ACCESS FOR ALL? STRATIFICATION EFFECTS OF ECEC SYSTEMS IN EUROPE.

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It is now generally accepted policy knowledge that investing in the early years has multiple benefits for individuals and society, and across the EU and European countries there is the pronounced aim to make good early childhood education and care (ECEC) services available to all pre-school children. In many countries this goal has been extended to include children below the age of three. At the same time expanding ECEC provision is difficult in times of permanent austerity and general welfare retrenchment. Thus, particularly in countries, where ECEC provision historically lagged behind, governments have been looking for economically and politically viable ways in meeting EU targets and fulfilling electoral promises, favouring targeted policy initiatives and the support of childcare markets. But are the ECEC systems that are developing at the beginning of the 21st century suited to fulfil their objectives? This paper examines the challenges different welfare states face in providing access to good quality ECEC. Most European countries combine universal and targeted, public and marketized ECEC provision, but do so in different ways leading to different stratification effects in the access to ECEC. Following a discussion of different ECEC trajectories the paper concludes with a critical evaluation of the extent to which European countries are prepared for the Europe 2020 social investment agenda.