

SHAPING THE KINGDOM'S FUTURE

Towards brighter beginnings
for our children

JULY 2023

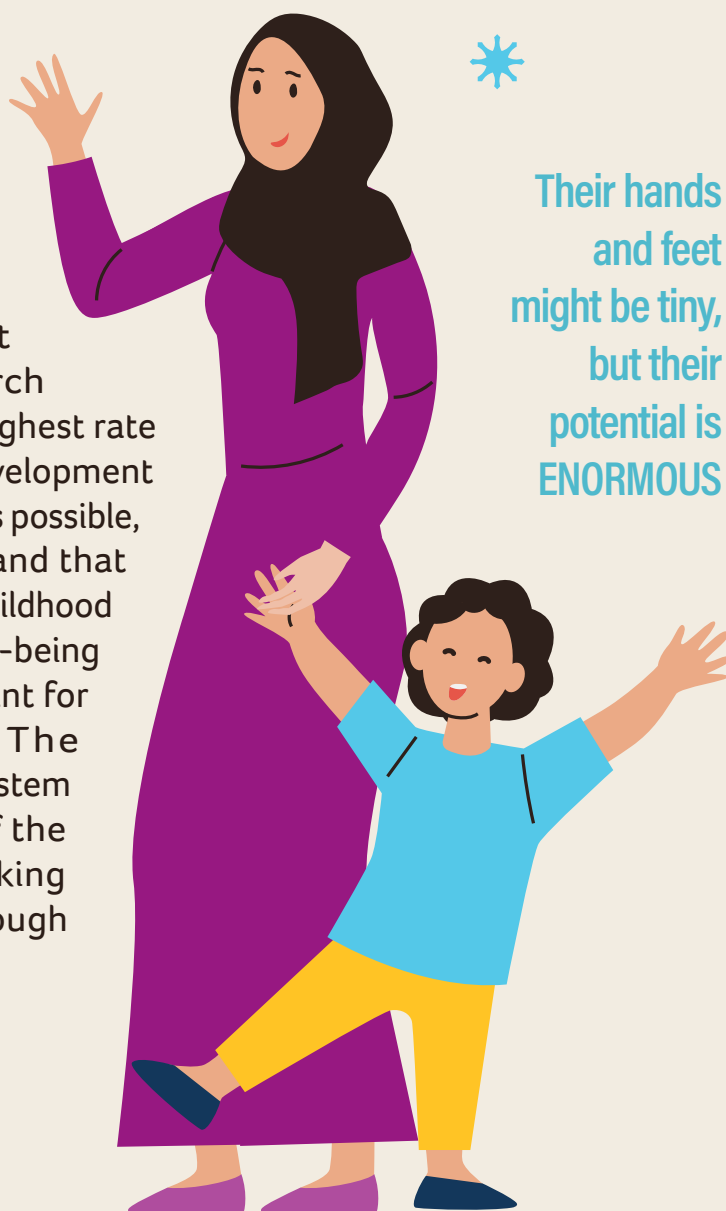


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INTRODUCTION

Their hands and feet might be tiny, but their potential is enormous. Childhood from birth to 8 years old is the period referred to as early childhood, a period of rich brain development for children. Early childhood provides the foundation for subsequent physical, cognitive, and socio-emotional development. Quality Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) has immediate effects in terms of gains in cognitive and non-cognitive skills, as well as indirectly in terms of greater academic and employment success later in life¹. Research evidence has found that the highest rate of return in early childhood development comes from investing as early as possible, from birth through age five, and that parental involvement in early childhood care and education boosts well-being and confidence and is important for academic progression². The stakeholders in the ECCE ecosystem in the Kingdom are aware of the importance of ECCE and working towards strengthening it through national efforts and goals.



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NATIONAL EFFORTS

The policy agenda for ECCE in Saudi Arabia is moving in the right direction. Several key players are working towards improving and developing the ECCE ecosystem in KSA, including the **Ministries of Education, Health, and Human Resources & Social Development (MHRSD), the Education and Training Evaluation Commissions, Vision Realization Programs (VRPs), universities, NFPs,** and other players.

In line with the Vision 2030 strategic objective of building a life-long learning journey, the **Human Capability Development Program (HCDP)**, a VRP, aims to raise kindergarten enrollment to **40 percent by 2025³**, and the **Ministry of Education (MoE)** aims to raise kindergarten enrollment to **90 percent by 2030⁴**. In recognition of the importance of parental involvement in early childhood development, the **HCDP** also aims to increase the percentage of parental

participation in school-related activities to **80 percent** (from a baseline of 37 percent in 2018)⁵. The Kingdom has also made strides in a major aspect of development which is inextricably linked with early childhood education: female employment. **The Human Resources Development Fund (HRDF)** supports working mothers by subsidizing their childcare services through the **Qurrah initiative**, allowing them to join the labor market while being reassured that their children will be cared for.

Providing high-quality kindergarten can only be achieved if 'high quality' is clearly defined. In line with this, several entities including the **MoE** and the **Education and**

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Training Evaluation Commission (ETEC) have developed standards to evaluate the quality of teaching and learning in early childhood settings. These include educational and developmental standards, specialized standards for kindergarten teachers, and the **Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS)**, international standards which have been localized to evaluate quality within public kindergartens. The national efforts in the ECCE space have led to a consistency in the offerings, leadership, environments, and overall quality of public kindergartens in KSA.



Numerous other guides have been developed by different entities to support key stakeholders in the ECCE ecosystem. These include guides for teachers and caregivers in kindergartens and daycares, guides for those in charge of early intervention programs for students with special education needs, as well as guides on child rights and parenting for families and guardians.

In addition to the standards and guides, there have been several national efforts to develop the ECCE space. The **MoE** is expanding the supply of kindergartens across all regions of the Kingdom to meet the ambitious targets for kindergarten enrollment and has developed an online early childhood platform so children who cannot access in-school early childhood education can still access a curriculum and benefit from educational and developmental activities. The MoE is taking comprehensive approach to improving kindergarten education through innovative teaching methods, infrastructure improvements and structuring workforce qualifications and profile requirements.

Cambridge International also recently launched the Cambridge Early Years programme for ages 3-6 years as part of their pathway. The Cambridge Early Years Curriculum has benefitted from Cambridge's wide-ranging transnational research work

and in collaboration with trusted early years experts, so it reflects the very latest educational thinking. The pathway includes curriculum, assessment tools, resources and standards for early years practitioners to define key characteristics and practices of effective educational provision for young learners. Schools wanting to deliver the curriculum and become a Cambridge Early Years Center have to demonstrate their eligibility to do so by going through a registration process. Emkan Education is the KSA's Cambridge Associate who will be facilitating the process and ongoing support⁶.

The **Family Affairs Council**, under the **MHRSD**, has worked on a parenting program including a training kit for parents and care providers for children birth to 18 years, and is currently working on a caregiver training certificate with **UNICEF** for children from birth to 3 years old.

The not-for-profit sector in Saudi Arabia has a significant role in the ECCE space. **The Child Care Association**, for example, provides multiple programs to support mothers in

caring for their children (e.g. nursing mothers' program). **Al Muhaidib Social Foundation (AMSF)** is one of the key entities which is committed to the development of youth. **AMSF** in collaboration with the **Saudi Standards Metrology and Quality Organization (SASO)**, works towards understanding and analyzing the current state of the early childhood environment including identification of the gaps and opportunities in the space of children's experience (physical, social and learning aspects) and provides recommendations to developers and policymakers to include into frameworks and standards.



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FAMILY AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Family and community engagement are crucial for a healthy and thriving early childhood care and education environment. Family engagement refers to the formal and informal relations that families have with ECCE services, whereas community engagement refers to the connections between the ECCE services and all forms of input and contribution by community services to ECCE ⁷. The most common family and community engagement strategies can be split into two categories: child-focused and center-focused.

Center-oriented engagement:

- Volunteering (organizing the community to help and support run events, fundraising activities, trips, sharing skills and expertise)
- Involving the families and communities in decision-making related to the ECCE centers
- Utilizing resources from the community to strengthen programs and children's learning and development ⁹.

Child-focused strategies:



- Designing effective communication about programs and children's progress
- Helping families establish home environments that support children as learners
- Providing information and ideas to families about how to help children at home with stimulating their development and other curriculum-related activities ⁸.



The ECCE environment in the Kingdom could benefit greatly from increased engagement with families and the wider community. Such engagement, in countries such as Sweden and New Zealand, has shown to aid in young children's growth and wellbeing, and it could help contribute to a more integrated and effective ECCE ecosystem in KSA.

Saudi communities' capacity for change and openness to new ideas will play a crucial role in shaping the future of early childhood education in the country. The dedication to realizing the mission of Vision 2030, and the rapid pace of transformation and change Saudi is enduring is nothing short of remarkable. Harnessing this flexibility, adaptability, and readiness to grow will offer more opportunities for the integration of families and communities to become involved in the ECCE ecosystem, creating a more dynamic and inclusive space for children's growth and development.

Another positive aspect is the increasing demand for quality early childhood education. The number of parents who value quality care and learning for their children is increasing due to the increase in awareness. In the past, the norm has been for family members, nannies, and helpers to care for the children during the early childhood stage. However, with higher awareness on the importance of ECCE, more parents are enrolling their children in ECCE centers. The low supply of ECCE centers, only **1516 nurseries and kindergartens** in Saudi Arabia as of 2023, has caused a high demand and waiting lists in high quality ECCE centers and institutions. The increase in demand but shortage in the supply creates an attractive opportunity for investors to establish ECCE centers in the country.



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The government and private provision of quality ECCE is a key enabler for women being able to enter, return, or progress in employment. The increase in female involvement in the workforce is another driver for the ECCE environment in Saudi Arabia. **Vision 2030** promotes Saudi women as an integral part of the country's strengths and one of the goals is to increase female participation in the workforce from **22% to 30%** ¹⁰. This goal has already been achieved, with Saudi women comprising **33.6%** of the Saudi workforce as of March 2022, according to the **General Authority for Statistics (GASTAT)**. The influx of women in the labor market is due to reforms, legislations and laws that foster an inclusive environment in the workplace. Dr. Nuwair S. Al-Shammari, who was chair of the media committee at a conference on women's empowerment in November 2021, added: "The transformations in recent years saw an overwhelming presence of Saudi women in the labor market, Chambers of Commerce, Shoura Council, diplomatic work, and other important leadership positions."



Women were granted the necessary powers to fulfill their responsibilities toward the country due to their capabilities with the government's support" ¹¹.

As a result of the increase in the number of females in the workforce, demand for enrollment at ECCE centers, especially for day-cares has risen. The number of women in the workforce is only expected to grow, and with it so will demand for ECCE centers. The greater demand for these centers creates a big opportunity for investment in the ECCE environments and more centers opening to cater for the demand and insufficient supply.

Affordability of childcare centers is a factor influencing women's decision to work. A 2018 study on childcare as a potential barrier to women's employment in Saudi Arabia found that around 20% of mothers cited lack of affordable childcare as at least one reason they were not looking for a job. Indeed, daycare center fees range from 1000 SR to 3000 SR per month, and kindergartens range from 1400 SR to 4800 SR per month, which is prohibitive for many families ¹².

Although awareness is increasing amongst families and the community, a large portion of the society in Saudi Arabia still

lacks the sufficient awareness on the importance of early childhood care and education and are less aware of how crucial the early childhood phase is in the life of the child. This is reflected in the low number of enrollments

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in KG, which was 18% in 2021 ¹³. A lot of families underestimate the value of high quality ECCE and prefer to keep their child at home or to send them Raising awareness of the society in Saudi Arabia on the importance of ECCE can support the development of the ECCE ecosystem and environment through enabling, support, advocacy or even funding. Raising awareness can take place through social media campaigns, events (both virtual and physical), and boosting relevant content. The more aware society is, the more engaged it will become in the ECCE space, and therefore the more the ECCE environment will grow in Saudi Arabia.

Integrating ECCE institutions into the community requires a collaborative and cooperative effort between families, the community, and the educational centers themselves. When ECCE organizations are able to engage with these groups, as vital partners of every aspects of the child's ECCE journey, they can create an environment that will support the growth and expansion of ECCE in Saudi Arabia.

WORKFORCE IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

The early childhood care and education workforce is key in providing children with the care and support they need for their development while at daycares, nurseries or kindergartens. Saudi has and continues to work on preparing its early childhood workforce through educational qualifications, standards and training. Public kindergartens in Saudi Arabia have more rigorous teacher qualifications than in many countries across the globe. Teachers in MoE kindergartens are required to hold bachelor's degrees in early childhood education. This positions public kindergartens at an advantage with providing high quality care and education. However, this requirement does not apply



A decorative graphic at the top of the page features three interlocking puzzle pieces: a teal one on the left, a yellow one at the top center, and a purple one on the right. Scattered around these pieces are several starburst shapes in teal, yellow, and purple. The teal puzzle piece contains the main text of this block.

A gap still exists between academia and practice where students in early childhood higher education programs lack hands-on experience and training

in private kindergartens and daycares where many caregivers and teachers do not have post-secondary degrees. This provides an opportunity to enhance regulatory qualification and training requirements for caregivers and teachers in private early childhood education and care settings ¹⁴.

Many universities across Saudi work to offer qualifications in Early Childhood Education. The universities ensure that their curriculum is aligned with standards set by the Ministry of Education. Yet, a gap still exists between academia and practice where students in early childhood higher education programs lack hands-on experience and training. This suggests a need for enhancement of pre-service and in-service training programs for caregivers and teachers. The gap highlights a difficulty for kindergartens, nurseries and daycares to recruit the qualified staff. The focus of Early Childhood Education in some universities is also positioned on kindergartens compared to the broader

range of early childhood, suggesting less focus on the critical developmental periods of infants and toddlers¹⁵.

Standards in early childhood education allow for a unified approach to care and education and a shared understanding between caregivers and teachers, enhancing the quality of care and education provided to children. In efforts to enhance quality, ETEC has developed kindergarten teacher standards based on the **Saudi Early Learning Standards (SELS)** and developed early grades teacher standards. Teachers in KSA wanting to receive a professional teaching license must be able to demonstrate knowledge of these standards in the professional teaching examinations. On the other hand, teachers and caregivers within private daycare settings have no standards or licensing requirements. This results in unsuitable and unqualified staff within some early childhood settings and with staff practices based on personal efforts and convictions. Additionally, staff in daycares are not provided with any certified programs or activities to be rolled out in daycares, resulting in activities/programs that are personal efforts. This raises the risk of providing inappropriate

and insufficient care and education programs and activities, compromising child development and wellbeing. The creation of certified standards, programs, and activities for ECCE centers, especially daycares, instead of relying on personal efforts is an opportunity for growth. This will lead to unified & quality programs and activities that are beneficial to the child's development and learning.

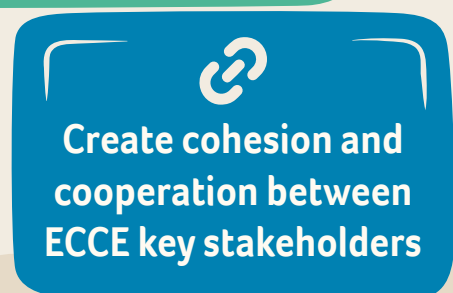
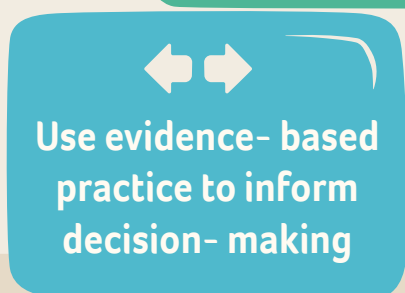
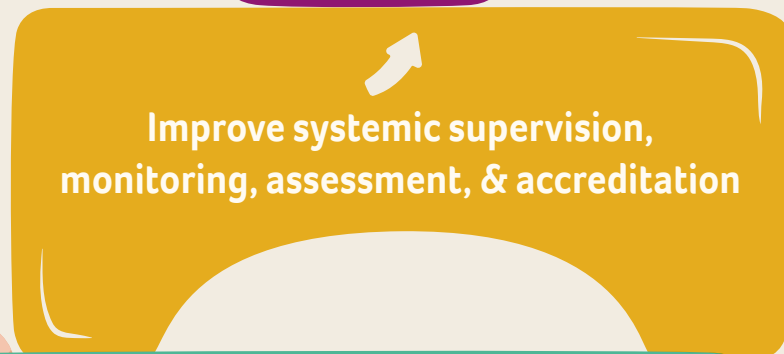
Perceptions of working in early childhood care and education settings have also resulted in a disinterest of many to work in the sector. With long hours, low wages, and lack of professional development opportunities, specifically in the private sector, the early childhood care and education space is left with unqualified or trained staff and high teacher attrition rates, risking the quality of care provided to children and the secure attachments that children need to form with caregivers. This suggests a need to enhance policies related to teacher benefits, training, and professional development¹⁶.

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OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

The gaps and challenges in the ECCE ecosystem in Saudi Arabia create considerable opportunities for the development and enhancement of ECCE. Some of these opportunities include:





Provide ECCE resources in the Arabic Language

Various ECCE standards and resources are available online for leaders, caregivers, and teachers in the English language, however there are very limited resources for Arabic speakers. To promote ECCE in Saudi Arabia, it is critical to develop Arabic-language resources that support the acquisition of essential skills and best practices for teachers and caregivers.



Improve systemic supervision, monitoring, assessment, and accreditation

Systemic supervision and assessment of centers is extremely important but limited in Saudi Arabia. Evaluation and assessment allow for monitoring and creates a more accountable and transparent educational ecosystem that allows for early identification and elimination of risk. It is also an opportunity for leaders, teachers, and caregivers to receive feedback and improve their performance. Those working in ECCE centers are more likely to follow the laws and regulations when inspection and monitoring are more regular and systemized. Therefore, there is an opportunity for this area to be expanded, which would result in higher quality ECCE centers.



Create mandatory quality standards

Another opportunity for improvement is accreditation and quality assurance of ECCE centers, which is necessary for families, policy makers and investors. Accreditation will allow families to select quality programs for their children, investors to receive feedback on and enhance their services, and policy makers to understand the state and quality of centers. There is currently a lack of accreditation for early year programs in Saudi Arabia. The inconsistent quality of educational programs, offered by ECCE centers, is highlighted by the lack of agreed quality standards to measure institutions against. Standards of high quality must be applied throughout the entire ECCE system to ensure a minimum level of quality is being offered to children and so classification of ECCE centers in terms of quality is clearer.



resources effectively and implement evidence-based strategies that support the growth of the sector. The availability and accuracy of such data is critical to support the expansion of ECCE services and improve the ecosystem. Reporting and monitoring could also serve as a part of data collection. Entities including **MHRSD**, **MoE**, and **GASTAT** could contribute to data collection and provision. The collection, analysis, and utilization of data in decision making will ensure that the best policies and legislation are put in place.

Create cohesion between key stakeholders in ECCE

Finally, there is an opportunity for more cohesion, uniformity, and cooperation between the different key stakeholders in the ECCE space. Currently there are gaps in the ECCE environment, and it is unclear which entity is responsible for filling these gaps. Additionally, there are differences in requirements and guidelines across different entities when it comes to the establishment of ECCE centers, which makes investors prefer one type of ECCE center over the other. These challenges can be turned into opportunities through more organization and cohesion between the stakeholders in ECCE and updating the requirements & guidelines under each entity so that they are aligned and in harmony with one another. Making the process for obtaining licenses for different centers similar would stop investors from preferring one form over the other and therefore filling gaps in the supply of certain ECCE centers.

Use evidence-based practice to inform decision-making

Making informed decisions about ECCE in Saudi Arabia can be challenging due to the lack of accurate and reliable data. Without access to comprehensive data such as the demand and supply for ECCE centers, especially daycare centers, it can be very difficult for institutions to allocate

INTERNATIONAL TRENDS

When it comes to ECCE, it is beneficial to reflect on countries which have effective practices and positive outcomes. Countries such as Sweden are aware of the “evidence which suggests that children who start strong in their learning and well- being will have better outcomes when they grow older and that benefits from early interventions are conditional on the level of quality of ECCE that children experience. Such evidence has driven policy makers to design an early intervention and re-think their education spending patterns to gain “value for money”¹⁷.

Sweden has given a lot of attention to designing and implementing curriculums and standards for ECCE. Sweden has a mandatory ECCE curriculum, which includes the values and principles that guide ECCE programs and also includes resources to guide ECCE centers and staff. The curriculum provides continuous child development through the use of one national framework plan for ECCE. The curriculum has been designed based on cognitive and neurological science, keeping in mind things like emotional control, peer social skills,

language and numbers. It includes critical learning areas such as literacy, numeracy, ICT, science, art and music, physical and health development, and play¹⁸.

Countries such as New Zealand, Norway and Portugal have gone a step further and developed curriculum content for different ages and development groups and clearly linking the ECCE curriculum to the primary school curriculum. They have also included straight- forward examples in the curriculum to support staff and caregivers, as well as support parents in children’s development at home¹⁹.

The high value, effort, and money that Sweden places on ECCE is reflected in its high ECCE enrollment rates. In Sweden, 48% of children under the age of 3 are enrolled in early childhood education, whereas the average for OECD countries for that age group is 27%. Enrollment rates for children aged between 3-5 years is very high at 95%.²⁰.

Australia is another country where lessons can be drawn from ECCE policies. Australia’s National Quality Framework (NQF) is a “system for regulating early learning and school age care including legislation and national quality standard, sector profiles



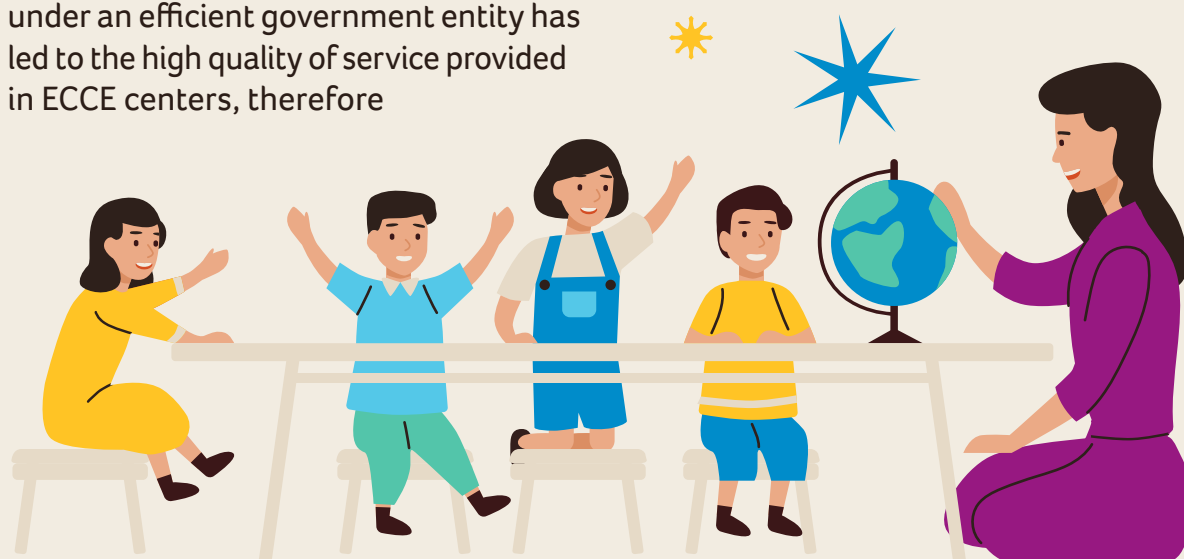
and data, and learning frameworks”²¹. The NQF oversees the regulation, assessment and quality for ECCE. Services approved and regulated under the NQF include childcare services (long day care, family day care, and outside school hours’ care) and preschool services²². The National Quality Standard comprises 7 quality areas, which are the following:

-  Educational program & practice
-  Children’s health & safety
-  Physical environment
-  Staffing arrangements
-  Relationships with children
-  Collaborative partnerships with families & communities
-  Governance & leadership

Demonstration of the critical importance of systemic standards and quality assurance mechanisms is that 15,902 ECCE services were approved by the NQF in 2019, of which 94% received a quality rating. This extremely high number of quality centers is achieved through systemic quality drivers²³.

increasing participation rates of children. In 2017, 59% of children aged 0–4 usually attended some form of childcare²⁴. In 2017, 90% of eligible children were enrolled in a preschool program in the year before full-time school²⁵. Much can be learnt from Australia regarding how the regulation of quality standards in ECCE can contribute to an increase in ECCE enrollment.

The regulation of standards and quality under an efficient government entity has led to the high quality of service provided in ECCE centers, therefore



RECOMMENDATIONS

The OECD has identified five effective policy levers to encourage quality in the sector:



Quality goals and regulations



Curriculum and guidelines



Workforce



Family and community engagement



Data, research and monitoring²⁶

These policy levers are crucial for ensuring high quality in the ECCE ecosystem. Improving the quality of ECCE centers in the Kingdom is key for increasing demand for and supply of high-quality early childhood centers for education. By providing parents with the information and support they need to make informed decisions about their children's care and education, the sector can begin to grow and flourish. Increasing awareness of the value of early childhood education can drive investment in the sector and spark innovation and growth. Cooperation and unity between the different stakeholders in the ECCE environment are imperative for the development of effective legislation, policies, and practices. In unity and awareness, the community can work towards a brighter future for our little ones.

Small steps forward, big steps for the future.



END NOTES

- 1 <https://www.unesco.org/en/early-childhood-education/need-know>
- 2 https://heckmanequation.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/F_HeckmanDeficitPieceCUSTOM-Generic_052714-3-1.pdf and <https://data.unicef.org/data-for-action/parental-involvement-childrens-learning/>
- 3 https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/media/nfob33q5/hcdp_mv_en-1.pdf
- 4 <https://moe.gov.sa/en/education/generaleducation/pages/kindergarten.aspx>
- 5 https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/media/nfob33q5/hcdp_mv_en-1.pdf
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- 10 https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/media/rc0b5oy1/saudi_vision203.pdf
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- 21 <https://www.acecqa.gov.au/national-quality-framework>
- 22-25 <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/children-youth/australias-children/contents/education/early-childhood-education>
- 26 <https://www.oecd.org/education/school/SWEDEN%20policy%20profile%20-%20published%2005-02-2013.pdf>

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