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### **Pre-school education in Slovenia and its international comparison with the EU countries**

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#### **Summary**

Accessible and high quality pre-school education is an important welfare priority. According to PISA survey results, 15-year olds who attended pre-school education also achieved better results on the reading scale than those who didn't. The participation in pre-school education also has a positive effect on social cohesion. Besides that, it may have a positive effect on women's employability, harmonization of work and family life and the fertility rate. Investments in early childhood education also have a high economic rate of return. However, not only participation in pre-school education, but also its quality is important. Pre-school education is also a priority in national and international documents. The main purpose of the working paper is to represent selected views on pre-school education and main issues in Slovenia and in comparison with the EU. The working paper presents data from the year 2000 or from the year for which the most recent data are available.

In the majority of EU countries pre-school education and care is split into two areas (pre-school education and pre-school care). Slovenia has an integrated model of pre-school education and care, similar to some Northern European countries. The integrated model has a positive effect on preschool care provision for the youngest children. In Slovenia preschool education and care may be organized in kindergarten, childcare family or at home. In the school year 2011/2012 almost all children attended pre-school education in kindergarten.

EU countries differ in whether pre-school education is obligatory or not. When Slovenia had 8-year primary education, pre-school preparation was obligatory. With the introduction of 9-year primary school, pre-school preparation was abolished. In some EU countries participation in pre-school education is obligatory one year before children start primary school (Austria, Cyprus, Greece, Hungary, Latvia) or two years before they start primary school (Poland, Luxemburg). Pre-school education is thus part of compulsory education. In Austria, Cyprus, Greece, Hungary and Luxemburg, as in Slovenia, children begin to attend primary school at the age of six, in Latvia and Poland, at the age of seven. Introduction of a certain degree of obligatory pre-school education is also a challenge to be considered in Slovenia.

Availability of vacant places in kindergarten is important for pre-school education accessibility. In Slovenia it is not determined by law that vacant places in kindergartens must be available for all children in need. Children with special needs and socially disadvantaged children have advantage over other children. In the 2000/2001–2010/2011 period the number of rejected children increased strongly. Examples of good practice are Finland and Sweden, where places in pre-school education institutions must be guaranteed by the local authority for each child in need. In some EU countries (Austria, Hungary, the Netherlands and Estonia) reforms aimed at increasing the availability of places in pre-school education institutions are in place. In Slovenia, due to an increasing number of births, increased needs for vacant places in kindergartens are to be expected in the years to come.

The participation of children aged 1–2 years and 3–5 years in pre-school education has been increasing. The number of children enrolled in pre-school education has also been rising. The main reasons for these positive trends are a growing number of births, increasing participation in pre-school education as a consequence of realized national and EU goals and the introduction of free-of-charge kindergarten for the second and every further child attending kindergarten in year 2008. All these factors have an influence on the needs for vacant places for children, investments in kindergartens, the number of teaching and other staff and expenditure. As a result of a growing number of births in the last few years and fulfilment of EU goals, a further increase in the needs for vacant places is also to be expected in the next few years. In 2009 the participation of children aged 3-5 years was higher than the EU average. But the participation of children aged 5 in pre-school education and Isced 1 is one of the lowest among EU countries. The participation rate in education of children aged between four years and the year when they enter compulsory education in the school year 2010/2011 was below the EU 2020 target and in 2009 below the EU average. In the year 2011/2012 Slovenia achieved the EU 2020 target. The number of children from socially disadvantaged families enrolled in pre-school education has been increasing. The participation of children of foreign citizens in pre-school education is low. The majority of children enrolled in kindergartens attend all-day programme. The share of children attending all-day programme totalled 97.7% in the school year 2011/2012 and reached the highest level in the period 2000/2001–2011/2012.

The number of private kindergartens has been increasing but is still low. The number of private kindergartens totalled 42 in 2011/2012. It was the highest in the 2000/2001–2011/2012 period. But only a few of them don't receive public funds. The share of children enrolled in private kindergartens is also low. In the year 2011/2012 it totalled 3.1 %, which is 2,0 p.p. more than in the year 2000/2001. The share of children enrolled in private pre-school education is one of the lowest in the EU.

The number of kindergartens and class units increased strongly in the period 2000/2001–2011/2012. In 2011/2012 the number of kindergartens totalled 922, which is 108 more than in 2000/2001. Since the year 2004/2005 the number of class units has been increasing, too. Their number totalled 4,749 in the year 2011/2012 and in the 2000/2001-2011/2012 period it increased by a third. Consequently, the number of persons employed in kindergartens increased strongly. It totalled 14,173 in 2011/2012. The share of educators and assistant educators in the total number of persons employed in kindergartens totalled 72.0%. The number of educators and assistant educators has been increasing from the school year 2004/2005; the relative growth was the highest in the years 2009/2010 and 2010/2011. In the year 2009 the relative growth of teaching staff (educators and assistant educators) was comparable with the EU average, while in the period 2005-2009 the growth in Slovenia was stronger than the average level in the EU. The age structure of educators and assistant educator is favourable compared to the EU average. The share of teaching staff younger than 35 years is one of the highest among EU countries, while the share of employed persons aged

55 and more is one of the lowest. In the period 2006/2007–2011/2012 the share of young age group (25–34 years) increased the most compared to other age groups. With regard to the growing number of children born in the last few years, the needs for vacant places in kindergartens and for teaching staff are also expected to grow in the coming years.

The participation in pre-school education has a greater positive effect if the education is of high quality. The average number of children per class unit has been maintained at almost the same level for the last three years. It totalled 12.5 for children aged 1-2 years, 20.4 for children aged 3-5 years, and 17.1 for combined class units. The ratio between the number of children and the number of teaching staff is a frequently used internationally comparable indicator of the quality of pre-school education. In recent years the ratio has been kept at the same level and is one of the lowest among the EU countries. In the education structure of teaching staff, the share of teaching staff without appropriate education increased in the last few years. In the education structure of educators, the share of educators with a tertiary education increased, too.

In the year 2011 the average price for programmes in kindergarten totalled 456.80 EUR for the age group 1-2 years and 340.30 EUR for the age group 3-5(6) years. The highest price for the first period is a consequence of a lower number of children in class units. An average parent's payment for kindergarten totalled 146.40 EUR for the first age group and 109.07 EUR for the second age group. On average, parents paid 32% of the price. In the 2002–2010 period the share of parents' payments increased. Also, there are huge differences among kindergartens. In some EU countries pre-school education is free of charge, or parents pay only for selected activities or selected types of costs. In some EU countries a selected number of hours in pre-school education or participation in pre-school education one or two years before the beginning of primary school is free of charge. A frequently used form of support is payment regarding the family income, family size and other criteria. Exemption from pre-school education payment is usually used for socially disadvantaged families. Employer's contributions are a rare form of support for participation in pre-school education.

In 2009 expenditure on pre-school education as a share of GDP accounted for 0.71%. Within that, 0.56% was allocated for public expenditure and 0.15% for private expenditure. The share of expenditure on pre-school education in GDP totalled 0.63% in 2008. It was higher than the OECD average (0.44%) and the average of 21 European countries that are also OECD members (0.52%). In 2008 the share of public expenditure for pre-school education in GDP was lower than the EU average. In 2009 it almost reached the levels recorded in 2001 and 2002 when it was the highest in the 2000–2009 period. The share of private expenditure in total expenditure for pre-school education totalled 20.7% and was higher than the EU-21 average (12.2%) and the OECD average (18.5%). In the structure of expenditure on the pre-school level of education, expenditure on compensation of employees accounted for the largest share (2009: 67.1%), followed by other current expenditure (21.8%) and capital expenditure (11.1%). Expenditures on pre-school education per student are an approximate measure of the quality of education. In 2008 they totalled 8,029 USD PPS and were among the highest among OECD countries.