



Early Childhood Education and ERASMUS+

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White Paper on Early Childhood Education and Erasmus +

Authors: Karl-Heinz Knoll, Viktorija Lipskiene, Blanka Tacer

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Translation: Grit Dreßler
Design: Primera – Center for Pedagogical Further Education Vienna & E-School Group
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INTRODUCTION

This white paper was developed during the implementation of the "SuperheroLap" project, funded by the European Union's ERASMUS+ program (Project Reference: KA220-SN-23-36-151314). The core objective of this initiative was to design innovative methodologies that empower children aged 4 to 6 to actively explore and discover sustainability concepts. To achieve this, the project partners established an international pedagogical working group.

Because these experts joined as associated partners, they could not receive direct funding from the ERASMUS+ budget. Consequently, the project partners cross-financed all in-person working group meetings entirely through their own organizational resources. Retaining educational professionals in this capacity is critical; their frontline insights directly elevate the quality and field-readiness of the project's outputs from the earliest development stages.

Extensive dialogue with these working group educators, alongside consultations with national partners across participating institutions, revealed a significant systemic gap: the ERASMUS+ program remains largely unknown within the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) sector. This white paper serves to bridge that gap and advocate for a stronger, more strategic focus on ECEC within the broader ERASMUS+ framework.

The insights and recommendations presented here are rooted in real-world project implementation, accurately capturing the practical hurdles faced by childcare providers and institutions. Early childhood professionals are highly motivated to engage in European exchange programs. However, the sector currently lacks the tailored funding instruments and structural mechanisms required to make this engagement feasible.



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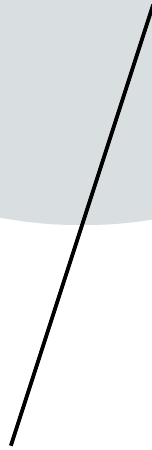
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01



CALL TO ACTION

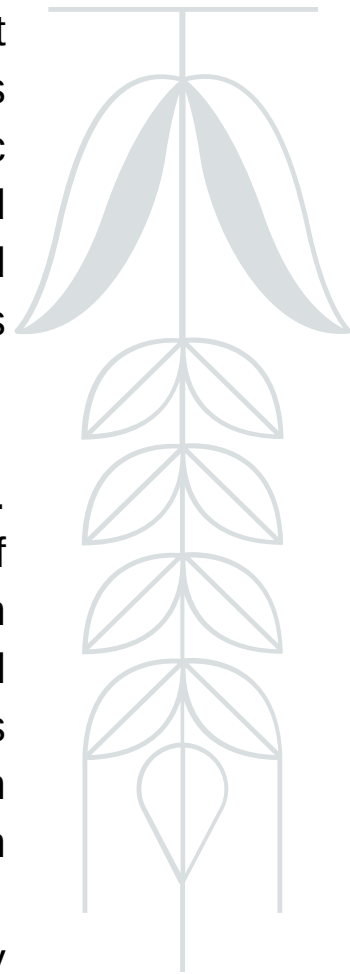


01

WHY THIS PAPER

Children possess an immense capacity for learning, yet conventional educational materials and methodologies frequently fall short. Passive play with uninspiring plastic toys offers little cognitive stimulation. Similarly, standard early science education often relies on rigid, teacher-led demonstrations where children function merely as passive observers.

The "SuperheroLap" project challenges this status quo. We demonstrate that young children are fully capable of conducting independent experiments and engaging in complex, inquiry-based play that drives meaningful learning. For policymakers, supporting these initiatives is a critical priority. Educational policy must champion active, play-based learning frameworks that position children as central agents in their own development. Integrating sustainability into early childhood pedagogy is particularly vital. For the rising generation, navigating and implementing sustainable practices will be a lifelong responsibility.



CROSS-NATIONAL PERSPECTIVES

- Lithuania (Šiauliai District): While sustainability education is active in kindergarten environments, it remains primarily confined to everyday routines like recycling, energy conservation, and basic nature walks. Teachers are highly motivated to lead environmental activities, but these efforts are often fragmented rather than integrated into a unified pedagogical framework. Opportunities to foster deeper competencies—such as understanding human-environmental impacts or collective problem-solving—remain limited.
- Slovenia and Austria: Sustainability education in these nations is deeply rooted in holistic, nature-centric, and play-based pedagogy, featuring a strong commitment to outdoor learning. Kindergartens frequently align environmental themes with seasonal changes and local community collaboration. While this effectively builds an emotional bond with nature, there is still significant room to cultivate structured reflection, critical thinking, and a long-term understanding of ecological concepts.

- Germany: Many kindergartens actively advance Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) by emphasizing democratic values, participation, and agency. Sustainability is integrated into project-based learning and daily operational routines. However, due to Germany's highly decentralized educational system, implementation quality varies drastically between centers. Educators express a clear need for standardized pedagogical guidelines and consistent regional approaches.
- Greece: Sustainability initiatives are typically executed through localized, thematic projects centered around immediate ecosystems, community life, and daily habits. While highly contextual and meaningful, these institutions are frequently constrained by limited material resources and a lack of professional development opportunities. Consequently, sustainability education relies heavily on the personal initiative of individual teachers rather than systemic support.
- Sweden: Sustainability is an explicit, mandatory core element embedded across the national preschool curriculum. Swedish kindergartens systematically integrate environmental awareness, responsible consumption, and ecological respect into daily pedagogical routines. Outdoor learning and inquiry-based science are central to the curriculum, effectively supporting children's understanding of natural processes. Despite this robust foundation, educators continually seek advanced methods to translate complex global systems into early childhood practice.

FIRST SUMMARY

Across all participating project countries—Lithuania, Slovenia, Greece, Germany, Austria, and Sweden—sustainability is increasingly recognized as a cornerstone of high-quality early education. Both European and national policy frameworks demand the integration of environmental awareness, social responsibility, and sustainable thinking into early childhood settings. Kindergartens are expected to introduce these values through experiential, play-based, and developmentally appropriate practices that deepen children's connection to nature, community, and daily life.

Across all partner nations, children benefit from rich learning environments that encourage exploration and social interaction. However, current ECEC sustainability frameworks focus heavily on practical habits and routine activities. To maximize the sector's potential, the focus must shift toward developing deeper systemic understanding, critical thinking, and active civic participation from an early age.



Based on international sector feedback, project partners concluded:

- **Support Networks:** Institutions need enhanced guidance from experienced, globally networked partners.
- **Administrative Relief:** Initial funding should cover administrative tasks to offset staff shortages.
- **Active Matching:** Agencies must actively facilitate direct personal connections between professionals, as traditional search methods are insufficient.
- **In-Person Foundations:** Initial face-to-face meetings are vital for building trust. While digital tools are viable, personal contact helps overcome technical skepticism and establishes stronger bonds.
- **Professional Development:** Global cooperation strengthens intercultural competence and the exchange of innovative pedagogical practices.
- **Sustainability:** Long-term frameworks are required to maintain networks beyond the duration of specific project funding.
- **Systemic Recognition:** Increased political and financial backing is essential to ensure equitable access to international exchange opportunities.

02

**EARLY CHILDHOOD
FOUNDATIONS**

02

LAUNCHPAD FOR LIFELONG LEARNING

Children possess an innate drive to explore their environment, which served as the core motivation for the "SuperheroLap" project. Our methodology provides young learners with the opportunity to actively discover sustainability concepts through hands-on, play-based actions. Because engaging with sustainable environmental design is a lifelong journey for future generations, anchoring these concepts early is vital.

The experiments developed in this project seamlessly integrate and advance seven key educational pillars simultaneously:

- **Social Education:** Collaborative discovery fosters a profound sense of unity where social background, origin, or skin color play no role, ensuring the seamless integration of children with disabilities.
- **Participation and Self-Confidence:** Active experimentation empowers children to express original ideas and experience firsthand how their actions positively shape their surroundings.
- **Communication:** Peer-to-peer collaboration during experiments acts as a natural, playful catalyst for language development, particularly supporting children from multilingual backgrounds.
- **Aesthetics:** The project stimulates sensory perception, creative design, and forward-thinking, teaching children how to practically apply the results they achieve.

....Launchpad for Lifelong Learning

- Science Education: A broad spectrum of foundational scientific fields is addressed through age-appropriate, real-world observation.
- Mathematics: Mathematical thinking is naturally reinforced as children practice counting, measuring, and recognizing geometric patterns during structured play.
- Environmental Awareness: Practical experiences cultivate an early, intuitive understanding of ecology, resource management, and environmentally responsible behavior.

By prioritizing direct experience over passive instruction, this approach builds high intrinsic motivation. To maximize this impact, systematic investment in teaching staff is essential. Educators require a robust understanding of the specific scientific and pedagogical background behind each experiment. Providing targeted materials, continuous professional development, and structured platforms for cross-border exchange ensures that childcare professionals can confidently implement these exploratory methods into everyday kindergarten routines.

DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION AND INTERNATIONAL ENCOUNTERS

Democracy education must begin in preschool to build a foundation for open-minded, prejudice-free attitudes. While children naturally embrace diversity, international exchange primarily impacts educational staff.

International training, workshops, and job shadowing via ERASMUS+ allow professionals to discuss both pedagogical content and broader social contexts. These encounters challenge assumptions and introduce new perspectives on inclusive education. To make this sustainable, ERASMUS+ requires low-threshold access, practical support, and sufficient funding for smaller institutions.

DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION AND THE ROLE OF EDUCATORS

Democracy education in early childhood sets the foundation for a cosmopolitan society. Since children are naturally open to diversity, encountering the unfamiliar mostly targets teaching staff.

ERASMUS+ enables educators to learn about democratic practices in other European countries through mobility programs. This exchange of experiences expands methodological skills and enhances intercultural competences in diverse environments. Low-threshold access to the program is therefore vital to support educators in their professional growth.

BROADENING HORIZONS:

The Role of International Exchange in Democratic Education

Encountering the unfamiliar—specifically through the international dimension—is vital for educating people about democratic societal structures. This applies primarily to teaching staff, as children generally act democratically, making origins and skin color irrelevant to them.

Participating in international training courses, workshops, and job shadowing offers professionals the chance to engage with peers from across Europe. Beyond learning technical content, educators exchange insights on the social realities of different countries. This allows them to explore how other nations promote democracy in kindergartens and integrate these international practices into their own work.

Because democracy education must begin in early childhood to build a cosmopolitan and prejudice-free foundation, the ERASMUS+ Programme can make a significant contribution. As outlined elsewhere in this document, optimal conditions are required to utilize ERASMUS+ effectively. Providing educators with easy access to the program enables them to experience new professional environments, develop tailored approaches, and broaden their personal and methodological skills.

03



**REALIZING
INTERNATIONAL
EXCHANGE**

03

CHALLENGES AND ALTERNATIVE PATHWAYS

While the ERASMUS+ Programme offers opportunities to implement mobility projects for children aged 4–6, this option is rarely used in practice. Realizing physical mobility for this age group is often impossible because it requires a large number of accompanying adults, such as parents, and ERASMUS+ does not fund these accompanying persons. Furthermore, the available funding generally does not cover the heavy organizational and support needs associated with traveling with very young children. Consequently, direct contact between children is ruled out, making physical international encounters significantly more challenging in early childhood education than in other educational sectors.

For this reason, alternative forms of international exchange must be developed specifically for early childhood education:

Digital Exchange

Formats: Virtual meetings, video messages, and shared projects offer age-appropriate intercultural experiences. These activities playfully foster openness, curiosity, and communication skills while exploring cultural similarities and differences.

Prioritize local intercultural learning over travel.

For ages 4–6, practical mobility requires ERASMUS+ flexibility, funding, and staff support.

Staff Cooperation:

Trained educators bring international methods and intercultural perspectives into daily kindergarten work, ensuring a positive impact without physical child mobility

Family Involvement:

Engaging families from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds allows children to experience diversity directly within their everyday educational environment.

PROVEN PRACTICAL MODELS

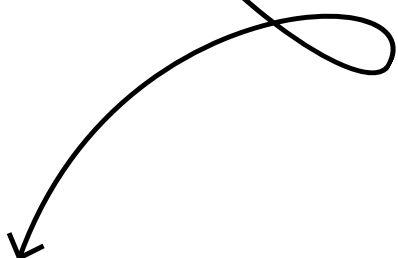
While platforms like eTwinning enable cross-border exchange for children, many participating partners note a significant lack of information on how to use them. Smaller institutions and educators with limited international experience especially require practical guidance and technical support during the initial stages.

To bridge this gap, experienced ERASMUS organizations within local, regional, and supraregional networks could host information events and support kindergartens during their initial phase. However, there is currently a lack of funding for these supporting services. Because of this, project partners consider mentoring and networking structures crucial for facilitating access to international cooperation in early childhood education.

Through a Small-Scale Partnership (KA210), kindergartens from Saxony and Vienna launched video projects. This let children meet virtually in a familiar environment, building intercultural curiosity and openness.

Choosing Vienna as a partner country enabled direct communication without language barriers. Crucially, the project proved that success relies on appropriate pedagogical approaches, openness, and regular interaction, rather than advanced language skills.

To utilize digital education efficiently in early childhood settings, robust technical and infrastructural prerequisites must be established. However, current conditions vary significantly across participating project countries.



TECHNICAL INFRASTRUCTURE AND EQUIPMENT

Ensuring equal access to digital education should transcend institutional structures (public or private). It is a challenge that requires government action and investment.

Funding Challenges: In other regions, the use of digital infrastructure remains limited. Institutions are frequently burdened with financing and maintaining their own technology. Smaller facilities, in particular, struggle to secure funds and ensure long-term equipment updates.

The Scandinavian

Benchmark: Scandinavia leads in this area. Every kindergarten features a digital infrastructure used for educational purposes, with children independently operating the tools after receiving proper instruction.

Digital tools must not replace direct social interaction or creative play. Instead, they should balance and enhance existing, child-centred educational methods.

Educators need continuous training and pedagogical support to use digital media confidently. International cooperation and exchange programs can further strengthen these competences across Europe.

Connectivity Issues: Beyond hardware, institutions require reliable broadband access. Due to uneven fiber-optic expansion across Europe, many facilities lack the bandwidth needed for online educational resources, creating regional inequalities for children and staff.

04

**ERASMUS+ AND
EARLY CHILDHOOD
EDUCATION**

04

NATIONAL ERASMUS+ APPLICATION RATES IN KINDERGARTENS

Erasmus+ participation among early childhood education institutions is growing but remains underrepresented compared to schools, with varying levels of engagement across partner countries. Key challenges include administrative barriers for smaller institutions and varying institutional capacities, despite rising interest in digital and innovative approaches.

Germany

Participation is growing slowly, primarily through small-scale partnerships, with high underrepresentation compared to school sectors.

Lithuania

Interest in international collaboration is increasing, but smaller institutions face administrative

Greece

Economic challenges impact participation, yet projects are increasingly used for professional development.

Sweden

Strong digital infrastructure and a developed system enable participation, though it varies by municipality.

Austria

Despite regional support networks, kindergarten involvement remains significantly lower than in the school sector.

Slovenia

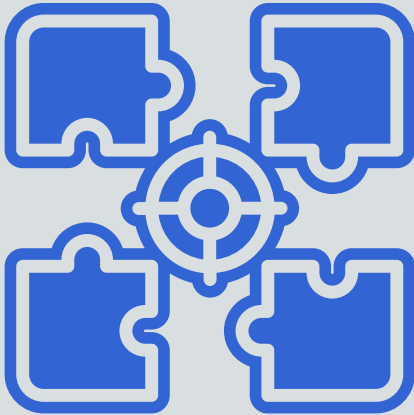
European project engagement is rising, largely dependent on local capacity and support.

For more details on Erasmus+ participation, visit the National Agencies website. [\[1\]](#)



CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

There is a major gap between typical early childhood institutions and those utilizing ERASMUS+, leaving the sector underrepresented. To bridge this divide, national and European access to international programs must be strengthened.



Key Challenges & Solutions

Adapt Support: Current frameworks fail to meet the specific needs of early childhood education.

Lower Barriers: European programs must reduce administrative burdens and improve information access.

Support Small Facilities: Smaller institutions require targeted funding and personnel assistance.

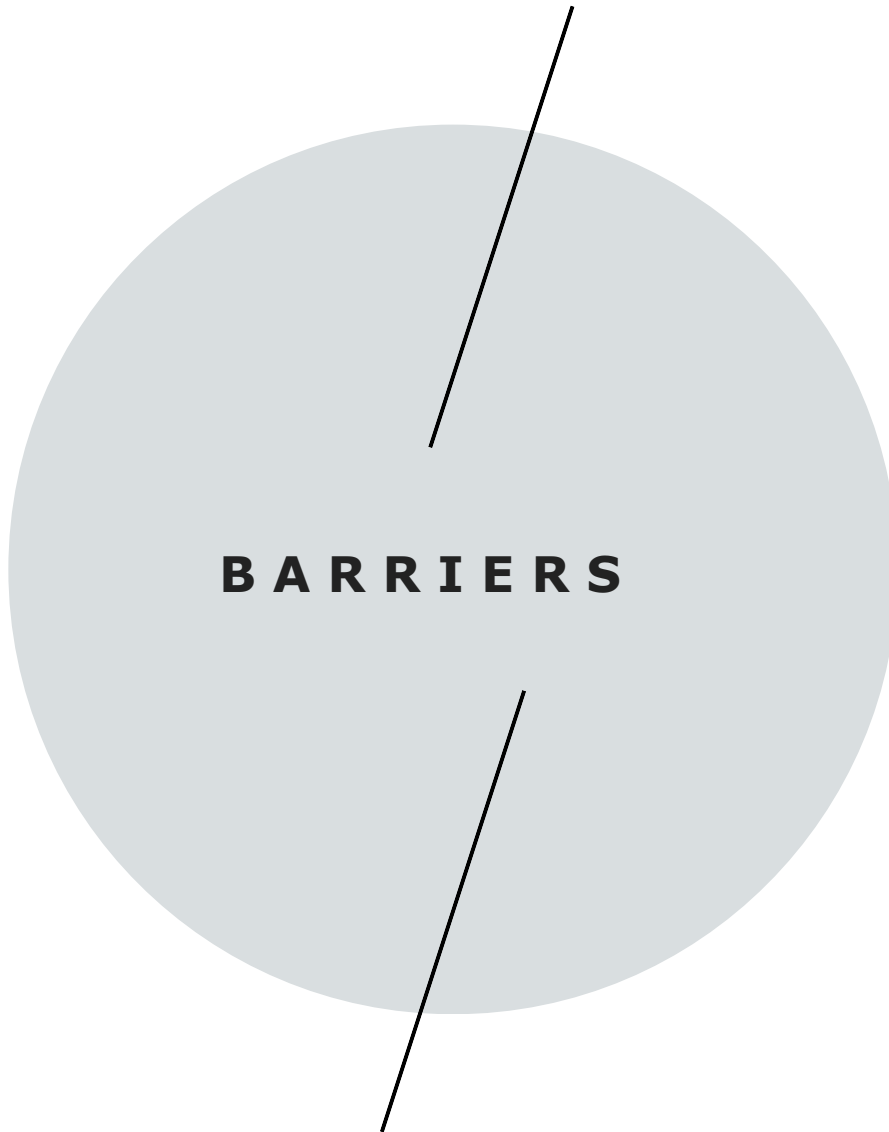
Simplify Mechanisms: Frameworks must become more accessible, practice-oriented, and sustainable.

Value of Participation

Drives Innovation: International cooperation provides immense added value for staff, institutions, and children.

Fosters Values: Early mobility builds inclusion, intercultural understanding, and democratic values from a young age.

05



BARRIERS

05

Barriers to Early Childhood Education Participation in ERASMUS+

Early childhood education (ECEC) institutions are heavily underrepresented in the ERASMUS+ program compared to schools and vocational sectors. This lack of participation stems from a combination of systemic, financial, and structural barriers across the sector.

Key Barriers to Participation

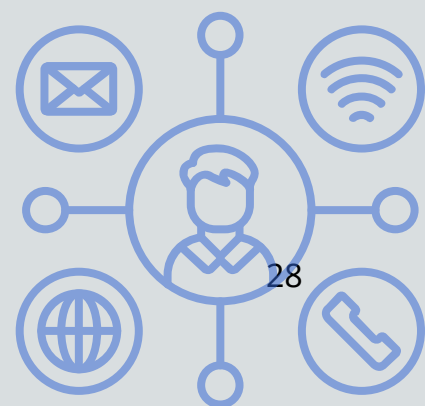
- **Low Awareness and Network Deficits:** The program is largely unknown at the leadership and decision-making levels. Institutions frequently lack the professional networks and methodological expertise required to find international partners.
- **Severe Resource and Time Constraints:** Small institution sizes mean a baseline lack of organizational capacity. Frontline staff face increasing everyday pedagogical workloads and staff shortages, leaving no time to manage international projects or cover for absent team members.
- **Administrative and Compliance Anxiety:** Complex application frameworks, strict reporting guidelines, and language barriers create an unmanageable administrative burden. Providers heavily fear potential financial clawbacks from National Agencies or unexpected co-financing and pre-financing costs.



Structural Framework Bottlenecks

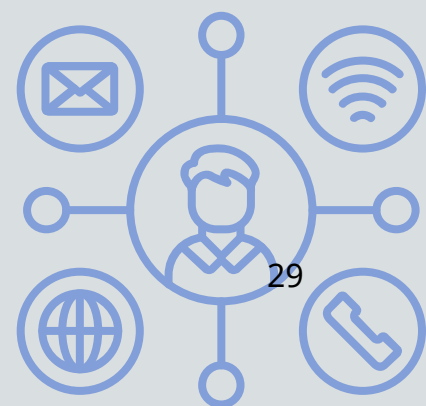
- **The Consortium Problem:** Unlike stable school or vocational consortia, ECEC centers do not send staff for training regularly. This leads to a highly fluid, fluctuating annual membership that makes standard consortium management impractical.
- **Single Application Limitations:** While individual center applications allow text templates to be reused efficiently, strict limits on the maximum number of application submissions prevent widespread adoption of this method.

Ultimately, the project findings suggest that increasing ECEC engagement requires low-threshold access, targeted advisory support, and simplified compliance mechanisms tailored to the lean operational realities of childcare providers.



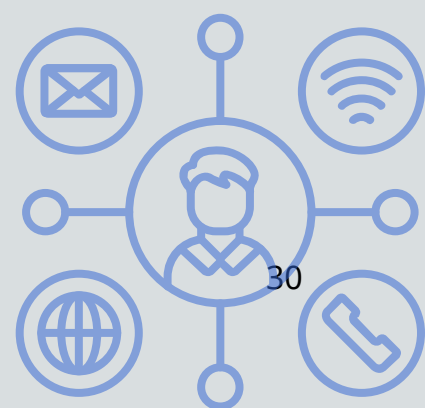
GENERATIONAL LANGUAGE BARRIERS AND REGIONAL EXCLUSION

A critical socio-political barrier to ERASMUS+ participation remains largely unaddressed by European educational policy: the generational and regional language divide across Eastern European member states and eastern Germany. The current international framework for professional development courses, job-shadowing, and European networking relies heavily on the assumption that participants possess a working proficiency in English. However, this assumption fails to account for the historical and geopolitical realities of the late 20th century. Prior to 1990, the mandatory first foreign language across the Eastern Bloc—including the former German Democratic Republic (GDR)—was Russian, not English. Consequently, a significant portion of the current, highly experienced ECEC workforce consists of mature professionals who never received foundational English training during their formal education.



This linguistic misalignment creates severe systemic consequences for the program's equity goals:

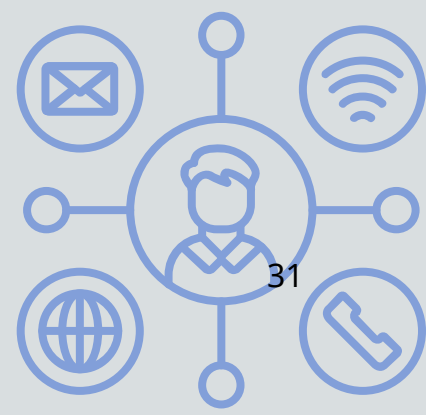
- **Exclusion of Seasoned Expertise:** The very educators who possess decades of practical, hands-on pedagogical experience are structurally barred from participating in ERASMUS+ courses and mobility opportunities solely due to an English-centric framework.
- **Deepening Regional Disparities:** This barrier disproportionately impacts Eastern European member states and eastern Germany, inadvertently fueling a lopsided distribution of funding and international innovation toward Western European nations.
- **Undervaluing Non-Verbal Pedagogical Skills:** Early childhood education relies uniquely on practical, situational, and non-verbal communication methods. In this specific educational sector, professional knowledge transfer does not depend exclusively on advanced corporate English.



STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS FOR LANGUAGE INCLUSIVITY

To bridge this regional gap and ensure equitable access to international programs, the project partners recommend the following targeted interventions within the ERASMUS+ framework:

- 1. Multilingual and Regional Training Tracks: Develop and fund specialized international training modules hosted in regional languages, or provide professional, simultaneous translation services for key ECEC mobility tracks.**
- 2. Low-Threshold Language Support Measures: Allocate targeted financial allowances within project budgets specifically for local language preparation, tailored to mature learners who are transitioning from Russian to basic vocational English.**
- 3. Inclusive, Practical Communication Formats: Expand the recognition and funding of highly visual, practice-based, and observational exchange models—such as specialized job-shadowing—where shared pedagogical practice takes precedence over advanced language fluency.**



06

**STRUCTURAL
INTEGRATION AND
CAPACITY BUILDING**

06

STRUCTURAL DIVERSITY AND COMMON CHALLENGES

Across all project partner nations—Germany, Sweden, Lithuania, Slovenia, Greece, and Austria—both public and private providers are legally authorized to operate early childhood education and care (ECEC) institutions. Despite these varied national governance models, providers face identical systemic barriers that isolate them from the ERASMUS+ program:

- **Information and Network Deficits:** A fundamental lack of targeted information leaves childcare centers completely unaware of the concrete funding tracks and professional benefits of international mobility.
- **Severe Resource Shortages:** Demanding daily pedagogical responsibilities and widespread staff shortages leave frontline educators with zero surplus time to design or manage international initiatives.
- **Administrative and Digital Friction:** Opaque EU registration portals present a high entry barrier for local childcare directors who lack dedicated IT, compliance, or international departments.
- **Prohibitive Onboarding Time:** The application framework is highly inefficient for small providers. An inexperienced employee requires 3 to 4 days of uninterrupted desk time just to prepare a single application.

STRATEGIC SUPPORT FRAMEWORKS AND POLICY INTERVENTIONS



To bridge these gaps and align the program with the lean operational realities of the ECEC sector, the project partners recommend establishing the following support mechanisms:

- **Advisory Hubs:** Localized, sector-specific advisory centers and peer-to-peer mentoring networks to guide new applicants through onboarding.
- **Streamlined Bureaucracy:** Simplified, fast-track application forms and lighter reporting guidelines calibrated to the capacity of standalone facilities.
- **Targeted Matchmaking:** Structured, international networking events specifically designed to help resource-constrained ECEC institutions find trusted European partners quickly.
- **Dedicated Funding Windows:** Ring-fenced funding allocations and quotas managed by National Agencies to protect the ECEC sector from competing against hyper-resourced higher education institutions.

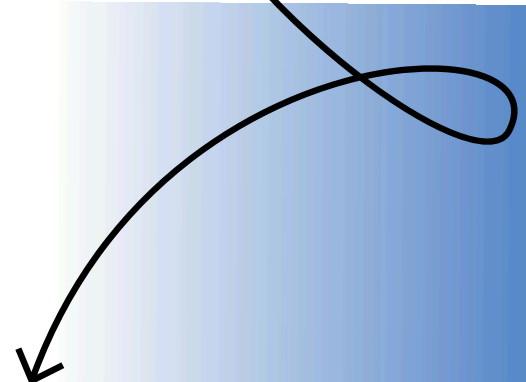
THE ROLE OF SPECIALIZED COORDINATORS AND LOW-THRESHOLD FORMATS



The project partners consider the establishment of funded coordinators a vital prerequisite for strengthening participation. These experts guide smaller centers through partner matching, project planning, application compilation, and cross-border communication. To build valid partnerships, the EU should fund low-threshold operational formats:

- Cross-Border Events: Physical or digital informational seminars executed in direct alignment with a second European partner institution.
- Simplified Preparatory Visits: The reinstatement of an expedited, few-page application pathway for preparatory visits. Face-to-face encounters build organizational trust, allow the exchange of pedagogical philosophies, and spark project ideas adapted to daily childcare practices.
- Accompanied Mobility: To maximize success, early exchanges should be accompanied by an experienced coordinator or mentor supporting a suggested framework of up to eight participants for a maximum duration of four days.

FINANCIAL DE-RISKING AND PREPARATORY FUNDING



A major structural bottleneck is the financial risk associated with project development. Under current regulations, potential applicants must finance the specialized services of coordinators out of pocket. If a project application is subsequently rejected, funding for the coordinator's upfront labor is lost. This exposure deters risk-averse non-profit and municipal providers from initiating projects.

To resolve this issue, the project partners strongly recommend introducing low-threshold preparatory funding mechanisms, such as a standardized lump sum. Actively decoupling project development costs from the final evaluation outcome will remove a prohibitive entry barrier for smaller institutions. In the long term, establishing stable, risk-free coordination infrastructures will secure sustainable and equitable ECEC participation within European cooperation programs.

07

**ADVICE AND
SUPPORT**

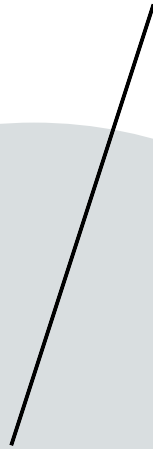
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CROSS-BORDER LEGAL CONTEXT: THE STATUS OF INCLUSION

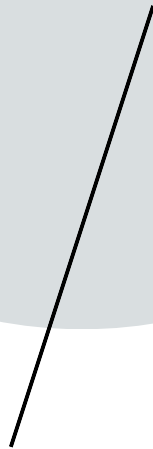
Designing appropriate "Advice and Support" frameworks becomes even more complex when navigating the widely divergent national legal environments of project partners. A core example of these structural differences is how inclusion is mandated and implemented across Europe. While inclusion is increasingly recognized as a vital European principle, the legal obligations and institutional capacities vary significantly by country, altering the type of administrative support kindergartens require

- Sweden: Inclusion functions as a fundamental educational principle; integration into mainstream settings is standard practice wherever possible.
- Lithuania & Slovenia: Legally supported and actively promoted by national legislation, though practical execution relies heavily on the availability of specialist support and local institutional resources.
- Greece & Austria: Promoted via national policies and legislative frameworks, but implementation is highly decentralized, varying greatly between federal provinces (Austria) or specific institutional capacities (Greece).
- Germany: No statutory mandate exists. Mainstream early childhood providers generally decide on a voluntary basis whether to accept children with disabilities.

08



CONSORTIA



08



While consortium structures in early childhood education differ from those in school and vocational training due to their flexible and dynamic nature, they present a unique opportunity to foster inclusivity, resilience, and innovation. The regular change in participating institutions encourages adaptability and broadens the variety of perspectives involved, making collaborations more vibrant and representative of the diverse early childhood landscape.

By establishing well-informed, experienced consortium leaders and promoting continuous capacity-building, smaller or less experienced institutions can leverage the advantages of collective action. Such structures facilitate resource sharing, peer support, and effective management—reducing individual burdens and expanding access to international opportunities. Embracing flexible consortium models can thus serve as a powerful engine for democratizing access to European cooperation, strengthening institutional confidence, and accelerating the internationalization of early childhood education across Europe.

In conclusion, fostering flexible and well-supported consortium structures offers a promising pathway to overcome structural barriers and promote greater participation in European cooperation. By investing in experienced leadership, capacity-building, and adaptable models, we can ensure that early childhood education institutions of all sizes and backgrounds can benefit from international exchange and collaboration. This approach not only enhances professional development and innovation but also empowers the sector to contribute more effectively to a united, inclusive, and internationally engaged early childhood education community across Europe.

CONCLUSION

Promoting international cooperation and sustainability education in early childhood is essential for nurturing responsible, culturally aware, and environmentally conscious future generations. Despite existing challenges, strategic support, simplified processes, and targeted capacity-building can significantly enhance participation among early childhood institutions in ERASMUS+ and similar programs. By fostering inclusive, innovative, and sustainable practices, educators and policymakers alike can lay the foundation for a more connected and responsible Europe. We invite all stakeholders to embrace these opportunities, collaborate across borders, and commit to shaping a sustainable future starting with our youngest children.

