

Press release

Joanne McKenna, press liaison, +44 (0)20 7576 8188; joannemckenna@economist.com

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Preschool is gaining in importance and Europe leads the way in providing it

But not all developed countries perform well in new Economist Intelligence Unit index

European countries offer the most affordable and high-quality preschool programmes in the world. And while the region's sovereign debt crisis has led to sharp cuts in social spending, recognition of early childhood education (ECE) is so strong that preschools are unlikely to be uprooted. This is one of the key findings of *Starting well: Benchmarking early education across the world*, a new report from the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), commissioned by the Lien Foundation.

A growing body of research suggests that increased government investment in ECE, if directed well, can benefit society. These returns accrue in part to the children themselves—largely in the form of increased lifetime earnings— but more significantly to the wider society, in the form of reduced need for later remedial education and spending, as well as lower crime and less welfare reliance in later life, among other things.

The Nordic countries top the ranking, with Finland (1st), Sweden (2nd) and Norway (3rd) rated as having the world's three best preschool environments. In total, 16 of the top 20 countries are European. These countries perform relatively well across all four index categories—the “Availability”, “Affordability” and “Quality” of their preschool environments, as well as the broad “Social context”, which examines how healthy and ready for school children are.

“As economies shift towards more knowledge-based activities, awareness about child development continues to grow,” says Manoj Vohra, the EIU's custom research director for Asia. “Europe's state-led systems perform well, as the provision of universal preschool has steadily become a societal norm.”

Key findings of the report include:

- **Many high-income countries rank poorly, despite wealth being a major factor in a country's ability to deliver preschool services.** Australia, Canada, Singapore and the US, for example, are all listed in the lower half of the index, despite having high average per-capita incomes. This is not to suggest that quality preschool programmes are lacking in these countries. But such schemes are not available or affordable to all strands of society, while minimum quality standards vary widely.

OVERALL SCORE

Rank	Country	Score
1	Finland	91.8
2	Sweden	91.7
3	Norway	88.9
4	UK	87.9
5	Belgium	84.7
6	Denmark	83.5
7	France	81.0
8	Netherlands	75.6
9	New Zealand	73.9
10	South Korea	72.5
11	Germany	71.9
12	Austria	70.9
13	Switzerland	69.9
14	Spain	69.1
15	Portugal	68.7
16	Italy	68.4
17	Czech Republic	68.1
18	Ireland	67.4
19	Hong Kong	66.2
20	Chile	63.6
21	Japan	63.5
22	Hungary	61.6
23	Israel	61.0
~24	UAE	60.3
~24	USA	60.3
26	Canada	59.9
27	Greece	59.4
28	Australia	59.1
29	Singapore	58.8
30	Taiwan	58.4
31	Poland	56.1
32	Mexico	50.5
33	Russia	49.9
34	Argentina	43.0
35	Turkey	39.9
36	Malaysia	39.4
37	South Africa	38.8
38	Thailand	37.9
39	Brazil	35.1
40	Ghana	34.3
41	Vietnam	31.3
42	China	30.7
43	Philippines	30.5
44	Indonesia	22.1
45	India	21.2

Overall and category scores are scored 0-100 where 100=most favorable

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- **Several countries punch above their weight, delivering widespread preschool services, despite having lower average per-capita incomes relative to their peers.** Despite budgetary challenges, a number of other countries, such as Chile and the Czech Republic, have made significant efforts to ensure preschool provision for all families, including instituting it as a legal right. Even though significant further work is needed to bolster preschool standards in these countries, they've made laudable gains in ensuring at least a minimum level of provision for all.
- **Much basic progress is still required.** While many countries lack the financial and human-capital resources to establish a rounded, universal preschool environment, far too many still fail to take even the first steps. At the very least, countries can still provide guidelines and quality standards, even if these cannot yet be properly enforced. Among wealthier countries that are making considerable steps towards quality universal provision, many have yet to enforce even a minimum level of preschool as a legal right for children.
- **Ensuring a high standard of teacher training and education, setting clear curriculum guidelines, and ensuring parental involvement are some of the main drivers of preschool education quality.** Experts from around the world highlight the importance of a high-quality system in ensuring good overall outcomes from preschool education, not least to distinguish it from simple childcare. The factors defining quality are widespread, from high training standards and well-defined guidelines to ensuring parental involvement. Other factors can also help: reducing student-teacher ratios in classes, ensuring good health and safety measures, and creating clear links between preschool and primary school, to name just a few.

Starting well: Benchmarking early education across the world

is available free of charge at

www.startingwell.org

About the research

Definitions and terminology relating to preschool vary significantly from one region to another: kindergarten, playgroups, pre-K, and nursery schools, to name a few, with many specific regional variations. All of these are taken to be part of early childhood education, or ECE, and so this study refers to both preschool and ECE interchangeably. This study focuses on children between the ages of three and six. This is not to detract from the importance of the vital years from birth to three, but it represents the critical years when children move from predominantly home-based care and start to interact in a group environment with specific learning targets, in preparation for the first grade of primary schooling.

With this in mind, the Economist Intelligence Unit was commissioned by the Lien Foundation to develop a "Starting well index" to rank countries according to the quality and inclusiveness of their preschool environments. These are both broad terms, but we focus on specific aspects:

Quality: This does not in any way relate to the specific pedagogical approaches taken within preschools, or seek to prejudge which of these are best. Instead, our quality measures relate to the aggregate national indicators of quality, such as the overall level of training of teachers, the presence of clear curriculum guidelines, and so on. These are detailed in the appendix.

Inclusiveness: This index assumes that all children, regardless of their background, legal status and ability to pay, have a right to affordable, quality preschool provision. But use of the term inclusiveness does not imply that this ranking considers issues around disability and special needs, as comparable data on such provision is largely unavailable.

We assessed 45 countries across the world: 29 OECD nations and 16 select other countries comprising important developed and emerging market economies. The index scores countries across four categories—Social Context, Availability, Affordability and Quality—comprising 11 quantitative and 10 qualitative indicators.

A country's overall ranking in the benchmark index is a weighted score of the underlying categories. For a full breakdown of the categories, individual indicators, weightings and data sources, see the appendix to the report.

About the Economist Intelligence Unit

The Economist Intelligence Unit is the business information arm of The Economist Group, publisher of *The Economist*. Through our global network of more than 650 analysts and contributors, we continuously assess and forecast political, economic and business conditions in more than 200 countries. As the world's leading provider of country intelligence, we help executives make better business decisions by providing timely, reliable and impartial analysis on worldwide market trends and business strategies. For more information, please visit www.eiu.com or follow us on www.twitter.com/theiu.

About the Lien Foundation

The Lien Foundation is a Singapore philanthropic house noted for its model of radical philanthropy. It breaks new ground by investing in innovative solutions, convening strategic partnerships and catalysing action on social and environmental challenges. The Foundation seeks to enhance educational opportunities for the disadvantaged, advance excellence in eldercare and promote environmental sustainability in water and sanitation.

The Starting Well Index is part of the Lien Foundation's efforts to advocate greater access to quality early childhood education. It aims to create a better playing field by strengthening capacity in this area and opening up opportunities for disadvantaged preschoolers. The use of I.T forms a key strategy in the Foundation's efforts to increase efficiencies and enhance professionalism in the preschool sector. The Foundation has championed a community-based model of care where specialists go into mainstream preschools to help children with learning difficulties. Its success is inspiring a scaled-up national version in Singapore.

www.lienfoundation.org

Press enquiries

Manoj Vohra, Asia custom research director, +65 6428 2616; manojvohra@economist.com
Joanne McKenna, press liaison, +44 (0)20 7576 8188; joannemckenna@economist.com