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The situation regarding skilled workers in youth work: Initial results from workshops, an expert hearing and an online survey of open youth work institutions across Germany

Anyone subscribed to mailing lists related to youth work will regularly receive a plethora of job advertisements. They are often accompanied by messages containing similar formulations, from “we are urgently seeking staff” to “please support us, as we have been forced to curtail the services we offer for young people”. Alert observers will notice that the same job advertisements are sent out time and again. Finding staff is, evidently, a tough proposition in youth work at present. This is cause for concern, as youth work plays a vital role in (supporting) the development of many young people (Deutscher Bundestag 2017; Voigts & Blohm 2022, 2023).

Joint activities between the German Federal Network on Youth Work, the EYWA Transfer Office and Hamburg University of Applied Sciences

Against this background, the German Federal Network on Youth Work (Bundesnetzwerk KJA), the Transfer Office for Implementation of the European Youth Work Agenda in Germany (Transferstelle EYWA) and Hamburg University of Applied Sciences (HAW Hamburg) have undertaken joint activities focusing on the shortage of skilled youth workers and means of recruiting and retaining them. The partners agreed several objectives: firstly, to engage in a broad, systematic exchange; secondly, to collect empirical data on the situation regarding skilled workers in open youth work institutions; thirdly, to develop strategies to combat the shortage of skilled workers and, fourthly, to make the topic a central focus of the 4th Federal Congress on Youth Work in Potsdam in 2024.

The partners conducted regional workshops on the topic with specialists in Hamburg and held a national hearing with representatives from associations, public authorities and academic institutions at federal, state and municipal levels. This approach quickly highlighted the dearth of empirical insight into the topic. In an effort to provide a sound knowledge base upon which to develop potential strategies for recruiting skilled workers to the field of youth work, the partners jointly conducted an online nationwide survey of open youth work institutions in Germany. This article presents the initial results of these various processes.

This broad-based engagement with the situation regarding skilled workers in the field of youth work began with workshops in Hamburg. Held in October 2022 and March 2023, the workshops provided an opportunity for specialists with first-hand experience of youth work to gather with public authorities, higher education institutions and professional associations to share their views on the skilled work situation in youth work. Hamburg University of Applied Sciences, Diakonie Hamburg and the Social Services Office of the Free and Hanseatic City of Hamburg organised the event, with discussion concentrating on four key questions: What are recent experiences of recruiting skilled youth workers? What are the central challenges

involved in this? What is needed to recruit skilled workers to the field of youth work? And how can higher education institutions, training establishments, public bodies and independent sponsors contribute? (Voigts 2023a).

At the federal level, the Federal Network on Youth Work, Hamburg University of Applied Sciences and the EYWA Transfer Office held an internal, digital expert hearing entitled “Skilled worker shortage – the future of youth work” on 28 March 2023. Dr Andreas Maierhofer (German Youth Institute – DJI) and Dr Thomas Mühlmann (Youth Welfare Statistics Office – Arbeitsstelle KJH-Statistik) presented empirical data on the topic. Dr Lars Schulhoff (Social Services Office, Hamburg), Matthias Hoffmann (Ministry of Education, Young People and Sport, Brandenburg – MBS Brandenburg), Christoph Gilles (Rhineland Regional Council – LVR Rheinland) and Lucia Tanneberger (State Youth Welfare Office, Saxony-Anhalt – LJA Sachsen-Anhalt) expressed views from different federal states. Volker Rohde (Federal Association of Open Children’s and Youth Facilities – BAG OKJE), Christian Weis (German Federal Youth Council – DBJR) and Daniel Poli (International Youth Service of the Federal Republic of Germany – IJAB) contributed perspectives from youth work practice in Germany and Europe. Martin Holzner (Youth Work Institute, Gauting – Institut für Jugendarbeit Gauting) and Alexandra Nitsch (Children’s and Youth Council, Saxony – KJR Sachsen) provided practical approaches to state-run educational institutions and projects. All member organisations of the Federal Network on Youth Work (cf. <https://bundeskongress-kja.de/bundesnetzwerk-eng/>), the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMFSFJ) and the DJI were also represented to discuss the statements at the event. These three events and additional consultations on the different structures in youth work across Germany allowed the partners to identify eight topic areas of significance for strategies to combat the shortage of skilled youth workers.

Eight significant topic areas for strategies to combat the skilled worker shortage

Clustering makes it possible to bring together challenges from different areas, which is exactly what the workshops and expert hearing achieved. It is now imperative to tackle these challenges with a target-oriented approach in order to counter the skilled worker shortage in youth work. A number of summarising propositions were then added based on the consultations.

- (1) *Status of youth work in public and socio-political discourse:* Youth work appears to be under-discussed in societal discourse. There seems to be insufficient appreciation of the importance of this field, which is fuelling a “downward spiral” in efforts to recruit skilled workers.
- (2) *Unattractive working conditions:* Working hours, workloads, remuneration (both overall and within pay grades), a lack of bonuses and fixed-term contracts are all considered unattractive aspects.
- (3) *Advertising practices and recruitment processes:* Practices and processes used to advertise jobs and recruit staff are often perceived as complicated, drawn-out and lacking transparency. It also remains unclear where vacancies are advertised.
- (4) *Education and training:* Youth work practitioners believe that students, as the skilled workers of the future, lack links to practice during their education and training. The transition from education into employment is often perceived as lacking structure and support. There is criticism of barriers to entry to courses that offer qualifications for careers in youth work.

(5) *New generation of skilled workers with new demands*: There is a sense that a new generation of skilled workers is entering the world of work with specific demands. These include team work, benefits, good digital infrastructure and flexible working hours. However, youth work is not usually able to meet these demands.

(6) *Blurring of boundaries in youth work*: Younger skilled workers in particular feel that the blurring of boundaries in youth work is problematic and leads to youth workers performing activities that are not considered part of the actual field of work. This includes, for example, the focus on providing controlled, mandated, full-day support services rather than facilitating voluntary, open educational spaces.

(7) *Potential reasons for the skilled worker shortage*: Competition with other areas of youth welfare, the difficulty in employment lateral entrants and the prevalence of fixed-term (part-time) positions are regarded as factors that exacerbate the general skilled worker shortage for the field of youth work.

(8) *Different manifestations and features of the skilled worker shortage*: The reasons for the skilled worker shortage in youth work, and how this shortage manifests, differ significantly between major cities, medium-sized towns and rural areas. This also applies for access to qualifications in Germany and in neighbouring countries.

Nationwide online survey of open youth work institutions

In June 2023, a nationwide drive to collect data on the skilled worker situation in youth work was launched, including to examine the identified topic areas and propositions. Open youth work in institutions was selected as a specific focus, as full-time employees are an essential resource in this area (cf. Maierhofer et al 2022, p. 29 et seq). Roles in youth work have the highest proportion of fixed-term contracts (16%) of the entire sector of youth welfare. In addition, 24.4% of positions entail less than 19 hours per week, with only 35.9% entailing 38.5 hours or more per week. By contrast, full-time positions account for 64.4% of all jobs in general social services and 54.4% in residential care (Olszenka et al 2023, p. 14 et seq). At the same time, the average age of the population continues to rise, which will increase the need to recruit new skilled workers as existing professionals enter retirement (cf. akjstat 2021).

Nevertheless, the general public underestimate the “quality requirements associated with the requirement profile” (Maierhofer et al 2022, p. 29 et seq) of a youth work professional. Yet, these requirements have increased as a result of the coronavirus pandemic and other crises (cf. Voigts & Blohm 2022; Voigts 2023b). Youth work programmes have the potential to promote education, responsibility, community and integration (cf. Rauschenbach et al. 2010; Hallmann & Sass 2022). This requires full-time employees with appropriate professional competencies; they require an academic and theoretical basis combined with a (considered) professional understanding and personal skills (cf. Jump 2018; Voigts 2020). In this context, dual work-study programmes at (private) higher education institutions that neglect fundamental curricula, and sometimes appear to turn a degree programme into an apprenticeship, should be regarded just as critically as the downgrading of positions for state-accredited social workers with relevant academic qualifications to educational support-level positions (see agj 2022a and 2022b for the German Child and Youth Welfare Association (agj) stance on both aspects). Consequently, the proportion of staff in youth work with a relevant academic education is just 46.0% – compared with 69.3% in youth social work and 92.1% in general social services (Olszenka et al 2023, p. 16). More specific data, which is vital for the development of specific strategies to counter these issues, is not available. This was a further

reason behind the nationwide drive to collect up-to-date information on the skilled worker situation in open youth work.

The Federal Network on Youth Work, the EYWA Transfer Office and Hamburg University of Applied Sciences cooperated as partners to conduct this survey. Julia Hallmann of the EYWA Transfer Office and Gunda Voigts of Hamburg University of Applied Sciences were responsible for producing, conducting and evaluating this survey. Volker Rohde (BAG OKJE) and Christoph Gilles (Federal Association of State Youth Welfare Offices – BAG LJÄ) were involved in the organisational planning process as representatives of the Federal Network on Youth Work.

The nationwide online survey on the skilled worker situation was launched in June 2023 and remained for responses for five weeks. The questionnaire featured fixed answer options based on the results of the workshops and hearing. The survey content was divided into seven topic blocks. After an initial block collecting general information on the respondent's institution, the second block focused on specific aspects of the employment situation in the institution; the third covered general recent developments and the fourth addressed the skilled worker shortage in open youth work. The fifth block examined the respondents' experiences with job advertisement and recruitment; the sixth covered staff acquisition strategies used to date, and the seventh asked respondents to examine statements about their cooperation with higher education institutions and training establishments.

The survey was conducted with the survey tool LimeSurvey. Using snowball sampling to disseminate the link to the survey created a certain degree of randomness in the institutions addressed by the survey. Calls for responses were placed on the Jugendhilfeportal site and various other website. However, given that the Federal Association of Open Children's and Youth Facilities (BAG OKJE) was integrated with its state-level divisions and central offices in youth welfare offices and state ministries, it is reasonable to assume that the survey was widely disseminated. The responses ultimately confirmed this: in total, 1,223 fully completed questionnaires were received from respondents across all federal states. Although more responses were received from Baden-Württemberg, Bavaria, North Rhine-Westphalia and Lower Saxony than other federal states, given the size of these states, the survey results reflect the actual prevalence of open youth work institutions in the institutional landscape across Germany. The two city states, Hamburg and Berlin, were also strongly represented.

Responses from institutions in the eastern federal states, including Berlin, was 23% – which represents a deviation of just two percentage points from the distribution identified in the DJI survey of youth centres (Maierhofer et al. 2022, p. 25). Less than half of institutions responding to the survey are located in towns and cities with a population of 100,000 and over; around a third are based in towns with 10,000 to 99,999 residents, while 16% are in small towns and rural communities with fewer than 10,000 residents.

Of the people who completed the questionnaire, 60% categorised themselves as facility managers, while a further 30% were (other forms of) education professionals. When it came to describing their institution, 32% chose the category of “youth club (incl. girls-only club) or community club”, while 46% chose “youth centre or central (major) institution”. “Other mobile or visiting service” and “youth farm, adventure playground, community farm or play centre” each accounted for just under 6%. Of these institutions, 38% are publicly owned, 48% are independently owned and 14% belong to a corporation under public law (e.g. churches, youth councils in Bavaria).

The initial evaluation presented in the following pursues a strategy based in descriptive statistics. The final report, which will be published and accessible free of charge in early

2024, will provide more extensive interpretations and present recommendations for action on the basis of empirical data. Prior to publication, (online) events will be held to present and discuss the results.

Skilled worker situation in open youth work institutions

This section of the survey focused on the qualification levels of staff currently employed by the respondent's institution and the employment situation at present. As a nationwide average, 59% of institutions state that the majority of their education professionals have a university degree, while 19% state that a majority of their staff have a professional qualification, e.g. as an educator (German: "Erzieher"). For 18% of institutions, the two grounds are roughly equally represented.

Just under half (48%) of respondents reported that education professionals had left their institution over the last 12 months for various reasons. The survey allowed respondents to add the reasons for these departures, if known. Between 21% and 28% of respondents selected at least one of the following three options: the professional resigned from their position for personal reasons, moved to a different field of work either within or outside of youth welfare, or moved to a different position in youth work specifically. Retirement was the cause of departure in 10% of cases, while termination by the employer was the cause in 9%. Conclusion of a project with no offer of continued employment and resignation to pursue further training each accounted for 8%, while illness-related departures and death represented a combined 6%.

In cases where respondents indicated that professionals left to work in a different field within youth welfare, school social work accounted for 28%, family social work accounted for 24% and youth social work accounted for 18%. Childcare facilities and general social services each accounted for 10% of departures, while 29% of respondents selected the "other" option.

Just over half of institutions (51%) reported that they had vacancies for educational professionals that remained unfilled for longer than one month during the last 12 months. Furthermore, when asked about current challenges facing institutions, the option that received the strongest agreement "securing and/or retaining skilled workers" – with 43% selecting "fully agree" and a further 33% "somewhat agree". Even the "financial situation" option received less vociferous agreement (38% "fully agree", 26% "somewhat agree").

When asked how difficult it is overall to secure educational professionals with the requisite abilities and competencies in open youth work in Germany at present, the respondents' feedback clearly illustrated the challenging situation regarding skilled workers in this field: 43% described it as "somewhat difficult" and 51% as "very difficult". Focusing on their own institution, 46% of respondents said it is currently "very difficult" to secure educational professionals with the requisite abilities and competencies for the work involved, with a further 40% describing it as "somewhat difficult".

In addition, 62% of institutions said it is "very difficult" or "somewhat difficult" to find suitable freelance staff. To the statement "open youth work institutions I know of are affected by the skilled worker shortage", 64% of respondents selected "fully agree" with a further 29% selecting "somewhat agree".

The impacts of this skilled worker shortage provide cause for concern: 29% of institutions reported that they had been forced to reduce their opening hours "more often" over the last 12 months due to a lack of available staff (i.e. unfilled vacancies, illness, parental leave). A

further 45% reported that they needed to do so on “isolated occasions”. Only 24% of institutions had not needed to take this step.

Attractiveness of open youth work as an area of employment

The survey covered a number of different aspects an effort to determine which aspects of open youth work make the field an attractive or unattractive area of employment for educational professionals. The following aspects were described as “very attractive” or “somewhat attractive” by 91% to 96% of respondents: relationship building; opportunities to influence content; team work; working with young people as the target group; the voluntary nature of services, and opportunities to take on responsibility. Between 65% and 84% of respondents described the following aspects as “somewhat unattractive” or “not at all attractive”: institutions’ financial situation; salary classification/remuneration; IT equipment for employees; working hours; the status of social recognition; the compatibility of family life and work; administrative duties, and opportunities for advancement. The survey responses highlighted that fixed-term positions represent a serious problem for the attractiveness of the profession.

Recruitment processes

In the last 12 months, 60% of the institutions that responded to the survey have advertised at least one vacancy. Of these institutions, 70% reported that they received between one and five applications for the position. However, 9% did not receive any applications, while 7% of institutions received six to ten applications. Only 2% received 11 or more applications.

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that 71% of institutions said they repeatedly advertised the same vacancy. Criticisms highlighted by respondents include applicants’ lack of any prior experience and lack of familiarity with fundamental principles of open youth work. Respondents also expressed strong agreement that their institution does not believe that applicants are suitably skilled and do not have the requisite qualifications.

Just under half of institutions (49%) had successfully employed at least one educational professional in the last 12 months. For 36% of institutions, this person came directly from a university or another higher education institution, while 12% recruited from a training establishment for educational support workers. At 28% of institutions, the recruited staff came from another position in youth work, with a further 23% recruiting staff from elsewhere in the field of youth welfare.

The survey then asked where the institutions had advertised their vacancies, with respondents able to select multiple options: 55% had advertised on social media, 46% had used the portal of the Federal Employment Agency (Bundesagentur für Arbeit – BA) and 44% had placed advertisements in local newspapers (including online). In addition, 47% had contacted potential candidates directly, with 35% contacting higher education institutions. In addition, 32% had advertised on jobs portals operated by regional sponsors, such as charitable associations, while 14% had distributed their advertisements using the mailing lists of national youth work structures. In addition, 26% said they had used “other” methods.

Strategies to combat the skilled worker shortage

The partners conducting the survey were interested in collecting information on strategies used to counter the shortage of skilled workers in open youth work in Germany. The survey asked what respondents think needs to be done to counter this issue. They were asked to give their opinion on a number of statements, choosing from a range of options. A total of 90% of respondents “fully” agreed with the statement that the significance of open youth work needs to be made clear to society, with a further 9% saying they “somewhat agree”. In addition, 84% “fully” agreed that employment and working conditions need to be improved, while a further 13% “somewhat” agreed with this statement. Respondents also indicated their view that it is necessary to facilitate intensive public engagement with the topic, improve staff retention and have professionals in the field speak positively about their work. Furthermore, 80% indicated that they either “somewhat” or “fully” agree that the induction process for new professionals requires improvement.

Asked which strategies their institutions use to recruit staff, and with the ability to select multiple options, a majority of respondents indicated that they advertise their vacancies publicly (72%) and enable their employees to participate in professional development activities during working hours (70%) and work as part of a team (69%). In addition, 61% of institutions directly contacted potential candidates already known to them. However, only 28% of institutions advertised positions with a general induction concept, while just 19% have a concept to support new professionals make the transition to working life and only 15% have staff development concepts for advancement and ongoing training.

Cooperation with higher education institutions and training establishments

When asked about their staff recruitment strategies, 30% of institutions reported that they cooperate with higher education institutions or training establishments. In principle, 51% indicated that they cooperate with higher education institutions in their region with regard to internships for students, while 21% participate in university careers fairs and 18% are professional partners to dual work-study programmes. Moreover, 28% of institutions have participated in a specialist event at a higher education institution, 16% contribute to research projects, 12% host joint events and 9% regularly share details of their work in teaching events at a higher education institution. One-in-five institutions (20%) are in contact with at least one professor or other member of academic staff. However, the same proportion (20%) said they have no contact with relevant higher education institutions in their region. These figures align with the fact that 43% of institutions have not hosted an intern from a university in the last 12 months – and 43% have not hosted an intern from a socio-pedagogical training establishment over the same period.

Further analysis of the results

The next step involves contextualising the results of the field work, presented in amalgamated form for the first time in this article, through more comprehensive data analysis. This will facilitate a debate on the development of action strategies to overcome the skilled worker shortage. This step should be regarded as policy-focused advocacy on behalf of children and young people in Germany, particularly in the context of the Federal Network on Youth Work. Given the services it provides and the unique structural principles upon which it relies, youth work provides a vital facilitation space and source of shelter for many young people. It offers them the potential to experience community, a sense of belonging, support and spaces for

personal engagement. Skilled workers are of fundamental importance to youth work. This is why the Federal Network on Youth Work, the Transfer Office for Implementation of the European Youth Work Agenda in Germany and the Hamburg University of Applied Sciences believe it is so important to engage effectively with the question of the skilled worker shortage in youth work. The support of these three pillars presents an opportunity to implement the results in the wide-ranging youth work landscape, both in Germany and in Europe. The 4th Federal Congress on Youth Work will be a chance to do just that.

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