAII provided they followed and successfully completed a training programme approved by DES and DQSE and delivered by MCAST. Three courses were offered for:

- KGAs who had 30 or more complete scholastic years accumulated service. They were invited to attend a 70 hour training programme. Of the 54 participants, 47 were certified[28].
- KGAs who had between 20 and 29 complete scholastic years accumulated service were invited to attend a 140 hour training programme. Of the 161 participants, 145 were certified.
- KGAs who had between 15 and 19 complete scholastic years accumulated service were invited to attend a 210 hour training programme. Of the 59 participants, 47 were certified.

Successful participants were awarded a certificate and assimilated into the grade of KGAII. The content of the up-skilling courses varied according to the years of service and included issues related to Early Childhood Education namely learning theories, developmental stages, numeracy, literacy, outdoor play and special needs.

The two-year certificate course offered by the then Education Division was phased out and since 2003, has been replaced by a two-year full-time course which has been pegged to Level 4 by the Malta Qualifications Council (MQC). This course is offered by the Malta College for Arts, Science & Technology (MCAST) which is the leading vocational training institution in Malta. 'O' level entry requirements are still requisites for the MCAST National Diploma course[29] . Therefore applicants for the KG courses have the compulsory school-leaving certificate/qualification as their base level of education. In some instances individuals applying for these courses also possess 'A' level certificates.

The BTEC-MCAST programme is the route which secures employment in kindergarten settings, if it includes an extended training programme. MCAST programmes, based on the BTEC syllabus have developed as follows (Table 19):

MCAST-BTEC National Diploma	Years when available	Number of students
...in Early Years	2003-2007: five cohorts	97
... in Children's care, learning and development	2008-2012: three cohorts	134
... in Children's Play, Learning and Development	2013 -	

Table 19 Early years courses offered by MCAST

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[27] Director General Circular dated 26th May 2009 Ref DES/DQSE/01/2009: Memorandum of Understanding Between The Government of Malta and the Malta Union of teachers

[28] MCAST has an 80% attendance clause. Any candidate who falls below this threshold cannot be certified.

[29] http://www.mcast.edu.mt/MainMenu/Full-TimeCourses/CoursesbyInstitute/InstituteOfCommunityServices/Courses.aspx?CourseID=924

MCAST is also offering the two-year full-time Higher National Diploma (HND) in early years. To date, 231 students have completed the BTEC Diploma courses and 7 students have completed the HND programme. No tracer study has yet been conducted to find out the career paths of these students.

According to information provided by the DQSE, when recruiting KGAs 'qualified' personnel are considered to be those who are:

in possession, or have been approved for the award, of a recognised Diploma, at MQF level 4, in Early Childhood Education and Care that includes a component of Training Practice (including the Extended Training Programme organised by the Education Directorates in collaboration with MCAST), or a recognised appropriate comparable qualification including qualifications in pre-school education or pre-school childcare 0-5 years at MQF level 4. Qualifications at a level higher than that specified above will be accepted for eligibility purposes, provided they meet any specified subject requirements[30].

Whilst it is positive to note that qualifications accredited with a level higher than 4 are accepted, it is also clear that currently, there is:

- no reference to undergraduate qualifications as a minimal level qualification;
- no stepped plan on raising the qualifications of staff who hold a Level 4 qualification; and
- no plan which could potentially map out the career paths of different employees within the sector depending on the level of the qualifications which will be pegged to the different roles.

Data about qualifications of staff working within KG settings in the three sectors are somewhat sketchy and should be interpreted with caution (Table 20). Data provided by the Directorate came with a caveat that not all information might be available as this depends on what individuals complete in their staff form. The qualifications data for staff in the Church and Independent sectors need following-up as generic information is included (example, 'diploma in childcare'; 'certificate in childcare' without any information about the accrediting body or level of the course).

	State sector		Church sector		Independent sector	
	Regular	Supply	Regular	Supply	Regular	Supply
Pre-school education[31]	61	1	16		13[32]	2
MCAST-BTEC			12	2	10	1
Other qualifications related to early years[33]	1		13	1	31	4
TOTALS with qualifications	**62 (12.8%)**	**1**	**41 (71%)**	**3**	**54 (53%)**	**7**
Qualifications not related to early years	4			1		1

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[30] Post of KINDERGARTEN ASSISTANT II in the Directorate for Educational Services (DES), May 2012
[31] No title specified (pre-voc certificate; MCAST-BTEC etc.)
[32] Reference made to 'KG course'. Assumed to be pre-school KG course offered between 1991-2003.
[33] Especially for Independent but also within Church KG settings, data needs to be verified as a variety of names are attributed to courses of varying levels including Level 2, 3, 4. These figures include references to generic 'certificate' or 'diploma in childcare' without any mention of accrediting body or specific title of award.

No qualifications	420[34]	57	17	5	48	9
TOTALS without any/relevant qualifications	**424 (87.2%)**	**57**	**17 (29%)**	**6**	**48 (47%)**	**10**
OVERALL TOTALS	**486**	**58**	**58**	**9**	**102**	**17**
	544[35]		**67**		**119**	

<p align="center">**Table 20 Qualifications of staff working with 3 to 5-year-olds**</p>

Of 486 KG assistants currently employed in the State sector, 62 (12.8%) are in possession of a qualification listed as "pre-school education"; one person has a Masters degree in Early Childhood and four individuals are in possession of qualifications in other areas of interest (for example, an M.A. in Creativity & Innovation; a Diploma in Facilitating Inclusive Education). In addition to the 486 KG assistants, the state sector employs a further 58 supply KG assistants[36], one of whom is in possession of the pre-school certification[37].

In summary, both the entry and exit qualifications of KG personnel are low. This is of concern as a high level of initial training contributes to professional early years practitioners who are expected to possess a reflective and a critical approach to their own practice, to developments in their context and thus be able to act and react in the best interests of the children and families they serve.

Following an agreement between the Government and the MUT (2007), any new personnel to be recruited to the early years sector, specifically KG settings, ought to have an initial teaching degree from 2015 onwards. In response to this agreement, the University of Malta has offered a part-time B.Ed. (Hons.) degree in early childhood education and care for three consecutive years (2009, 2010 and 2011). The part-time course primarily targeted existing practitioners. A four-year full-time B.Ed. (Hons.) in the area will be offered for the first time in October 2013. A two-year top-up course will be offered to MCAST-HND students who have successfully completed their studies in early years. This top-up will lead to first degree status.

The introduction of an initial qualification at tertiary level puts Malta on a par with most other European counties. This is to remedy the current situation since the two-year qualifications at ISCED 3-4[38], puts staff working in the early years sector in Malta as the lowest educated in Europe (Oberhuemer, Schreyer & Neuman, 2010). In another four countries where initial education for early years staff is outside the remit of higher education institutions, the duration of the courses are of four or five years (Table 21).

Country	Pre-primary			Country	Pre-primary		
	ISCED 3-4	**Bachelor**	**Master**		**ISCED 3-4**	**Bachelor**	**Master**
Belgium (Fr)		3yrs		Malta	2 yrs		
Belgium (De)		3yrs		Netherlands		4 yrs	
Belgium (NL)		3yrs		Austria	5 yrs		
Bulgaria		3yrs/4 yrs		Poland		3 yrs	

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[34] Some are possibly in possession of a qualification which is not recorded – anecdotal information

[35] Includes 8 KG assistants with LSA duties, none of whom are indicated as having any qualifications.

[36] Supply KG assistants must be in possession of 1 'A' Level or equivalent in any subject (including typing) and a pass in 4 O levels (including Maths, Maltese and English)

[37] Data provided by Directorate.

[38] http://circa.europa.eu/irc/dsis/employment/info/data/eu_lfs/lfs_main/Related_documents/ISCED_EN.htm

Country	Pre-primary			Country	Pre-primary		
Czech Republic	4yrs			Portugal			4 yrs
Denmark		3.5 yrs		Romania		3yrs	
Germany	4 yrs			Slovenia		3 yrs	
Estonia		3yrs		Slovakia	4 yrs		
Ireland	No data available			Finland		3 yrs[39]	*
Greece		4yrs		Sweden		3.5 yrs	
Spain		4yrs		UK (Eng; Wales; NI)[40]		4 yrs	
France			5yrs	Scotland		4 yrs	
Italy			5yrs	Croatia		3 yrs	
Cyprus	4 yrs			Iceland[41]		4yrs	5 yrs
Latvia	2yrs			Turkey		4 yrs	
Lithuania		3yrs		Lichtenstein			
Luxembourg	4 yrs			Norway		3 yrs	
Hungary	3 yrs						

Table 21 Duration of initial teacher education in EU for pre-primary education[42]

Staff training and qualifications for Child-care personnel

The situation concerning formal qualifications of staff working in child-care settings poses a number of challenges. There are currently seven courses which are recognised as MQF/EDF Level 4 by the National Commission for Further & Higher Education (NCFHE). An eighth course will be launched in January 2014. Three of the courses are 'home-grown'; five courses are offered by foreign agencies (Table 22).

	Title of course	
Home grown	Child Care (0-5 years)	ETC
	BTEC National Diploma in Children's Care, Learning and Development	MCAST
	Diploma in Childcare (The Early Years) - to be offered from Jan 2014	Minds Malta
Foreign qualifications	CACHE Level 3 Diploma for the Children and Young Peoples Workforce	(UK)
	Carer Diploma in Child Day Care Management Penn Foster Career School	(USA)
	Diploma in Child Day Care Thomson Education Direct	(USA)

[39] More common for early years practitioners to have a first degree although a degree at Masters level is also available.

[40] **United Kingdom (ENG/WLS/NIR)**: The Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE, i.e. consecutive route professional training programme) is not a master's programme but may include some master's level study that can contribute to a master's degree.

[41] Teacher education for qualified teacher status should be at master's level but this will not come fully into effect until 2013. There is a transition period during which teacher education institutions are running two programmes

[42] European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2013. *Key Data on Teachers and School Leaders in Europe. 2013 Edition. Eurydice Report.* Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. Available at: (http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/documents/key_data_series/151EN.pdf)

Diploma in Child Day Care - International Correspondence Schools	(USA)
Edexcel Level 3 NVQ in Health and Social Care (Children and Young People)	(UK)

Table 22 Courses accredited MQF/EQF Level 4

Entry requirements for both ETC[43] and Minds Malta[44] courses are 4 'O' level passes. There are variations in the duration of the courses and the amount of time students engage in guided learning hours and practical placements (Table 23).

	ETC	MCAST	Minds Malta[45]
Duration	One year	Two-years	One year
Full/part time	Full time	Full time	Full time
Total number of credits	n/a	180[46]	60 credits
Taught courses	n/a		41 credits
Placement	n/a		19 credits
Guided learning hours	300	1080	280-340 hours
Placement hours	500	800	480 hours

Table 23 Comparison of home grown courses

ETC has had a long history of providing child-care courses. Between October 2000 up to December 2012, 348 individuals followed the one-year ETC course[47]. The majority of these students have successfully sat for a trade test, which is a requisite to signal successful completion of training. Currently, four cohorts are following a childcare course through two different schemes: 19 students are following the childcare course through the ESF *Employability programme (EP)*; 36 students are funded through the *Enhancing Employability through Training (EET) project*. As with MCAST graduates, there is no tracer study which follows the career paths of students who have successfully completed the childcare course.

The advertising material for the various courses indicates variations in the age-group targeted: for example, although the course title offered by ETC refers to *Child Care (0-5 years)*, the course description refers to 0 – 3[48] . The new course to be offered by Minds Malta claims that *those who successfully complete the course would then be able to work within Child Day Care facilities and in other settings that cater for children aged 0-5 years*. The MCAST-BTEC course, emphasis is given to the 0-5 year olds although core units entitled

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[43] http://www.etc.gov.mt/Resources/file/Training%20Programmes/Child_care_Course.pdf

[44] http://www.mindsmalta.com/diploma/

[45] Info sent via email (Aug 28th 2013): *The course is full time and will run Jan-Dec 2014. Taught lectures will be Thursdays and Fridays 5pm – 7.30pm and Saturday 9-12.30. You will then be required to fulfill 12 hours per week in placements which will be determined soon*; and website: *The course consists of 60 credits, 41 taught courses and 19 credits in placement settings. The course is projected to run over two terms: January-June/July 2014 and October-December 2014*

[46] In the BTEC specifications, there is no reference to the number of Credits / ECTSs for this programme but when compared with the other BTEC Extended Diplomas which have the same number of guided learning hours (and the credits per unit are specified), it can be assumed that the National Diploma in Children's Care, Learning & Development Level 4 programme carries 180 credits every 60 guided learning hours is the equivalent to 10 credits.

[47] There has been a course offered at ETC annually since 2000, except for the period between October 2006 and December 2010 when there were no courses on offer.

[48] *The student will acquire the essential knowledge of concepts and theories and will become aware of important issues in the development and care of children from conception to three years of age*
http://www.etc.gov.mt/Resources/file/Training%20Programmes/Child_care_Course.pdf

Developing Practice for children 0-8 and *Promoting literacy in children aged 4 to 8* are available on the programme of study units.

A glance through some of the programmes suggests that the emphasis is on care, health, protection and the provision of a safe environment. Aspects related to professional ethics; responsive practices; responding to children, acknowledging them as co-constructors in their own learning process; consideration to brain research and studies focusing on how neuro-science impacts on early years experiences; involving families as members of the child's communities; and supporting practitioners to develop into reflective personnel are largely absent from the course descriptions.

Accreditation procedures for child-care courses

There are three main entities involved in the recognition of qualifications which may or may not have an accredited MQF/EQF level: the NCFHE is responsible for local/home-grown courses; MQRIC is responsible for foreign qualifications; the ETC Trade Testing Board is responsible for testing individuals in possession of non-accredited courses.

Table 24 provides an overview of the procedures adopted by the entities involved in accrediting local and foreign courses prior to and following the publication of National Occupational Standards. The information serves to highlight the unevenness in accreditation arising from having different boards and structures which do not necessarily consider the details of the content offered in the programmes.

Table 24 Accrediting bodies and procedures for local and foreign courses pre and post occupational standards

Accredited courses			Non-accredited courses	
Local/Home grown **NCFHE**		**Foreign qualifications** **MQRIC**	**ETC – Trade testing boards**	
Pre OS	**Post OS**		**Pre OS**	**Post OS**
Four courses in childcare programmes offered by public and private organisations were examined in comparison with the UK qualification model offered by CACHE (Scolaro report, 2010). Two courses met the established criteria, although some recommendations for updates were made for one of these two courses.	External Evaluators of home-grown programmes of study are asked to assess the soundness, validity, adequacy of the proposed course for: Title of the qualification; MQF Level proposed vis-a-vis the content of the course; the course type (full-time/part-time/short-course); the target group; overall course objectives; the overall structure and modules; knowledge proposed to be achieved; - competences proposed to be achieved; skills proposed to be achieved; breakdown in the number of learning hours (i.e. contact hours, self-study hours, hands-on hours, assessment hours; teaching methods; assessment methods; reading list; lecturers'/trainers' profiles, qualifications and experience. Evaluator to state whether qualification satisfies the level descriptors of the respective level MQF and give recommendation for the proposed qualification to be accredited by NCFHE. Where evaluator is not satisfied with the programme, the evaluator makes suggestions and recommendations for the improvement of the course.	Info sought from foreign counterparts. Recognition and level rating by mutual recognition process. Where qualification is recognized by the state of origin, automatic local recognition. No queries raised re content/delivery of the courses (e.g. whether correspondence courses have supervised practical placements).	In the absence of the national OS, candidates were assessed against national assessment criteria process based on national standards. The trade testing process consisted of an interview, practical test and evaluation of the training logbooks. For the theoretical aspect, candidates used to sit for the theory test as part of the course.	The assessment criteria used for the trade testing process based on national OS as per requirements set out in the Legal Notice (L.N.295 of 2012, Education Act Cap. 327) to regulate the validation of non-formal and informal learning. Assessment consists of: • a written test; • An interview + portfolio • A four-hour practical test If candidates do not pass any one of the assessment components they would be eligible for a re-sit in the failed component/s

Table 24 Accrediting bodies and procedures for local and foreign courses pre and post occupational standards

Trade Testing Boards (TTBs) have been set up by means of Article 40 of the Employment & Training Services Act 1990. TTBs are tasked with the provision of a summative assessment and certification process through which trainees or non-apprentices[49] are assessed in order to obtain the Certificate of Competence[50].

Candidates sitting for a trade test in child care are normally trainees who are eligible for the test after successfully completing the child care course with ETC or non-apprentices. In January 2013 the National Occupational Standards (OS) in relation to Child Care workers and Child Care Managers/ Supervisors were launched. Since then, the DSWS have informed individuals who are employed as child-carers but do not possess an accredited qualification related to Child Care and are working within a Child Care Centre that they need to be in possession of a Level 4 qualification. In addition, individuals who are managers or have a supervisory role in a child care centre require a Level 5 qualification. This directive has generated a long waiting list of over 274 non-apprentices waiting to be trade tested and thus have their knowledge, skills and competences acquired through non-formal and informal learning validated. From amongst these applicants, 267 have applied for Level 4 accreditation whilst 7 applicants are seeking a Level 5 accreditation. To date, 39 applicants have successfully completed their trade testing to have their formal and informal knowledge accredited to Level 4.

As a historical point of interest, it is worth noting and questioning the relevance and therefore the validity of some of the assessment criteria formulated by the TTB with respect to the practical component prior to the publication of OS. According to documentation made available for this paper, it would appear that the TTB criteria were lifted from documentation appropriate for more formal teaching contexts. For example: Section E of the *ETC Trade Testing Board Practical Feedback Sheet* refers to the ***'Learning Process'*** and includes the criteria to illustrate whether the student undergoing the trade testing in a child-care setting: *introduces an activity effectively; makes use of resources including technology, such as whiteboard; handouts; OHP slides; adopts appropriate methods at propitious time; effective closure of activity*. Section H of the practical assessment criteria focused on the **Students' Records of Work** and refers to *making of class/homework regularly and thoroughly; covering sufficient ground through students' work; outlining formative and summative assessment and drawing up a class and students' profiles*. The final section of the document is reserved for general feedback and comments under the heading: *General consideration of teaching competencies.* The jargon and criteria themselves can hardly be associated with working in an early years environment.

Recruitment of qualified staff

Although entry qualifications for carers are low, there are still difficulties in recruiting staff with this basic qualification. The number of students graduating with the initial qualification (ISCED 3-4), does not seem to be enough to meet demand and FES has experienced a shortage of qualified staff. This situation arose when MCAST graduates resigned en masse and at short notice as they were called for employment as KGAs by DES. FES reports having had to recruit staff in possession of the Future Focus qualification, and ETC students nearing completion of their Childcare Course. FES does not employ carers without any initial training.

At the time of writing this document, limited data are available about qualifications of carers working at the government child-care settings. There are seventy-seven child-carers employed at the twelve FES settings. Most of the childcare assistants have an MCAST, ETC or Cache qualifications at Level 4

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[49] **Apprentice/Trainee** is a person who has successfully completed an apprenticeship or a traineeship administered or approved by the Employment & Training Corporation (ETC). **Non-Apprentice** is a person who wants to have his/her knowledge; skills and competences validated and certified but is not an apprentice or a trainee. Non-apprentices need to formally apply with the Corporation to be tested, against a fee that needs to be paid upon application.

[50] **Certificate of Competence** is the Certificate awarded to trainees and non-apprentices who have successfully passed the Trade Test.

and above. Some carers are in possession of a Future Focus qualification; yet, on its own the latter is not recognised as being on the same level as the programme offered by other entities. Holders of a Future Focus qualification are obliged to apply for the Certificate of Competence which they can receive through the Trade Testing Board (TTB) run by ETC and acquire the MQC Level 4 qualification in childcare.

Additional data provided by the DSWS indicate that across childcare settings, there is still some way to go to having all staff trained to the minimum level required. Whilst data indicate an increase in the number of carers being employed in the sector, overall results indicate a drop in carers who have a recognised/accredited early years qualification and an increase in the number of carers who are in possession of or following a course which does not lead to accreditation by the MQC (Table 25).

Qualification	Child-carers in employment (2011)	Child-carers in employment (2012)
No Qualification	29 (16.3%)	24 (10.6%)
In possession of OR reading for Qualification **not** recognised by MQC	74 (41.6%)	103 (45.6%)
Qualification not level-rated by MQC	1 (0.6%)	1(0.4%)
Qualification at MQF 4 or higher but not related to Child Care (0-3)	9 (5.1%)	9 (4%)
Qualification recognised by MQC (MQF 4)	74 (41.6%)	84 (37.2%)
Following a training course recognised by MQC (MQF 4)		5 (2.2%)
TOTALS	178	226

Table 25 Qualifications of child-carers employed in 52 provisionally registered settings (2012)

Other personnel in child-care

Apart from child-carers, other personnel are employed in child-care settings. The National Standards for Child day-care settings (2006) identifies three main categories of 'employees': in addition to the child-carers, there is the legally-responsible person, who may or may not be involved in the direct running of the setting and as such does not have a job role. The supervisor or manager is expected to be responsible for the day to day running of the setting and is expected to be in possession of a MQF/EQF Level 5 qualification. In 2012 only 1 manager met the MQF/EQF Level 5 requirement. Some managers do not even possess an MQF Level 4 in childcare.

The number of managers who are qualified in line with the requirement of MQF Level 5 in child care is a bare minimum (Table 26).

Qualification	Number of Managers 2011	Number of Managers 2012
No Qualification	2 (5%)	6 (11.5%)
In possession of / reading for Qualification **not** recognised by MQC	8 (20%)	13 (25%)
Qualification not level-rated by MQC	2 (5%)	
Have a qualification at MQF 4 or higher but not related to Child Care (0-3)	11 (27.5%)	12 (23.1%)
Qualification in Child Care (0-3) recognised by MQC at MQF 4	16 (40%)	20 (38.5%)

	1 (2.5%)	1 (1.9%)
Qualification in Child Care (0-3) recognised by MQC at MQF 5 or higher		
TOTALS	**40 (100%)**	**52 (100%)**

Table 26 Qualifications of managers employed in 52 provisionally registered settings (2012)

Apart from child-carers and managers within the different settings, there appear to be a range of employees. FES employs a Programme co-ordinator to oversee and monitor the provision in all its 12 settings. This appointee is required to have a Level 6 (first cycle degree) qualification in Social Sciences. In addition, within each of the 12 FES-run settings, one of the child-carers is appointed to be the child-care centre co-ordinator. The work-force mapping exercise conducted by DSWS in 2012 showed that there were approximately 300 individuals employed in the 52 then provisionally-registered child-care settings.

The DSWS work-force mapping report (2012) concluded that different nomenclature is being used for similar roles and most employees carry out the roles mentioned in the National Standards.

Carers, senior care workers, relievers and teachers carry out similar roles when working with children aged 0-3 years. Similarly, some helpers carry out similar roles to the carers. Through the assessment visits, DSWS assessors realised that these 'helpers' carried out the same roles as carer workers, but were yet unqualified (Table 27).

Role	Frequency	Percent
Administrative support worker	1	0.3%
Administrator	2	0.7%
Assistant Administrator	1	0.3%
Data Inputting Clerk	1	0.3%
Carer	209	71.3%
Senior Care Worker	1	0.3%
Roaming Reliever	4	1.4%
Kindergarten Assistant / Child Carer	2	0.7%
Cleaner	3	1.0%
Helper	6	2.0%
Kitchen Helper	2	0.7%
Headmistress / Principal of School	2	0.7%
Legally Responsible Person (no care or management role)	5	1.71%
Teacher	2	0.7%
Manager	47	16.0%
Co-ordinator	5	1.7%
Total	**293**	**100%**

Table 27 Roles identified through the 2012 workforce mapping exercise

Continuous professional development

Continuous professional development for KGAs in the state sector is addressed once per term after school hours. School heads may request Early Years EOs to deliver such sessions to KGAs or, invite other professionals at their discretion. When the opportunity arises, other training is provided. For example, in 2013, a group of 60 KGAs were provided with additional training[51]. The objective of the

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[51] The groups of children (classrooms) for whom the KGAs were responsible, were in the hands of students on their Teaching Practice.

course for KGAs was to up-skill those who are not attending the university B.Ed in ECEC to bridge the gap in preparation for implementation of the NCF. The intention is that this course will be repeated annually.

There is no obligatory or specifically organised continuous professional development for staff working in child-care settings. Clearly, measures must be taken to improve the initial qualifications of the workforce as well as maintain and improve the initial knowledge and skills through opportunities to learn about good practice, remain informed with research and developments. Membership in learned organisations and associations which focus on the professional development of its members through regular publications, organisation of conferences and meetings, sharing of good practice all go some way towards instilling in practitioners a more professional attitude to working with young children. But the early years workforce must have regular opportunities to engage in professional development which will make them better practitioners and therefore more effective contributors to children's learning and understanding. In their 'Best Evidence Synthesis' which reviews research which sheds light on what constitutes quality professional development as it relates to learning opportunities, experiences and outcomes for children within diverse early childhood provisions, Mitchell and Cubey (2003) identify 8 characteristics of effective professional development. Professional development:

- *incorporates participants' own aspirations, skills, knowledge and understanding into the learning context;*
- *provides theoretical and content knowledge and information about alternative practices;*
- *supports educational practice that is inclusive of diverse children, families and the extended family;*
- *helps participants to change educational practice, beliefs, understanding, and/or attitudes;*
- *helps participants to gain awareness of their own thinking, actions, and influence.*

In addition during effective professional development:

- *Participants are involved in investigating pedagogy within their own early childhood settings;*
- *Participants analyse data from their own settings. Revelation of discrepant data is a mechanism to invoke revised understanding;*
- *Critical reflection which enables participants to investigate and challenge assumptions and extend their thinking is a core aspect*.

Challenges related to staff training and qualifications

I. There needs to be recognition of the need to raise the standards in the personal level of education of practitioners and managers working in early years settings. According to local regulations, accreditation of the childcare qualification is established by the Malta Qualifications Council (MQC) in consultation with the Ministry for the Family and Social Solidarity in accordance with Legal Notice 347 of 2005 (National Standards for child day-care facilities, 2006). MQC and the Ministry have agreed that Level 4 and Level 5 courses for practitioners and service managers respectively, are sufficient qualifications for practitioners working with under three-year-olds. This places Maltese 'qualified' early years practitioners as the lowest-trained staff in Europe. It would appear that this decision to have Level 4 courses for practitioners needs to be re-visited in light of the in-depth knowledge, understanding, skills and a reflective approach which is expected of members of staff. Research has indicated that there is a direct relationship between the qualifications of staff and quality of programmes offered to children in the early years.

II. Raising the minimum qualification to a first cycle degree will have a direct impact on the financial management and organisation of the sector. Evidence suggests that a well-paid workforce is an important factor in light of the satisfaction of employees, lower turn-over rates and thus, more consistency and stability within early years settings. Data which are

being collected locally seem to indicate that the average wage earned by child-carers is €5.00 an hour. The OECD (2006) presents a strong conclusion about staffing, remuneration and training opportunities. *Decisions about staffing are in reality, decisions made about the level of quality that a State wishes to provide to young children (Phillips, 1988 cited in Kontos et al., 1995:9, Blenkin et al., 1996; Oberhuemer and Ulich 1997:3, Abbott and Pugh, 1998; Feeney and Freeman, 1999).* (OECD, 2006, p. 170).

III. Courses which are currently recognised at MQF/EQF Level 4 vary in the age-group on which they focus. Some emphasise care for under three-year-olds (ETC), others provide a somewhat broader focus (MCAST). If early childhood education and care is to be conceptually conceived of as the first five or seven years of an individual's life, all courses and training must reflect the development and experiences of children as they grow and transition from home to non-compulsory early years settings and onto the first two years of compulsory schooling.

IV. The matching exercise between the content of training courses provided and their link to the Occupational standards needs to be re-visited. Occupational standards (OS) are a helpful and necessary tool. The *Occupational Standards for Child Care Managers and Workers in Malta (2012)* document[52] and L.N. 295 (2012) (Education Act Cap. 327)[53] identify ten reasons which highlight the necessity for these standards, namely to:

- direct curriculum development;
- specify competences which workers need to possess;
- help certify workers;
- help employers carry out skills-audit;
- direct professional development within the workforce;
- facilitate the recruitment process to employers;
- set quality standards within sectors and occupations;
- facilitate the validation of informal and non-formal learning;
- allow government to stock-take skills capacity at a national level; and
- promote mobility of workers business within the European labour market and beyond.

Yet most of the courses which are currently accredited at the MQF/EQF Level 4 have been developed independently of the OS; most existed prior to the introduction of the OS. Therefore the OS **are not** directing the curriculum. If courses are allowed to develop separately from defined OS, it is difficult to see how candidates applying to have their knowledge, skills and attitudes validated will be able to match the expectations expressed in the OS document.

V. The links between initial accreditation of courses and subsequent maintenance of the proposed level need to be established and maintained. Currently, any applicant for the accreditation of new, home-grown courses is able to propose the Level of the course. An external/independent expert evaluator engaged by NCFHE to review the course confirms or otherwise whether such a level will be achieved. The expert evaluator can put forward his/her recommendations for the improvement of the course and for the achievement of the proposed level. Since the launch of childcare occupational standards for child care workers and managers, any person or body interested in providing child-care courses has to ensure that the occupational standards are mirrored in the learning outcomes of the course. External evaluators of child-care courses have to verify whether the course content is compliant to the said occupational standards. It will be interesting to see how monitoring

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[52] https://secure3.gov.mt/socialpolicy/admin/contentlibrary/Uploads/MediaFile/occupational_standards_child_care.pdf
[53] Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning Regulations, 2012

and assessment will continue to ensure that practitioners will continue to respect the OS through their practice.

VI. If there remains the need for trade testing to validate courses and therefore accredit and recognise one's knowledge, attitudes and skills, it is important that the assessment criteria are valid and reliable.

VII. It is not clear to whom the OS are applicable. The title of the document explicitly refers to child-carers and managers of child-care settings. Two of the twelve standards for child-carers specify that adults have to:

- CDC 408 Plan and implement positive environments for babies and children under 3 years
- CDC 409 Provide physical care that promotes the health and development of babies and children under 3 years

However, child-care settings are accepting children who are older than three. So how are OS applicable to carers who have 3 to 5 year old children? How are the carers' knowledge, skills and attitudes 'assessed' in relation to the older age group? Does this imply that there should be a separate set of OS for staff working with 3 to 5 year olds or is this one aspect of the 'dysfunctional' set-up brought about by a split system?

VIII. The information handbook for childcare workers (MQF/EQF Level 4) which gives a thorough overview of the validation process of informal and non-formal learning (ETC & NCFHE) specifies that *The prospective candidates need to have 3 years experience with children in a child care facility catering for children from 0–5 years.* Three difficulties arise: this statement appears to be contradictory to the OS which focus on the under threes. Secondly, if staff working in child-care settings are expected to demonstrate skills, knowledge and attitudes applicable to working with four and five-year-olds, are these OS equally applicable to Kindergarten staff working in KG settings? Thirdly, why are unlicensed, semi-regulated child-care settings allowed to have children in their care up to the age of 5 whilst KG settings operate under different conditions?

IX. It is difficult to envisage how the carers working with under three-year-olds can embrace and apply the OS in situations where most of their managers supervising the service are themselves unqualified. OS are meant to help employers carry out skills-audits, facilitate their recruitment process and set quality standards. This is impossible to achieve where service managers are unqualified.

OECD (2006) has a stark warning in this regard and concludes that:

> all countries in the coming years will have to address the professional education, status, pay and working conditions of ECEC staff. If not, the sector will remain, at least in some countries, unproductive where quality and child outcomes are concerned, and non-competitive with other sectors for the recruitment and retention of staff. (p. 170).

Section 5: Curriculum/Programme of activities

Programme of activities at KG

The richness or otherwise of the programme of activities, or indeed a curriculum, offered in early years settings is a further aspect which needs attention. Historically, KG settings were not provided with a formal curriculum which was to be followed. On-the-job initial training and subsequent tailor-made in-service programmes promoted:

- learning through the development of a thematic approach; and
- the benefits associated with learning through play.

One of the initial attempts at formalising a curriculum for KG settings came about with the publication of the National Minimum Curriculum (NMC) in 1999. Whilst acknowledging that the earliest learning occurs in homes or institutions where children are being raised, according to the NMC, the *main aim of the Curriculum at Kindergarten level is to enhance the holistic development of children* (p. 71). An overview of the NMC aims and recommendations with regard to KG settings is provided in Table 28. These were elaborated upon with suggestions for activities to meet the objectives, in a document issued in 2002 by the then Education Officer responsible for the sector[54]. More insights into what KG assistants are expected to do are obtained from the *Record of Development and Progress at KG level* [55]. The available documentation suggests that children are all developing in the same way: in a linear fashion and expected to achieve the same objectives. Considering that assessment procedures are promoted through checklists, a deficit model of children and childhood is implied: irrespective of the children's prior knowledge, strengths, interests, likes and dislikes, it would appear that children are expected to uniformly go through similar, if not identical activities in order to be assessed according to whether they have 'achieved', are 'still developing' or 'require attention' for each aspect of development (creative, physical, socio-emotional, moral and intellectual) and their respective sub-skills.

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[54] Attard, M. (2002). *Guidelines and suggestions for the implementation of the curriculum in Kindergarten.* Available at: http://curriculum.gov.mt/en/Curriculum/Kindergarten/Pages/default.aspx

[55] *Record of development & progress at KG level (Guidelines)*; the specific document to be completed by staff is available both as a word document and a spreadsheet. http://curriculum.gov.mt/en/Curriculum/Kindergarten/Pages/default.aspx

Intellectual development	Socio-emotional development	Physical development	Moral development	Development of a sense of aesthetics & creativity	Religious development (for those who believe)
Positive attitude towards learning	the development of self-confidence	the strengthening and confident use of the large muscles	develop a sense of what is just and good	provide opportunities for children to engage in symbolic representation, imaginative play, art and crafts, drama, movement and music.	a sense of awe and joy in the face of the greatness and beauty of creation; a sense of joy, gratitude and security that derives from one's relationship with God;
development of skills in the learning process, encouraging children to ask questions use their motor and perceptual skills; offering the children opportunities to explore and investigate new things within the environment.	the development of a positive attitude to life, including generate a sense of trust among children and between children and adults; enable children to become more independent.	the strengthening and confident use of the small muscles	distinguish between good and bad and between types of individual and collective action that either helps or results in hindering or hurting others	the appreciation of one's own creative work and that of others	an ability to participate in celebrations (singing, sense of friendship, sense of joy, community spirit, symbolic activities) especially those surrounding events in the life of Christ
development of logical thinking skills; to solve problems, establish cause and effect relations and organise events in sequential order		using one's senses as educational tools; strengthen sense-related abilities; develop a sense of balance; respond creatively to different rhythms; provide better co-ordination of eyes and hands			a positive exposure to some of the basic elements from everyday life such as bread, water, silence, listening and other gestures which constitute basic symbols in the Christian message
development, of concepts and information which lead to a greater awareness of the immediate world around them: concepts of time; quantity, volume and mass; comparative & descriptive vocab (eg. colours, shape, size)					
development of verbal communication					
the first stages in the development of writing skills					

Table 28 Summary of the KG curriculum from the National Minimum Curriculum (1999)

In KG settings within Church schools, there seem to be tighter programmes with an over-emphasis given to language, literacy and numeracy development through the completion of workbooks and abstract activities which are generally more appropriate for older children. Below is an excerpt from a post-graduate dissertation where data were collected with two KG settings for four-year-olds.

> Since there is no standardised national curriculum for early childhood education and care in Malta, the school, in consultation with other Church and Private schools, develops its own program of work. The topics, textbooks and activities to be organised are all decided upon by the school authorities in consultation with the practitioners. This results in a somewhat rigid timetable where the content had to be covered within an explicit time-frame. Different kindergarten activities were organised daily to include letter, number, and craft activities, outdoor and indoor free play.
>
> As a result of this kind of organization, play and learning activities were totally separated. The type of play frequently engaged in was almost exclusively free play, during which practitioners did not engage or interact with children, but stood aside. On the other hand, during learning activities practitioners would teach children, mostly about letters and numbers. These activities included using workbooks (six in total) in which the children would practise what was being taught. The activities were fairly structured and resembled activities which tend to be associated with formal school practices. With regard to this, Practitioner A noted:
>
> *We have to struggle because there is a lot to be done, and at the end of the year we have to show the workbooks, that all the children finished their work, to the school authorities... We are always running out of time. We have to finish the books, because obviously the parents bought them and by the end of the year they want to see them all ready... I think they expect too much out of them [children]. If I don't give them homework today, it's like I did something bad for them.*
>
> Practitioners had limited time and freedom to adapt to children's individual needs or to engage in child-initiated activities. Most of the time they had to find ways of engaging children in structured learning activities. As practitioner B explained "it's a struggle every day to try to make it fun but at the same time to finish the book". ...
>
> As a consequence of the way activities were organised, a daily routine was established, with a sequence of activities that usually followed each other. These routines were characterised by practitioners as good and beneficial, as children always knew what would be expected of them during the activity and the sequence of events. In other words, "they feel more secure knowing what is going on and what's next" (Practitioner A). Such practices and rigidity raise several issues concerning motivation, meaningfulness and challenge in children's early years settings.
>
> (Bankovic, 2012, p. 46-47)

The above excerpt illustrates a number of shortcomings in that factors which are crucial to promoting quality programmes in early years are lacking. Quality programmes are characterised by:

- Suitable pedagogical approaches which promote learning through a multi-sensorial approach. This implies that planning which must be focused on promoting integrated learning, requires flexibility and is negotiated with a range of partners, including children themselves (Taguma, Litjens and Makowiecki, 2013; Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford & Taggart, 2004).

- Choice of activities which is broad, relevant and meaningful to children's experiences and draws on their prior knowledge. Such activities take account of children's views and interests (Moyles, 2013; Skolverket, 2008; 2011).
- The engagement of responsive and reflective practitioners who plan, monitor and assess children through their observations and direct interactions. Such practitioners reflect upon their own observations and records of children's achievements, behaviours, attitudes and responses which serve to inform subsequent plans and activities. (Carr & Lee, 2012; Bennett, 2006, Rinaldi, 2006).

Programme of activities in Childcare

To date there have been no data or evidence collected systematically about the nature or quality of the programme of activities provided within child care settings especially those which are managed privately (DSWS, personal communication). Reference can only be made to a work-in-progress document which is the WSAU's initial attempt to assess this aspect of childcare.

Between November and December 2012, staff from WSAU assessed the element of care, learning and play in childcare settings. Data were collected through documentation or paper work made available by the service managers as well as the observation of one activity in each of the 51 settings which participated. The observations of activities were scheduled in advance and therefore carers could prepare specifically for the session.

In settings where staff is mostly unqualified it is doubtful that the quality of the activities being offered takes cognizance of the complexity of the child as an autonomous learner, as an individual who is avidly interested in being with responsive, caring adults who are in-tune with the emotions and well-being of each child in their setting. Limited information is available to illustrate how child-care settings plan the activities, who plans these activities, how choices are made, whether plans and activities are discussed amongst the carers and what discussions, deliberations and decisions are taken once the activities have been done and children's reactions observed and attended to.

The 2012 study by WSAU reports that all 51 facilities participating in the research had a programme of activities. However, the formality, planning, format and content of the programme of activities differ from one centre to another. *In most centres the programme of activities is prepared by the manager in consultation with the child carer/s (n=28), ... less often the programme of activities is solely prepared by either the manager (n=5) or the carer (n=9), or primarily by the carer but with the assistance of the manager (n=9).* The frequency with which programmes are prepared varies: *most commonly produced on a weekly (n =23) or monthly basis (n=17). In 7 child care facilities, the programme of activities is prepared on a quarterly basis whilst in 3 facilities the programme is prepared yearly.* Such findings raise issues about the value attached to long, short and medium-term planning. It is also clear that planning and preparation are guided exclusively by what adults perceive to be of importance or interest to young children with a complete disregard to children's interests. None of the settings reported developing, adjusting or tailoring their planning and programme of activities on the basis of interests which they would have observed or discussed with parents about their children. So whilst Standard 5[56] (p. 13) recommends that:

- *Children are encouraged to participate in various activities and are listened to and given the opportunity for self-expression. They are given the opportunity to play individually and to interact with other children.*
- *The programme of activities provided is designed to promote the intellectual curiosity and development of children.*

the evidence collected about the type of activities and the content included in the children's programme suggests that 'themes' are chosen which can last for a month, six weeks, two months or

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[56] *National Standards for Child day-care facilities* (2006)

even a whole quarter. The choice of themes is very similar to what children are exposed to later on at KG and even in the lower years of primary school. At the time of assessment, 41 settings were working on the Christmas theme whilst others adopted 'Autumn', 'Winter', 'Ways of Communication', 'Rhymes, Colouring and shapes', 'San Martin', 'All about me' and 'The Colour Red' as their theme. Not surprisingly, in 80% of the observations (N=42 settings), structured activities were observed and all were done 'with a purpose'. Whilst most of the activities were categorised as 'arts and crafts', none could be classified as *physical activities, pretend play (such as puppets), domestic play and sand and water activities.* Some activities which were observed included*: showing visual aids to children such as cards with numbers, shapes and letters where children need to identify/label what is being shown; matching coloured beanbags with same colour on cards and matching pictures. Another activity included rhyming name of colours with name of objects whilst in one centre the activity was aimed towards improving pencil grasp.*

The WSAU (2012) research provides little evidence about the documentation which settings maintain as a record of children's achievements or whether these achievements are shared with parents. This is another area which requires immediate attention and in-depth research. In the 2012 WSAU report, *thirty five facilities confirmed that an evaluation on the outcome of the activity performed is carried out by the child carer/manager/supervisor whilst in 16 centres no evaluation takes place. This evaluation serves to identify whether or not the desired aim of the activity was reached.* Simply 'evaluating' an activity according to whether an aim was achieved or otherwise, is rather rigid and short-sighted. There are missed opportunities from overlooking what and how children developed independently, as a result of participating in an activity which could have had a set aim by the adult but which is interpreted and understood differently by the child. The variety of 'evaluations' made by settings is also noted in the WSAU report; six settings claim to do '*a mental evaluation after each activity*' whilst some centres reported selecting activities and drawing up a written account for assessment purposes. *In one particular facility the evaluation is done by filling the 'aim' and 'projects' section within the daily programme of activities whilst in another facility, an evaluation form requiring ticking and grading is filled to determine communication skills level.* Of the 51 settings participating in this research, 27 (53%) had some form of record keeping; several have checklists which are completed at varying intervals.

Anecdotal evidence provided by staff at FES suggests that children in these settings follow a programme of activities that addresses the holistic development (physical, cognitive and language, emotional and social and play development) of the child through activities related to monthly themes.

FES employs a Childcare Programme Coordinator based at the main office and a Childcare Centre Coordinator in every centre. This Programme Coordinator manages all aspects of day-to-day operations of all FES childcare centres. The Program Coordinator implements and maintains an appropriate child care environment for children aged 3mths to 3 years, creates, together with childcare centre Coordinators, appropriate curriculum, monitors, together with childcare centre coordinators the children's developmental and educational progress.

Supporting the Programme co-ordinator, there is one Childcare Centre Coordinator in each setting who ensures effective leadership and management of the specific childcare centre, working with partners across all sectors and promoting high quality care to all children. This service is committed to safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children and expects all staff to share this commitment; to establish and promote a working environment in which the emotional, social, psychological, physical, developmental and educational well-being of children is paramount and in which a supportive, empathetic and non-judgemental approach is used in all interactions with children and their families.

Discussions are held regularly between management and staff (coordinators meetings) with regard to the smooth running and efficiency of the service provision. Regular monthly meetings chaired by

the Programme Coordinator address the quality of the service, monitor and assess the programme of activities. Evaluation is collected annually from parents through feedback forms. Co-ordinators are supported by management whenever they encounter difficulties with regards to individual children. The Programme coordinator assesses the child's situation and referrals to other professionals are made as necessary.

FES settings enjoy the services of a paediatric team who screens all children (with parents' permission and in their presence) attending the FES Childcare Centres. Follow up sessions are carried out as necessary as FES believes in prevention and early identification.

With regard to assessment, child-carers employed at FES carry out child observations against developmental checklists.[57] At least 6 months before each review meeting with parents, assessments are conducted. During the meetings the child's progress is discussed and goals set for the subsequent six months. At the end of a child's placement a report is drawn up by the key worker and coordinator. This report is given to the parents who are encouraged to give a copy of the report to their child's KGA. Detailed observations are carried out where there are issues of concern. The FES management retains all formal documentation about children at the childcare centres. Parents can have access to it upon request. However, provision for retention policy of documents is being discussed.

As with all other checklists which identify and pre-determine skills which are expected to be achieved, this form of assessment fails to capture the real, holistic achievements of individual children; expects all individuals to develop through the same sequence of events; ignores the parents' contributions which can provide a rich form of support for children's achievements and encourages practitioners to work and plan rigidly within a context which addresses the pre-determined criteria rather than prepare, modify and adapt activities in direct response to individual children's expressed interests. Checklists take a deficit approach to learning and development as the emphasis tends to be given to what is perceived to be missing and must be developed.

Assessment in early years can be useful when it celebrates individual children's achievements and development. Appropriate assessment is valuable for all stakeholders: children, parents/guardians and practitioners. Detailed records of children's achievements provide opportunities for in-depth and insightful discussions amongst all partners.

Curriculum Matters in the Early Years

The National Curriculum Framework (2012) is the first attempt at having the Early Years Cycle as a separate cycle in addition to the compulsory primary and secondary cycles. The NCF puts forward five broad learning outcomes to be promoted during the early years cycle (Table 29).

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[57] Information provided by FES report that these checklists are adapted from Meggitt (2007) and focus on categories and sub-categories within areas, including: emotional & social development; physical development; cognitive & language development; and play.

Outcome 1: Children who develop a strong sense of identity	Outcome 2: Children who have a positive self-image	Outcome 3: Children who are socially adept	Outcome 4: Children who are effective communicators	Outcome 5: Children who nurture positive attitudes towards learning and become engaged and confident learners
• Children who develop in a safe and secure environment which they can trust. • Children who develop a sense of independence and autonomy. • Children who become responsible and resilient in the face of challenges	• Children who believe in themselves, fully aware of their potential and capabilities. • Children who gain confidence in themselves and their achievements. • Children who develop positive attitudes which enable them to take the initiative and become risk-takers.	• Children who are capable of establishing relationships with others. • Children who develop empathy, respect and acceptance of different points of view. • Children who develop an awareness of the notions of fairness, a sense of justice and non-preferential treatment. • Children who learn to collaborate with peers and adults with diverse backgrounds and needs.	• Children who are capable of using different forms of media for communication. • Children who interact and engage with varieties of text and printed material increasing their awareness of purposes/functions of print. • Children who gain familiarity with symbols and patterns and their use. • Children who become aware of different language systems, notably L1 and L2. • Children who engage with digital literacy as a means of retrieving data as well as representing and communicating ideas. • Children who are versatile with the use of numbers, data handling, shapes and measurement and print in context as a means of production of knowledge and information as well as meaning making and comprehension.	• Children who develop a range of cognitive skills to include labelling/identifying, recognition, sorting, hypothesising, predicting, comparing, sequencing, and grouping. • Children who develop positive dispositions to include enthusiasm and motivation, curiosity, questioning, concentration, perseverance, imagination, ability to accept alternative suggestions / criticism. • Children who broaden their knowledge and reinforce their understanding through availability of and access to various sources of information.

Table 29 Summary of learning outcomes for early years – National Curriculum Framework (2011/2012)

As a framework, the document does not go into the specific details of the content to be covered in the early years. Providing a framework rather than a prescriptive curriculum allows settings across all the early years to develop their own specific programme of activities to address the needs of the children, parents and the settings themselves. At the same time, having broad outcomes to be achieved over the entire early years cycle would support seamless transitions from one setting to another. The curriculum framework for early years in the NCF emphasised the four years which incorporate the years at KG settings and the first two years of formal, compulsory education. During the consultation process about the then proposed curriculum framework, FES pointed out that the under threes were ignored. However, this is yet another example that highlights the disadvantages of a 'split' system. To date, the Education Directorates within the Ministry of Education have no remit over child-care settings and therefore the necessary infrastructure is not available to enable the NCF (2012) to include child-care settings.

To some degree, the broad outcomes being promoted in the NCF (2012) recognise "essential principles underlying quality provision" (VCAA, 2008). A thorough analysis of curricula and learning frameworks for early years (0-8), led the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA) to conclude that: *The strongest early childhood programs have had very clear well defined principles that were understood by teachers, families and the communities* (p. 47).   Eighteen principles were elicited as indicators of quality provision (Table 30).

In recognition of how our views or images of children impact on both how we interact with children and the types of experiences we provide	In recognition of the special characteristics of children from birth to 8 years	In recognition of the importance of collaboration and partnerships in education	In recognition of quality teaching and learning approaches
Viewing children positively as capable and competent	Focusing on a sense of well being and belonging	Empowering children, families and the communities	Interweaving teaching, learning, and assessment
Acknowledging children as having rights	Acknowledging the importance of relationships	Viewing teachers as scaffolders and as co-constructors of learning	Learning through play
Valuing the richness that cultural diversity brings to learning situations	Recognising play is central	Valuing and embracing diversity	Using 'teachable moments' for focused teaching and learning
Recognising children as being literate within the culture of their community and families	Enabling Environments: Learning through exploration, engagement, inquiry, investigation, hands on real life experiences, risk taking and problem solving	Acknowledging the multicultural nature of Australian society	Embedding rich literacy and numeracy experiences into programs
			Acknowledging the environment as the third teacher
			Recognising the quality of teaching staff as critical to quality program delivery

Table 30 Essential principles underpinning quality provision for children birth to 8 years[58]

[58] Source: VCAA (2008).

One principle emphasises the importance attributed to the quality of the teaching staff as a critical factor towards the delivery of a quality programme. Prescriptive curricula which determine the content or pedagogy to be used are highly discordant with a philosophy which acknowledges individual differences, strengths, interests and needs. However, addressing the individuality which all children bring with them at any stage of the early years, relies heavily on highly-educated and well-informed staff who can observe, discuss, decide, deliver and reflect on the breadth and depth of experiences offered to the children in their care. Carr & Mitchell (2010) argued that the long-term social, economic and educational cost would be too high a price to pay for the absence of qualified teachers to provide care and education for the youngest and most vulnerable children. Mitchell, Wylie & Carr's (2008) review of the literature led them to conclude that:

> *Children in high-quality ECE settings experienced significantly greater cognitive gains than children in low quality settings ...*
> *Positive effects of ECE participation were found in settings described as good quality in terms of adult–child interactions that are responsive, cognitively challenging, and encourage joint attention and negotiation or "sustained shared thinking".*
> *There is evidence that a curriculum where children can investigate and think for themselves is associated with better cognitive performance in later schooling than one that is academically oriented.*
> *Significant associations were found between staff: child ratios, teacher qualifications and education, teacher compensation, and children's cognitive outcomes.* (p.42)

A more recent review of what quality should look like for under-two year olds in early childhood settings (Dalli, White, Rockel, Duhn, Buchanan, Davidson, Ganly, Kus, & Wang, 2011) identified three key issues:

• **Early childhood settings for under-two year olds should be places where children experience sensitive responsive caregiving** that is attuned to their subtle cues, including their temperamental and age characteristics.

• **Early childhood settings for under-two year olds should be low-stress environments that actively avoid 'toxic stress'** or are able to buffer children against toxic stress "through supportive relationships that facilitate adaptive coping" (Shonkoff, 2010, p.359).

• **Environmental conditions and teacher action interconnect in creating quality ECS for under-two year olds.** The cornerstone of high quality care is a workforce of practitioners who understand the impact of their actions on children's development and are trained to make that impact a positive one. Attuned teacher-child relationships require a holistic pedagogical approach and structural conditions that support the teacher in context.

In light of the data about the type of activities conducted in early years settings as reported by the WSAU (2012) and in contrast to the references from the literature, it would appear that an issue that needs to be addressed concerns the content of the training courses and the perspectives promoted about children. Educating and training staff to work with young children is not simply a matter of referring to child development, major milestones and the acquisition of key skills. Personnel who are planning to work with young children ought to understand that children themselves have as much to contribute to their own development as the adult carers and educators; children are active and not passive members of a community and they need to be invited and challenged to make contributions and engage with learning opportunities. Responsive adults observe, note and react to children's contributions and use their insights to facilitate and extend further learning as well as create opportunities where children are faced with challenges which they have to over-come, thus making learning more personal, relevant and meaningful.

The way forward: Issues and recommendations

In the 2008 UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre report, *The childcare transition. A league table of early childhood education and care in economically advanced countries*, Adamson proposed as set of 10 benchmark standards[59] that are directed towards what governments can do to ensure that childcare is managed in the best interests of children and societies. Prior to summarising the challenges which face early childhood education and care in Malta, it is worth referring to these benchmark standards, which include:

- *Parental leave of 1 year at 50% of salary;*
- *Subsidized and regulated child care services for 25% of children under 3[60]*
- *80% of all child care staff trained*
- *50% of staff in accredited early education services tertiary educated with relevant qualification*
- *1.0% of GDP spent on early childhood services*
- *A national plan with priority for disadvantaged children*
- *Child poverty rate less than 10%*
- *Subsidized and accredited early education services for 80% of 4 year-olds*
- *Minimum staff-to-children ratio of 1:15 in pre-school education*
- *Near-universal outreach of essential child health services*

Adamson (2008), p. 2

These benchmarks are to be interpreted as minimum standards rather than a guarantee that they automatically lead to high quality early childhood settings and experiences. A quick glance through these benchmarks suggests that Malta has currently achieved two of the ten standards, namely having subsidized and accredited early education services for 80% of 4 year-olds and the near-universal outreach of essential child health services. With regard to staff-to-children ratios, these are certainly observed with under four-year-olds but the ratio of 1 adult to 20 four-year-old children in KGII is somewhat high.

If improvements are to be made in the local context in early childhood education and care, thinking about an integrated approach to services, policies, administration, curriculum, governance and monitoring is imperative. Having an integrated approach to ECEC provides us with an opportunity to reconceptualise early childhood and this in turn implies planning for a good early childhood infrastructure (Dalli, 2010).

Gallagher and Clifford (2000), identify eight crucial components for a successful infrastructure to support ECEC in the North American context, including: (1) personnel preparation, (2) technical assistance, (3) applied research and program evaluation, (4) communication, (5) demonstration, (6) data systems, (7) comprehensive planning, and (8) coordination of support elements. Dalli (2010) highlights the ten year strategic plan, set out for New Zealand between 2002 and 2012, through a stepped implementation plan which included policies for:

- new funding and regulatory systems;
- better support for community-based EC services;

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[59] A note in the Innocenti report emphasises that these benchmarks were drawn up in consultation with government officials and academic experts from OECD countries in Asia, Europe, and North America, with additional input from both UNICEF and the World Bank

[60] Ideally, parental leave entitlements would enable all children to be looked after at home for at least the first 12 months of life, at which point there would be the option of gradually introducing children to subsidized, high quality child care until the age when formal schooling begins. (This option is currently available in several of the Nordic countries where children also have a legal entitlement to a place in a local authority early childhood service when parental leave ends.). The suggested benchmark figure of 25 per cent is intended to reflect government commitment to this ideal.

- targets for professional registration of EC teachers;
- better cooperation and collaboration between EC services, parent support and development, and education, health and social services; and
- greater involvement by the government in EC education, particularly in communities where participation in quality EC services is low.

Issue 1 (Re)Conceptualisation of early childhood education: What cultural understanding and expectations about early childhood education do we share as a country? How do we view very young children and what do we expect of them during the first years of life? What roles do the main contributors to young children's experiences - parents/primary caregivers, practitioners and children themselves - play in children's learning, development and growth? What is the rationale/motivation for providing early childhood education and care?

Recommendation: That there be broad discussions with stakeholders: parents, practitioners, managers, teachers, administrators and policy makers with a view to share, debate and discuss the different beliefs, knowledge and experiences that guide current policy and practice and develop an agreed platform for future action that is informed by an in-depth understanding of how research results are informing early years policy and practice.

Issue 2 The split system and divided services in early years settings. The split system which refers to child-care for under threes, Kindergarten for 3 to 5-year-olds and formal education for 5 to 7-year-olds needs to be addressed.

The divide between child-care settings for under three-year-olds and KG settings for three to five-year-olds is becoming blurred especially if the former continue to accept children who are older than three years of age. Moreover, having two distinct set-ups promotes a division not only of the service, but of a philosophy and vision about early years care and education; a staccato approach to supporting families with young children and adds difficulties to implementing healthy transition policies. The fact that the two sectors are governed by two Ministries complicates the scenario: having different administrative personnel overseeing child-care and KG settings reinforces the split between 'care' for under threes and 'education' for the older children.

Recommendation: The need to take steps to end the split system of early years provision. A key step forward towards an integrated service is having ONE entity to take over the governance, development and monitoring of the early years sector. The monitoring agency would need to be composed of multi-disciplinary professionals, bringing together staff from the social, health and educational sectors to support decisions, systems and programmes appropriate for young children and their families. Having one lead authority/entity responsible for early years from birth to seven will facilitate the organisation, governance and monitoring of the sector. It will help children, families and practitioners share and experience a seamless transition from one phase to another because of the shared vision and understanding of children's development.

Issue 3: Identification and registration of early years settings The fact that to date, child-care settings are invited rather than obliged to apply for provisional registration is an issue which needs to be addressed. Having the opportunity to operate early years settings without any regard for standards, monitoring or accountability can be dangerous for the children and families and shows a clear disregard for the care, protection and education of one of the most vulnerable groups in society.

Recommendation: Registration of all early years settings should be compulsory; licensing should be given on a temporary basis and renewed periodically, depending on positive assessment reviews which take into consideration clearly defined standards.

Issue 4 Quality matters: How do we define and measure quality? What factors contribute to good/high quality provision in early childhood education? Why is it important to ensure good quality experiences? What short-term and long-term positive effects are achieved through high quality early years provision?

Several research studies have shown the positive effects quality programmes have on children in the short and long-term. Similarly, several extensive literature reviews have identified what good quality early childhood services should look like both for under-two or under-three year olds as well as for the older age-groups. For example, in a review of the literature on quality for under twos,

There are different aspects of quality to be considered:

Doherty-Derkowski (1995) as cited in VCAA (2008) presents two essential aspects of quality:
- *structural quality, the regulated environment of space, teacher training, group size etc. and*
- *process quality, which is concerned with such things as relationships, stimulation within the learning environment and social emotional security.*

VCAA (2008) updates these indicators to include and consider:
- *cultural awareness, an appreciation of diversity, a comprehension of environmental, historical and technological influences on experience.*
- *the importance of the immediate context and its influence on well-being and development.*
- *Low staff/child ratios are essential in the provision of responsive care and education.*
- *The presence of highly qualified and experienced staff has been consistently linked to high quality interactions.*
- *The qualifications and competency of staff to implement curricula are critical to success*.

The '*Competencies at age 14*' report on New Zealand children participating in the longitudinal study *Competent children, competent learners (*Wylie, Hodgen, Ferral & Thompson, 2006) indicated that aspects of early childhood education still have associations with performance nine years later. The aspects that showed a lasting contribution were:

- *high quality staff interactions with children;*
- *an environment providing lots of books and written material and where children could select from a variety of learning activities;*
- *the child's starting age and the total length of early childhood education; and*
- *the socio-economic mix of the children attending the centre.* (p. 13)

Similarly, the EPPE[61] (2004) longitudinal study with 3000 children in English settings, indicated that

> *while attending a pre-school, rather than none, has a positive impact on reading and mathematics attainment, experiencing a longer duration of time in pre-school, attending a centre with higher quality and attending a more effective pre-school centre were all related to significant attainment benefits in the mid-term (still evident at age 7 years plus).* (p. ii).

Recommendation: A programme of research that systematically accumulates local data that, in conjunction with international research, can inform local developments.

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[61] The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project is a longitudinal study following 3000 children and explores the impact of pre-school centre provision on young children's cognitive and social/behavioural development. Publications/reports from EPPE are available at http://www.ioe.ac.uk/EPPSE_epublications_April2013_-_new_links.pdf.

(i) National, longitudinal research needs to be undertaken to determine what quality indicators positively contribute to children's short and long term achievements. What is the relationship between positive, early years experiences and success at school? To what extent does good practice in early years settings impact children's cognitive and social development? What are the links between early years experiences and early school leaving age? Such research data will serve to shed insights into what constitutes good practice with young children, thus facilitating and supporting the sharing of good practice across the early years sector.

(ii) Data are needed about the profiles of families who are making use of child-care as well as those who would like to make use of early years services but cannot do so. It is important to identify reasons related to access and affordability in order to address issues around equitable access opportunities for children and families, not only to secure placements in quality settings but to inform government and administration how best to fund, subsidise and support those who are disadvantaged and at-risk. Moreover, it is important to find out what perceived benefits parents believe their children accrue as a result of attending early years settings together with expectations they have for their children. Such information helps professionals to support families as necessary.

(iii) Systematic data gathering procedures through mechanisms such as annual returns from licensed (or registered) early childhood services ought to be in place in order to facilitate planning and development.

(iv) Research is necessary to document the experiences of children and families making use of early years settings. What do parents consider to be quality indicators? How informed are they about practices promoted in early years settings? Do parents' expectations match the early years philosophy espoused by the administrative staff who are leading and giving direction within settings? Such data provide rich discussions about expectations and beliefs regarding young children and their potential achievements. The limited data available suggests that there is variation in terms of quality provision. In their study assessing quality within five, small independent KG settings, Agius and Debono (2006), concluded that:

- none of the KG settings in their study demonstrated excellent provision in all areas (as assessed through the ECERS-R scale);
- two of the service providers were aware and trying to offer what they perceived to be important for children;
- whilst service providers showed an awareness of the different factors contributing to quality, these were not always observable in the respective centres;
- only a few parents showed an awareness of some factors that constituted quality in KG settings. The majority seemed to expect the same type of activities and provisions found in local formal school settings.

In another case-study within one State KG setting which involved the participation of the Head of School, KG assistants, parents and children, Hili and Mallia (2005) concluded that although adults were aware of the importance of play, this was not always evident in practice. The Head of School did not follow-up the sector to ensure that her expectations about play were actually being met; the KG assistants did not plan activities before-hand and some prepared children formally for Year 1. Parents were rarely engaged in school activities as the school did not inform them about events.

Parents need to be more visible, not only for personal information and satisfaction but to ensure that early years services are built on collaboration with and in response to families and the wider community within which children are growing up.

(v) Tracer studies are required about individuals who followed basic courses in child-care to find out whether they are employed in the sector and whether they have upgraded their professional qualifications. Data made available by RSDU for 2011-2013 indicate that whilst in 2011/2012 there was a turnover of 12.5% (34 of 273 employed carers moved out of the sector completely), in

2012/2013, there was a turnover of 25.3% with 74 of the 292 employed carers, moving out of the sector. A high-turnover is a factor which contributes to poorer quality but generally coincides with a move out of child-care to better paid jobs, concomitant with one's professional recognition and qualifications.

(vi) Research is needed to consider the practices of practitioners in child-care and KG settings. What contributes to good quality from practitioners' perspectives? Who draws up plans for the settings and how are these decisions taken? Who decides which activities to present? Evidence is needed about the planning, preparation and documentation which practitioners develop. In a context where children are considered active participants in their own learning, it is necessary that planning addresses the emerging interests of the children. There needs to be a cyclical process of planning-implementation-observation-evaluation-modified planning etc. Research into practices is critical to the quality of the experiences being offered especially in light of the minimal or complete absence of formal qualifications of practitioners and service managers in early years.

(vii) Research is needed to consider the assessment practices adopted in both child-care and KG settings. If holistic development is to be promoted and smooth transitions for children and their families are to be in place, assessment of children's achievements must be captured and reflected in detailed, insightful and individual profiles rather than through pre-determined checklists which anticipate that every child must achieve identical skills, knowledge and understanding via the same pathways. Such assessment practices depend on critically, reflective practitioners.

Issue 5: Staff training and qualifications As emphasised earlier in the document and as noted in a comparative study on professional qualifications and training of personnel working in early years sectors (Oberhuemer, Schreyer & Neuman, 2010), Malta has the least educated work-force in the early years with the shortest period of initial training. This, in spite of the OECD (2006) conclusion from a review of early childhood education and care in 20 countries, where staffing of early childhood centres is described as the "key to quality services".

The content offered in the various courses needs consideration in order to ensure that it is up-to-date in acknowledging and incorporating the latest research findings which need to be addressed in the promotion of appropriate pedagogical approaches. Such approaches and practices truly address children's holistic development within an environment which respects children as capable and creative individuals with the potential to interact, hypothesise and experiment and reflect upon the world around them. Such environments offer opportunities for real, meaningful learning and facilitate conceptual understanding in collaborative settings.

Recommendation Whilst ideally all practitioners working in early years settings are qualified with at least a first cycle degree, it would be practical to aim for a situation where the majority of the work-force is trained to the highest level. This could be planned realistically in order to reach an optimal situation over a number of years. It is imperative that a tier of highly-qualified practitioners is created – these will be key practitioners who are responsible for setting out the programme, working closely with parents, working closely with children and helping to give direction to the carers who are assisting them. Such practitioners would also be responsible for keeping detailed records of each child's achievements and shaping/re-shaping the programme of activities on the basis of the observations. Other employees with a diploma as their basic qualification can be employed as assistants to the key practitioners and they would have a supportive role in facilitating the preparation and realisation of activities. As Carr & Mitchell (2010) conclude, in the long-run, it is just too costly not to have well-trained and highly educated early years practitioners. Similarly Shonkoff (2010) has argued that the path to quality early years services for children is "well marked – enhanced staff development, increased quality improvement, appropriate measures of accountability, and expanded funding to serve more children and families" (p. 362).

Issue 6: Accreditation of courses. Courses which are currently approved as preparing 'qualified' early years practitioners are pegged at MQF/NQF Level 4 for carers and Level 5 for managers. New courses

are being accredited in light of the National Occupational Standards which were officially launched in January 2013. Occupational Standards draw heavily on the UK standards. According to the Scolaro report (2010)[62], it was worth examining "*the occupational standards as developed and used within the UK on the rationale that the courses offered in Malta including MCAST are based on UK qualifications, which "provide the underpinning knowledge for the National Occupational Standards*" (p. 16). This is reiterated later in the report when Scolaro (2010) concludes that *Having examined and evaluated the UK model and qualification framework for workers in the childcare sector it is recommended that Malta follows the same standards of training as by doing so it will improve and raise the quality of training provided for workers within this field and will also have a positive impact upon children using the services. In addition as the MCAST Course in childcare is based on UK occupational standards, the use of this framework based on the UK model will provide a common base for all childcare workers* (p. 36).

Recommendation The pilot work done on National Standards for Child Day Care (2006) and National Occupational Standards (2010-2013) need to be re-visited in light of on-going developments in the field of early childhood education and care. Whilst researching and reviewing documentation which develops within other countries is crucial, standards, supporting documentation, qualifications and practices need to reflect the local, cultural understandings and expectations. Secondly, it is easier to review, monitor and improve services as they impact on the local community than it is to adjust and adapt according to the changing realities in foreign contexts and cultures. For example, whereas this current paper advocates for an integration of services on 8 dimensions (Moss, 2011)[63], England still has a partial integration on three dimensions – administration, regulation and curriculum. It thus continues to have separate childcare and education sectors, with different access, funding, types of provision and workforces (Moss, 2012). Would this be something to emulate? On the other hand, policy research and direction in Scotland (Children in Scotland, 2011) is recommending a move towards a fully integrated early years system precisely because, "*a conceptual split exists in UK public policy, including across Scotland, about when a child needs 'care' or is ready for 'education'. ...this split works against the best interests of both young children and their families*" (p. 6).

Issue 7: Curriculum and programmes of activities Although more research is needed in the area, small-scale research studies, the preliminary report about compliance with Standard 5 of the National Standards being drawn up by WSAU and RSDU as well as anecdotal evidence all indicate that there is clearly a need for professional development to focus on the development of suitable programmes in order to address basic principles of how young children learn best and show an understanding of the learning outcomes for the sector as presented in the NCF (2012). Practices adopted in several settings are not addressing the needs of young children with the result that the experiences offered, do not maximise the potential development of each child. The relatively low or even total absence of qualifications of staff, coupled with years of unregulated services, minimal direction in terms of the development of frameworks, programmes and activities and in some instances, misguided expectations of parents, are all factors which have contributed to a situation of inappropriate practices.

Recommendation Continuous professional development should be mandatory. Keeping in mind that several practitioners have no formal qualifications or are in possession of a low-level qualification, CPD should support practitioners in the development of appropriate programmes of activities. This needs to be done in light of the outcomes of the NCF (2012) as well as other curricular documents which can be considered as best practice examples.

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Conclusion

It seems fitting to conclude this document by borrowing the 'cross-roads' metaphor used by Alison Elliott (2006) in her review of early years in Australia and the pathways to be followed for quality and equity for all children. A choice has to be made: Malta can continue to invest in early years services in a fragmented and sporadic manner in response to societal changes and international agreements and expectations. Such a decision would imply that the service will remain split and dysfunctional with responsibility attributed to different Ministries and entities, resulting in lack of clear policy and inconsistent regulation; low staff qualifications, variation in programmes and services which do not necessarily address the needs of young children adequately and a poor and fragmented understanding of the potential of early years. Alternatively, a choice can be made to develop a strategic vision for the early years sector which will gradually raise the awareness of the importance which needs to be attributed to this crucial phase in the life of young children as it impinges on their later achievements and contributions to society. Coherent policies, appropriate funding, ensuring staff have appropriate initial qualifications with opportunities for further development and strengthening of the quality assurance system across all the sector are all issues to be addressed. Should the latter choice be made, there is a long journey ahead: the strategic vision will need to embrace the complexity of the field arising from existing legislation, regulation, policy, funding and stakeholders together with the diversity of families, but it will be one journey which will bear positive rewards in the future if the right investment, energy and good will are channelled towards the early years.

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