



Working Conditions of Youth Sector Workers in Estonia

BRIEF STUDY REPORT

Institute of Baltic Studies

Kats Kivistik, Maarja Käger, Mele Pesti, Liina Juuse, Kristiina Toomik and Anna-Lisa Aavik

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Study: Working Conditions of Youth Sector Workers in Estonia

Authors: Kats Kivistik
Maarja Käger
Mele Pesti
Liina Juuse
Kristiina Toomik
Anna-Lisa Aavik

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Cover illustration: Merike Paberits

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Institute of Baltic Studies
Lai 30, 51005 Tartu
Phone: +372 699 9480
ibs.ee

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INTRODUCTION

The youth sector plays a crucial role in the development of young people, and by extension, in fostering a viable society. It promotes cultural diversity, equal treatment and intergenerational cooperation, laying the foundation for a cohesive and healthy society based on participation and cooperation.¹

The youth sector encompasses various activities for and with young people, delivered through diverse formats and structures. These activities include youth camps and work camps, hobby education and activities, open youth work, youth participation, youth projects, youth associations, and support for youth not in employment, education or training (NEET youth). Professionals responsible for these activities include heads of relevant organisations, staff in these fields and sectoral coordinators, such as youth workers, hobby school teachers, hobby instructors, coaches and youth specialists at local governments.

In Estonia, young people express satisfaction with youth work and hobby education activities, and their participation in youth work has increased.² For example, in the 2022/2023 academic year, approximately 94,000 young people aged 7–26³ participated in hobby education, while in 2020, over 70,000 young people participated in youth centres, and more than 14,000 engaged in youth associations.⁴

However, not all young people are involved in youth work and hobby education activities, and some are dissatisfied with their participation experiences.⁵ The potential of open youth work and hobby education to support young individuals, prevent exclusion and promote social inclusion remains underused.⁶ Thus, it is crucial to focus on the situation of youth sector workers, including their perceptions of their work, working conditions, professional development opportunities and wages.

Given the importance of this field, its diverse nature, and the involvement of various professionals, presenting a comprehensive overview of the sector is appropriate. Key aspects to explore include youth

¹Ministry of Education and Research. (2021). Youth Sector Development Plan 2021–2035, <https://www.hm.ee/en/media/1600/download>.

²Ministry of Education and Research. (2021). An analysis of the implementation of the Ministry of Education and Research development plans and programmes in 2020, https://www.hm.ee/sites/default/files/htm_arengukavade_ja_programmide_2020_aasta_taitmise_analuu.pdf.

³Haridussilm. (2023). Individuals enrolled in hobby schools, <https://www.haridussilm.ee/ee/huviharidus/oppivad-isikud>.

⁴Väljaots, K., Hein, T., Mouse, K., Allik, A., Adamson, A.-K., Kivistik, K., Käger, M., Derevski, R. (2021). Satisfaction with youth work among young people participating in youth work in 2020, https://www.ibs.ee/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Noorsootoo-tegevuste-rahulolu-2020_lopparuanne.pdf. Around 78,000 young people participated in hobby clubs at general education schools in the 2017/2018 academic year. Education portal edu.ee. Opportunities for young people, <https://haridusportaal.edu.ee/artiklid/v%C3%B5imalused-noorele#huviharidus-ja-huvitegevus>.

⁵Väljaots, K., Hein, T., Mouse, K., Allik, A., Adamson, A.-K., Kivistik, K., Käger, M., Derevski, R. (2021). Satisfaction with youth work among young people participating in youth work in 2020, https://www.ibs.ee/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Noorsootoo-tegevuste-rahulolu-2020_lopparuanne.pdf.

⁶Käger, M., Kivistik, K., Avdonina, K. (2021). Opportunities for open youth work, hobby education and hobby activities to increase the social inclusion of young people, particularly those at risk of exclusion, and the need to develop these opportunities, <https://www.ibs.ee/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Lopparuanne-sotsiaalne-kaasatus.pdf>.

work activities offered in Estonia and their outcomes, job satisfaction, work motivation, youth involvement and staff participation. Previous research in these areas has been relatively limited, often focusing on individual services, youth satisfaction and the professional self-development of workers.

Currently, there is no comprehensive overview of the size of the youth sector workforce, their professional education, or their distribution between youth agencies and local governments. Additionally, there is a lack of information about the working conditions, work environment and organisation of work in the youth sector as a whole. Important aspects such as opportunities for professional self-development, working hours, support services, occupational health, burnout, mental health and work equipment require attention.

Nonetheless, previous studies have provided valuable information on the potential development needs of the sector, including factors influencing job satisfaction and motivation. These motivational factors encompass opportunities for youth sector workers to support young people, flexible working hours, interest in the field, self-fulfilment opportunities and chances to influence the development of the field. However, areas needing improvement include feedback mechanisms, professional development opportunities and staff motivation.

Regarding international studies on the youth sector workforce, only a few have been conducted. These studies, similar to those in Estonia, have primarily focused on specific activities or target groups within the youth field, such as job satisfaction among workers dealing with disadvantaged and at-risk young people⁷ or those with mental disorders.⁸ Some studies have also examined teachers' satisfaction with their working conditions.⁹ Job complexity, burnout and motivation retention have emerged as challenges in other countries, aligning with findings in Estonia.

The study aimed to identify the size and composition of the youth sector workforce in Estonia while providing a comprehensive overview of working conditions, the work environment, organisation of work, motivation, professional self-development opportunities and feedback practices. It particularly focuses on specialists who have been working with young people for an extended period and on a permanent basis. Both employees' and employers' perspectives are explored.¹⁰

⁷ Petty, G. (2005). "Job Satisfaction among Employees of a Youth Development Organization". *Child & Youth Care Forum* 34 (1): 57–73.

⁸ Tejero Hughes, M., Valle-Riestra, D. (2008). "Responsibilities, preparedness and job satisfaction of paraprofessionals: working with young children with disabilities". *International Journal of Early Years Education* (16): 163–173.

⁹ For example: Maeran, R., Pitarelli, F., Cangiano, F. (2013). "Work-life balance and job satisfaction among teachers". *Interdisciplinary Journal of Family Studies* 18(1): 51–72; Perrachione, B. A., Petersen, G. J., Rosser, V. J. (2008). "Why do they stay? Elementary teachers' perceptions of job satisfaction and retention". *The Professional Educator* 32 (2).

¹⁰ Regarding youth sector employers, the study mainly focused on employers who shape the working conditions for youth sector workers: (1) individuals responsible for the youth sector (youth work and hobby education for young people) at local authorities (e.g. youth work specialists, hobby education specialists and education specialists); (2) heads of youth work institutions (youth centres) and educational institutions (e.g. hobby schools and general education schools organising/providing youth work and/or hobby education and activities for young people) irrespective of ownership (a municipal institution or an institution owned by a private legal entity or private company).

The target group for the survey comprises youth sector employees and employers. To answer the research questions, various methods were employed: secondary sources, an online survey of youth sector employees and employers, analysis of registry data, individual and focus group interviews, and a data request to local authorities. The results were analysed using both qualitative and quantitative approaches.

The main report of the study¹¹ is divided into six chapters, starting with an overview of the Estonian youth sector, followed by a detailed description of the methodology used. The third chapter delves into the size and main characteristics of the youth sector workforce, based on register and survey data. The fourth chapter focuses on working conditions and the work environment, while the fifth chapter discusses the professional self-development of workers. The report concludes with the main findings and recommendations for the development of the field at various levels (the national level, local governments, representative organisations, employers and employees).

This brief report presents the main findings, conclusions and recommendations, along with a summary and an abridged version of the methodology chapter. The key graphics from the full report have been included in the chapter covering the main findings and conclusions.

The brief study report and fact sheet are available at ibs.ee/en/publications/working-conditions-for-youth-sector-workers-in-estonia-in-2023/.

¹¹ Available at <https://www.ibs.ee/publikatsioonid/noortevaldkonna-tootajaskonna-tootingimused/>.

METHODOLOGY

The aim of the study was to identify the size of the youth sector workforce, providing an overview of the working conditions and motivation of specialists working with young people on a permanent basis, examining their professional self-development and exploring employers' attitudes towards the development of working conditions.

Table 1 outlines the research questions that the study sought to answer.

Table 1. Research questions

<p>Youth sector workforce</p>	<p>What is the total size of the youth sector workforce in Estonia, and what are the key characteristics: age, gender, education, professional qualifications,¹² and working language? How is the workforce distributed across different categories: local government, occupation, area of hobby activities,¹³ and length of employment in the youth sector (including continuous employment with one employer and continuous employment in one occupation)?</p> <p>What is the situation with the next generation of youth workers, i.e. what motivates young people to study youth work-related professions, what are their goals, expectations, aspirations and future prospects? Where do they see themselves working in the future and why?</p>
<p>Professional journey and development</p>	<p>What is the professional self-development journey of the youth sector workforce? This includes the following aspects:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) getting a job in the youth sector; b) needs and opportunities for supporting professional self-development and career advancement; c) current practice and willingness to undertake further professional development, and the main areas where professional self-development is needed (e.g. methods, topics and target groups); d) the motivators for self-development and the main reasons for not having a professional qualification, as well as the barriers that hinder individuals from obtaining one; e) involvement in professional groups and their role in professional development, job motivation and job satisfaction.
<p>Working conditions</p>	<p>What are the working conditions like for people working in the youth sector? This includes the following aspects:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) forms of employment and workload; b) wage level, satisfaction with and expectations of wages, wage scales and their relationship with qualifications;

¹² This includes the share of workers with qualifications in youth work (including workers with various levels of professional qualification) and workers with education in youth work or other higher education or professional qualifications related to their job, such as teachers or coaches.

¹³ Where appropriate, this concerns the heads and teachers at hobby schools, and hobby instructors.

	<p>c) fringe benefits (e.g. length of leave, health days, and sports and travel allowances);</p> <p>d) prevalence of working multiple jobs and for several employers (both within and outside the youth sector) and the reasons for doing so;</p> <p>e) workers' expectations regarding the content of their job and whether these expectations differed from reality, and to what extent.</p>
Work motivation	<p>What influences work motivation (both intrinsic and extrinsic factors) and job satisfaction among youth sector workers?</p> <p>How can work motivation be increased?</p>
Working environment	<p>What are the main problems related to the work environment (e.g. mental health, physical working conditions and equipment) and the employers' attitudes, solutions applied and results achieved in addressing the problems?</p>
Organisation of work	<p>What are the main tasks for employers in terms of the organisation of work, including recruiting, appreciating, training and rewarding employees?</p> <p>How can recruitment and expectation management be facilitated from the employers' perspective?</p>
Professional development opportunities	<p>What opportunities do employers provide to promote the professional development and careers of youth sector workers?</p> <p>What factors influence the provision of these opportunities?</p>
Giving feedback	<p>How many employers implement feedback practices to support their employees' professional development? What methods of feedback (e.g. development interviews, coaching and mentoring) are used and how often, including follow-up activities?</p> <p>What are the preferred methods of feedback among youth sector workers?</p>

To estimate the size of the youth sector workforce by occupation, the study targeted individuals who had worked in a youth sector occupation within the past 12 months. The youth sector workforce comprises:

- 1) specialists shaping and organising youth policy, youth work, hobby education and hobby activities;
- 2) leaders and specialists from institutions and organisations providing and coordinating youth work, hobby education and hobby activities;
- 3) specialists working directly with young people.

The following methods were used to answer the research questions:

- Review of secondary sources: statistics on the youth sector (including information on the situation of youth services provided by local governments in 2022, available on the local governments' website minuomavalitsus.ee), research articles, previous research reports, strategic documents and legislation.
- Analysis of registry data: the employment register, the statistical population register, the Tax and Customs Board data on income tax, social tax, mandatory funded pension and unemployment insurance contribution declarations (form TSD), the Estonian education information system EHIS (for hobby education workers), the sports register (as of 2022), the Song and Dance Festival

register, and the register of professions of the Estonian Qualifications Authority. The graphs represent employees based on registry data.

- Online surveys of youth sector workers and employers¹⁴ and analysis of the results: the final analysis covers responses from 707 employees and 201 employers. The survey results are rounded to the nearest integer in the graphs for clarity, which may result in the sum of the results exceeding 100%. The graphs represent youth sector employees and employers.
- In a comparison of register and survey data, women and youth workers are over-represented in the survey, while coaches and workers holding at least a master's degree are under-represented.
- Individual and focus group interviews and analysis of the information collected: 11 interviews with 39 participants.
- Data requests to local governments: responses from 66 local governments on wages and sectoral coordination at the local government level.

In this brief report, graphs show the results of the analysis of registry data on the youth sector workforce where registry data are available. Additionally, survey results are presented in the graphs where relevant to indicate the comparative distribution of the data (e.g. Figure 1) or where doubts exist about the quality of registry data (e.g. Figure 9). For specific aspects, such as attitudes, where the data was exclusively obtained through surveys, the graphs include only survey data.

¹⁴ Representatives of employers who responded to the survey are considered as employers.

MAIN FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

The study results indicate that **good working conditions, particularly higher wages, a sufficient number of qualified workers and professional management**, contribute to better-quality activities with young people. This also leads to an increased appreciation for workers and the sector, attracting more people to the sector and resulting in greater workforce retention and improved staff motivation.

1. **The estimated number of youth sector workers is around 12,300**, with a margin of error in the numerical and proportional estimates due to incomplete national data. The data in the various registers are not directly comparable, and no single register fully captures the entire youth sector workforce. Moreover, it is unclear from the registers whether the worker directly engages with young people.

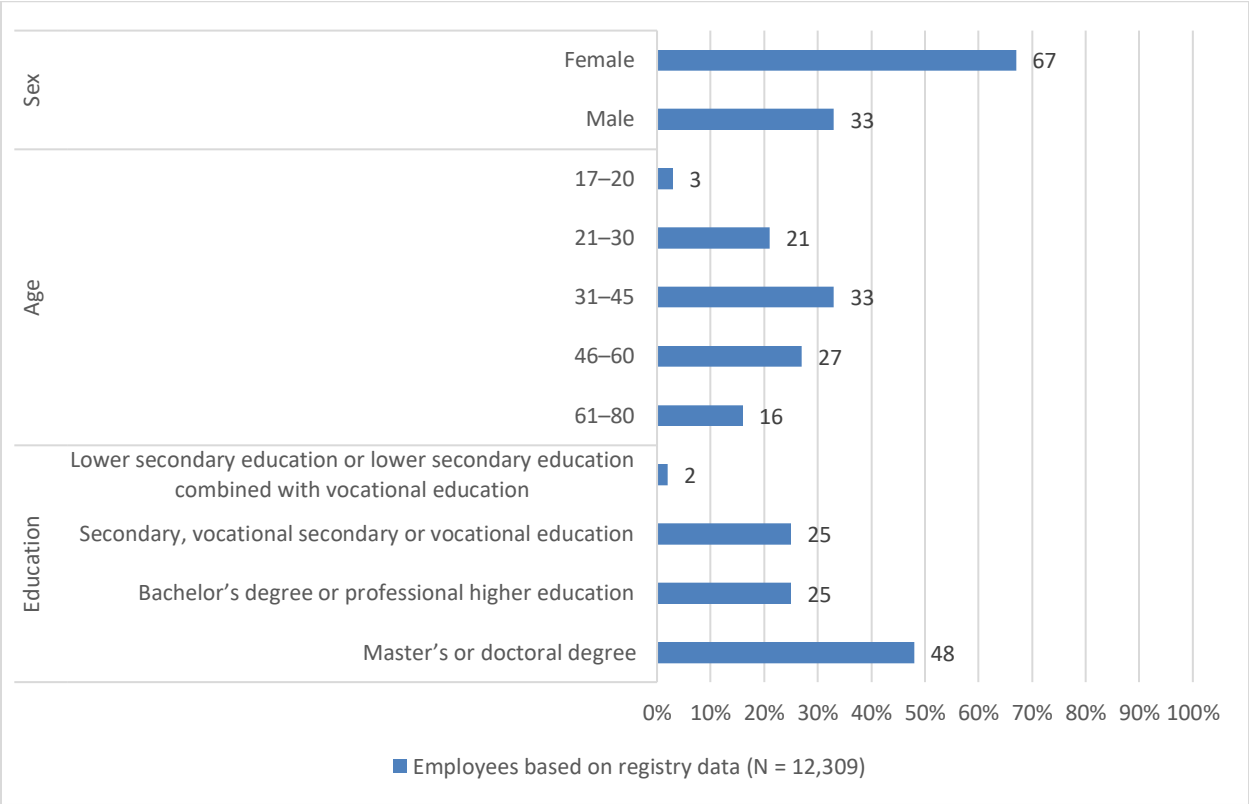


Figure 1. Employee profile: gender, age and education (employees based on registry data, N = 12,309)

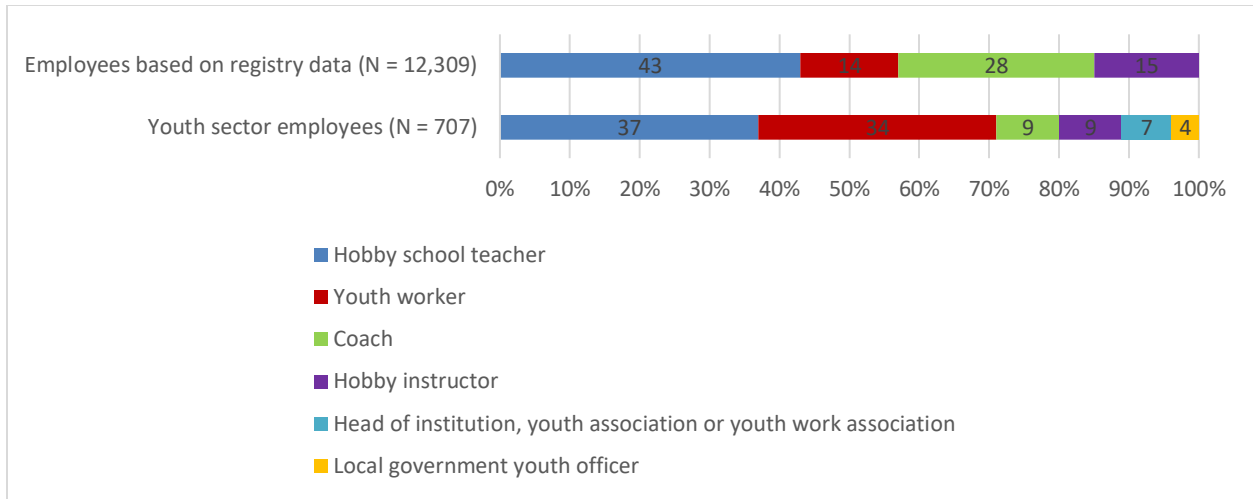


Figure 2. Breakdown of youth sector employees' jobs, % (employees based on registry data, N = 12,309; employees covered by online survey, N = 707)

2. **Workers generally express satisfaction with the content of their work.** The social aspect of the work environment is also rated as good. The majority of workers are satisfied with their colleagues and immediate managers, with colleagues being an important reason for working in the youth sector.

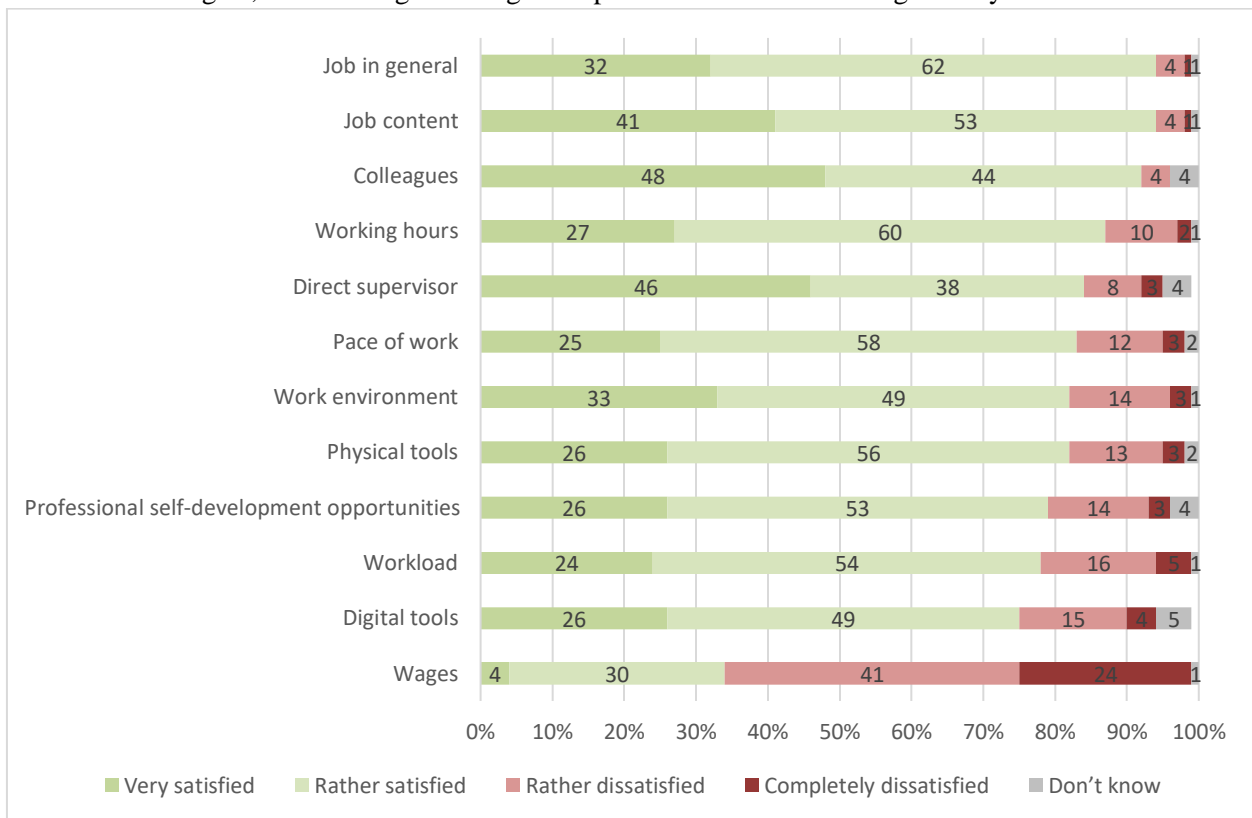


Figure 3. Employees' satisfaction with job and working conditions, % (employees, N = 707)

3. **Low pay is the most critical factor affecting the professionalism of the workers, the quality and organisation of their work, and the labour market entrance rate.** A considerable portion of full-time youth sector workers earn less than the average Estonian wages and the minimum wage for teachers. According to registry data, around 70% of full-time youth sector workers have gross monthly wages below €1,500, 55% have wages below €1,300, and 30% have wages below €1,000. A total of 65% of youth sector workers express dissatisfaction with their wages. Low pay leads many to work multiple jobs, making the organisation of work more difficult. Moreover, low pay is the primary reason for considering a job change in 75% of cases, and it is perceived as a lack of appreciation for the sector.

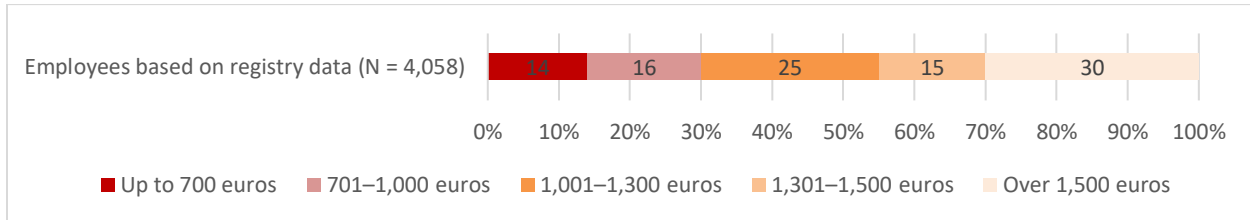


Figure 4. Average monthly gross wages of youth sector employees with a workload of at least 0.75 FTE (employees based on registry data, N = 4,058)

4. **The areas where workers express the least satisfaction include pay, feedback from managers and young people, workload, and opportunities for professional self-development.** Dissatisfaction with the work environment is mainly due to space constraints and the need for renovation. Additionally, a fifth of employers and workers are dissatisfied with the technical equipment (computers, projectors, etc). Reasons for considering a job change include low pay, stressful work, lack of recognition and lack of fringe benefits.

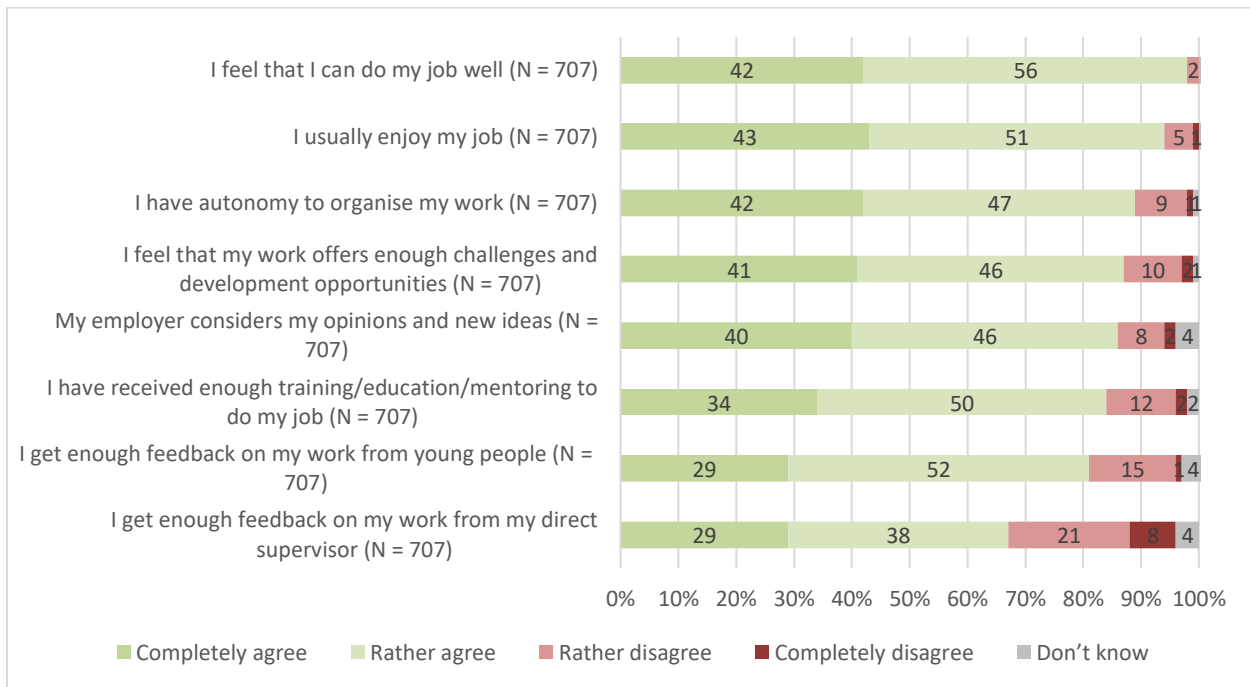


Figure 5. Employees' assessment of work-related statements, % (employees, N = 707)

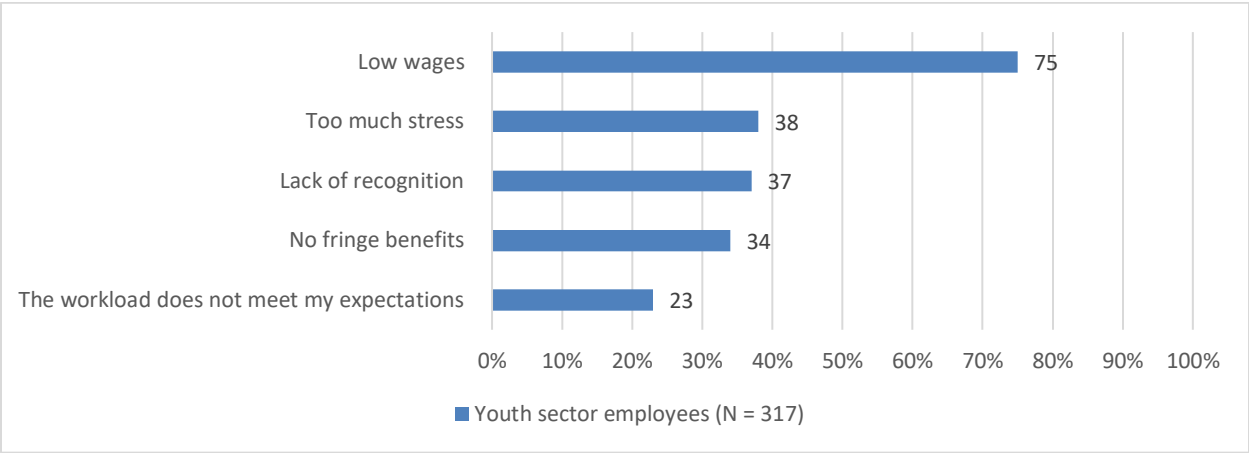


Figure 6. Reasons for thinking about changing jobs (employees, N = 317). Five most common responses

5. **Fringe benefits are not sufficiently available or motivating to compensate for the low wages and act as an additional incentive for staying with the employer.** Many of the benefits are available to less than a fifth of the workforce in the sector, according to their own assessment. A lack of fringe benefits is cited as one of the reasons for considering job changes by a third of workers. Workers are generally unaware of many available fringe benefits, and there is a lack of systematic information. Flexible working hours, bonuses, and longer holidays are the most anticipated benefits.

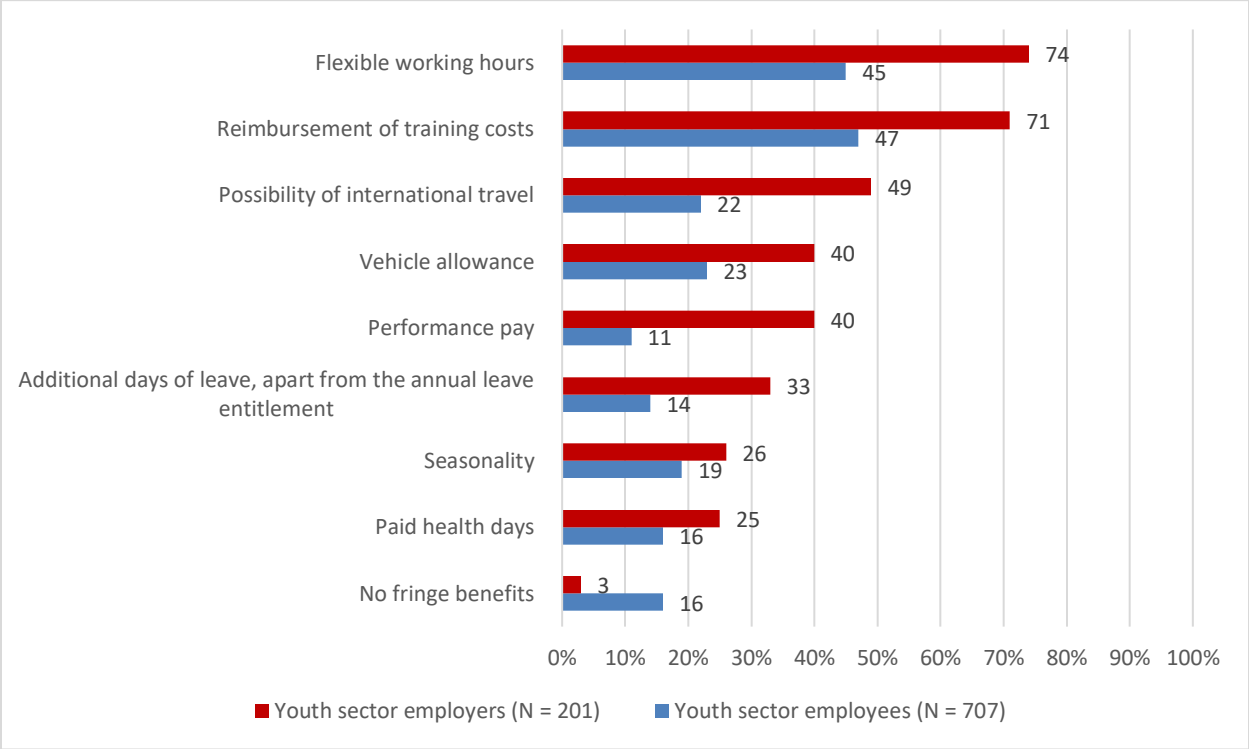


Figure 7. Fringe benefits of the job according to employees and employers, % (employers, N = 201; employees, N = 707). Authors’ choice of responses, the seven most common responses by employers and the response option “no fringe benefits”

6. **The biggest challenges for employers in terms of work organisation are related to budget and staff**, including raising wages in institutions with a limited budget, recruiting qualified staff, working multiple jobs, and recognising and motivating employees.
7. **The youth sector faces a shortage of qualified staff.** The increasing participation of young people, including at-risk groups, demands more time and skills from youth sector workers. Coping with an ageing and fluid workforce requires the addition of skilled staff to support young people in partnership with other professionals (e.g. social workers and formal education teachers) and sectors (e.g. the business and environmental sectors) and to find time for networking and sectoral development. **To avoid a workforce shortage, it is not reasonable to require qualifications from all youth sector workers before a shift towards a higher appreciation for the sector, the workers and the qualifications.**
8. Both newcomers and current **youth sector workers lack a clear understanding of the sector's diversity** and job tasks, which affects their career choice, specialisation, and career progression (including leaving the sector).
9. **Some youth sector workers are not fully prepared to meet the standards for the required tasks**, such as public relations, developing collaborative efforts, administrative work, and working with young people with special educational needs or those at risk. They require more support from colleagues, managers, and networks, as well as specialisation and role clarity.
10. **Not all local government leaders and professionals responsible for the youth sector recognise the importance of the sector.** Some local governments lack a dedicated youth sector specialist, as well as development and action plans for the field, leading to negative impacts on funding, sector recognition, staff appreciation and qualification recognition.
11. **Youth sector workers and managers come from very different educational and experience backgrounds.** Only 18% of workers and managers have a youth work education, while 42% of workers and 53% of managers have pedagogical education, and 54% of workers and 46% of managers have professional youth work or pedagogical qualifications. Around half of the workers have worked in the sector for at least ten years, while one-fifth have worked in the sector for up to three years.

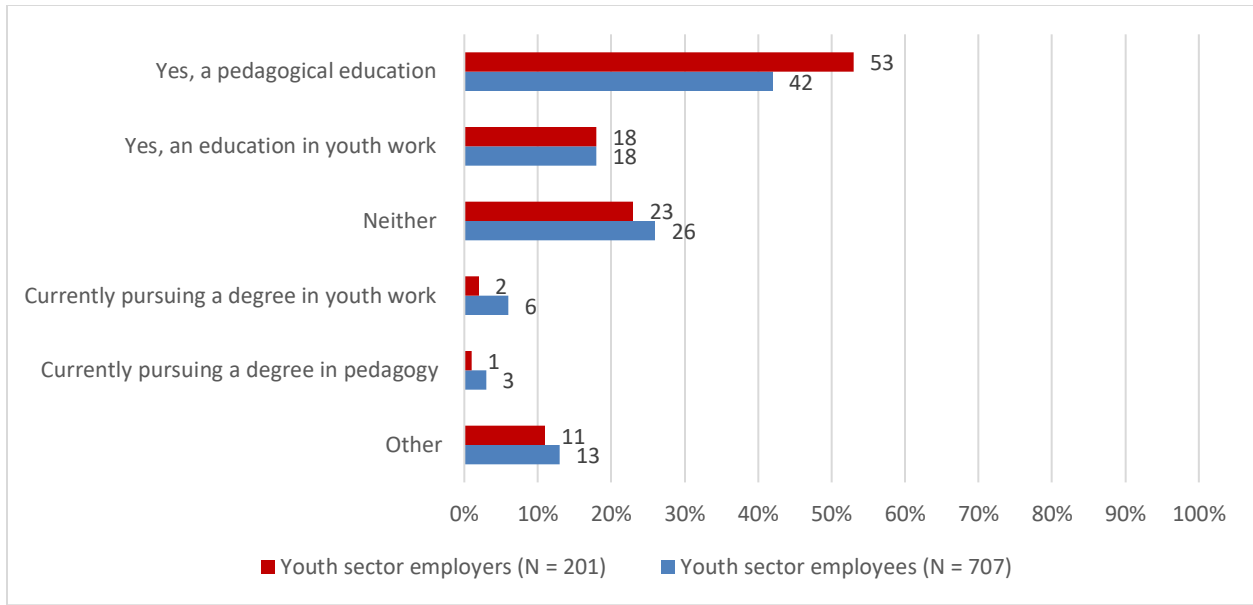


Figure 8. Youth work education or pedagogical education among youth sector employers and employees, % (employers, N = 201; employees, N = 707)

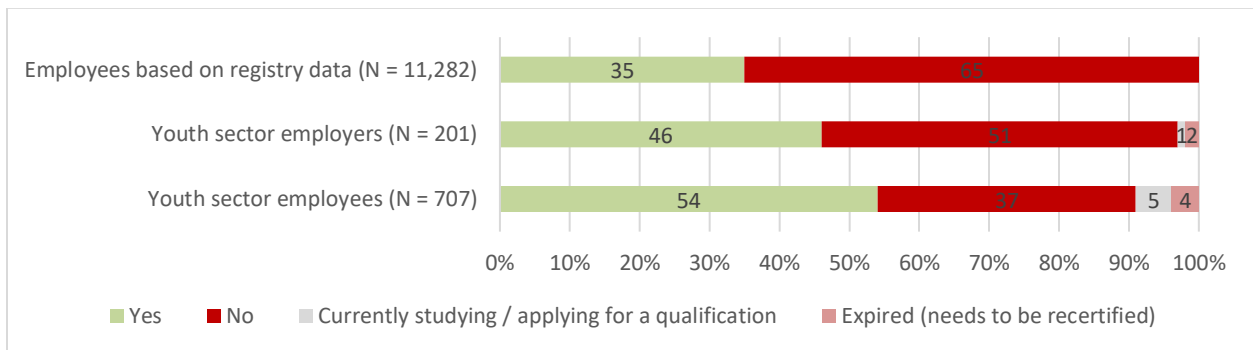


Figure 9. Youth sector employers and employees with youth work or pedagogical qualifications, % (employees based on registry data, N = 11,282; employers and employees responding to the survey questionnaire, N = 201 and N = 707, respectively)

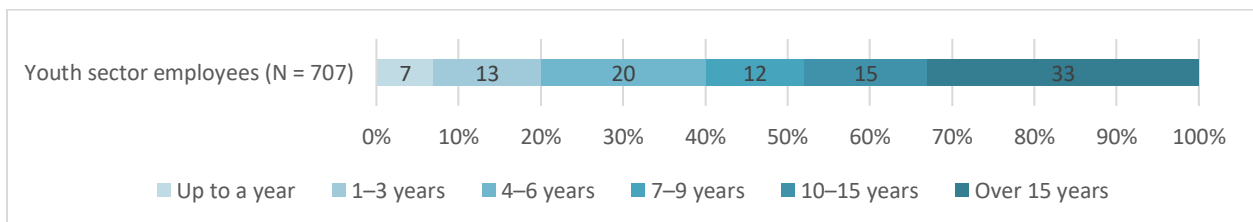


Figure 10. Youth sector employees based on the number of years worked in the sector, % (employees, N = 707)

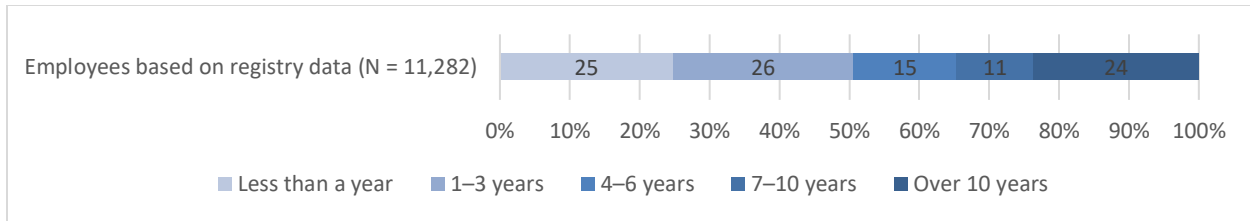


Figure 11. Youth sector employees based on the number of years worked in their current job, % (employees based on registry data, N = 11,282)

12. **The working conditions for youth sector workers have a direct impact on job satisfaction and retention.** Shortcomings in hygiene factors (e.g. low pay, lack of fringe benefits, excessive workload, poor management quality, and lack of feedback) lead to people leaving their jobs and discourage them from taking on more responsibility. Employers’ ability to improve working conditions is limited by budgets, staff size and employee qualifications.
13. **Many employers and employees are not familiar with mental health promotion principles,** including systematic and meaningful support for mental health using various techniques.
14. **Recruitment primarily considers personal qualities, work motivation, and professional competence.** While half of the managers value professional education, only up to a third of the employers in all occupational groups¹⁵ consider qualifications a priority.

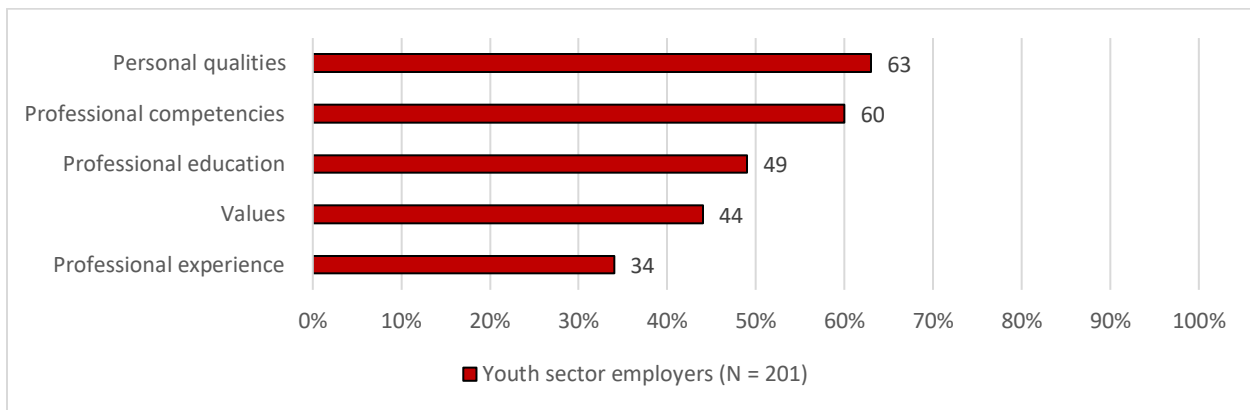


Figure 12. What is the main basis for your recruitment decisions? % (Employers, N = 201) Top five answers

15. **The image of the youth sector and the lack of recognition for its staff pose challenges in recruitment and retention.** While respondents feel that the image, appreciation and recognition of the sector have improved over time, efforts are still needed to justify youth activities and secure additional funding. According to the study, 72% of employees and 84% of employers believe that the wider public views the youth sector positively rather than negatively. More than a third of workers considering a job change cite a lack of recognition as the reason.

¹⁵ The following occupational groups stood out in the survey responses: youth workers, hobby school teachers, hobby instructors, and coaches.

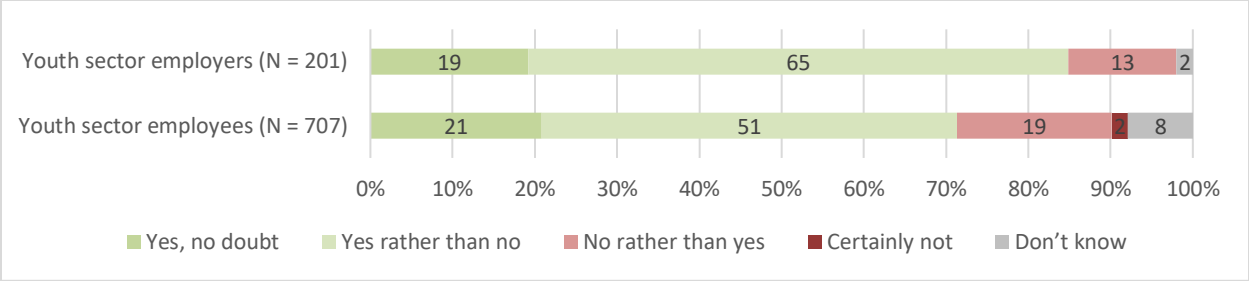


Figure 13. Do you think your sector has a positive image? % (Employers, N = 201; Employees, N = 707)

16. Intrinsic factors are the primary motivators for working in the youth sector. These include an interest in the field, challenging work, and opportunities for interaction and professional self-development.

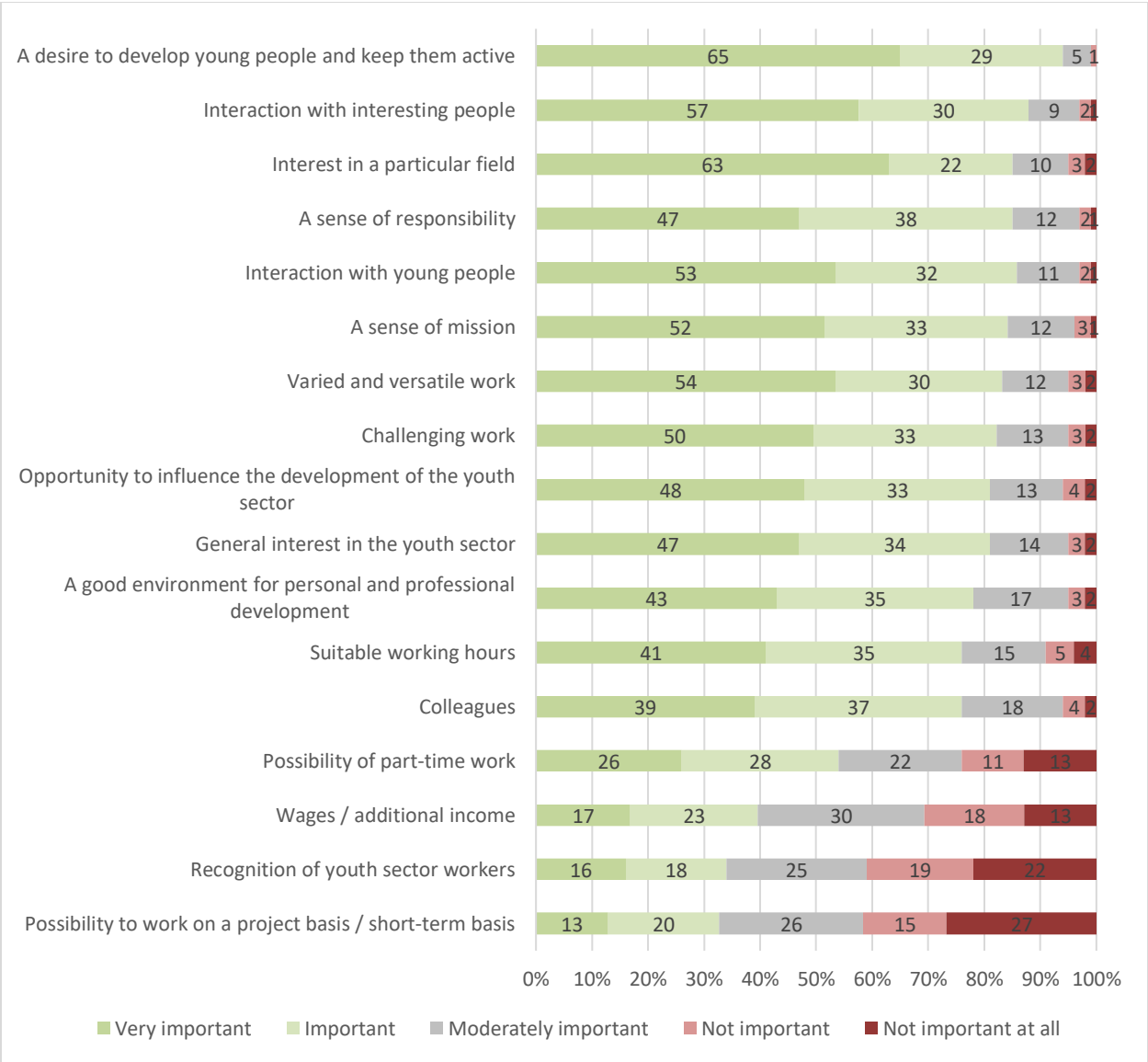


Figure 14. Employees rating their motivation to work in the youth field on a five-point scale, % (employees, N = 707)

17. Not all employers prioritise professional development opportunities or are willing to restructure work to facilitate such opportunities. While 71% of employers assess their staff’s competencies or training needs and encourage professional self-development, a fifth of employers have not done so. Limited budgets and, to a lesser extent, excessive workloads are identified as the main obstacles to providing development opportunities. In some cases, progress is hindered by a lack of awareness regarding the purpose of the profession and the need for lifelong learning and for considering the needs of young people as the target group.

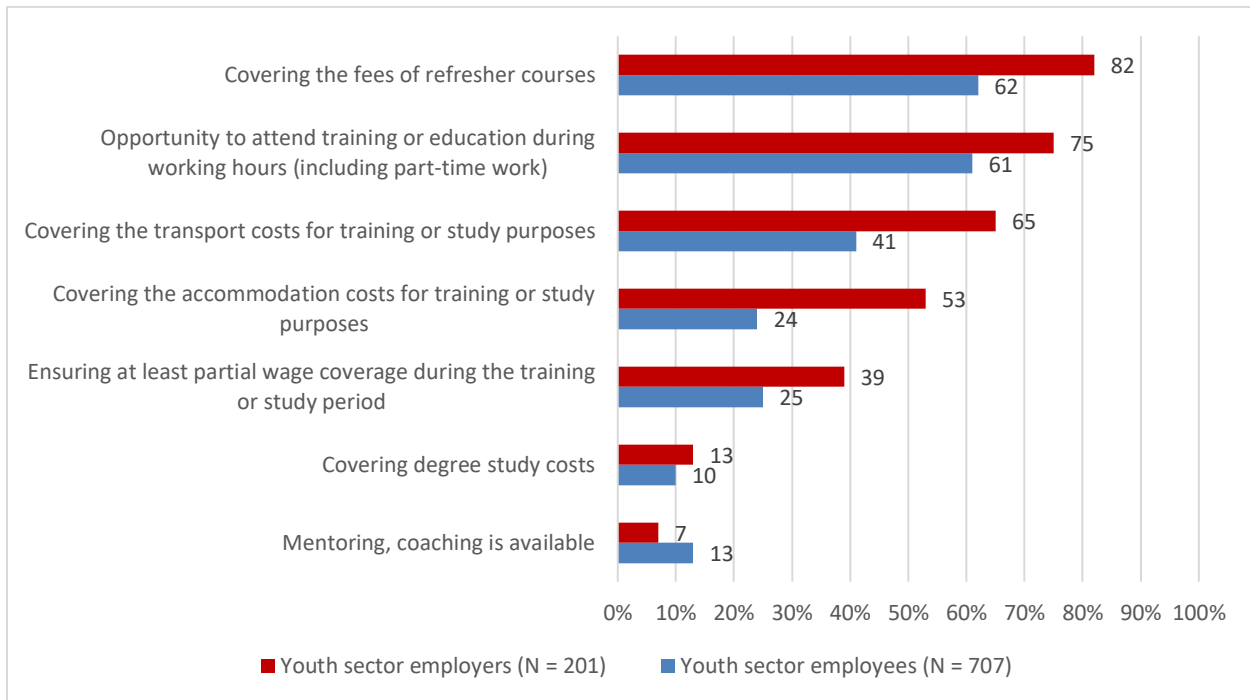


Figure 15. How does your employer support your professional self-development? How do you support your employees’ professional self-development? % (Employers, N = 201; Employees, N = 707)

18. The professional self-development of workers, along with monitoring, support and feedback, and the systematic provision of high-quality training are crucial to address qualification shortages or an ageing workforce. Managers often lack the time, financial resources and replacement staff to support professional self-development, including training, for their workers. Approximately one-fifth of employers who responded to the survey questionnaire had not assessed their employees’ competencies or training needs, and nearly a tenth were uncertain whether they had done so. Considering that most respondents foresee themselves continuing to work in the sector, there is a need for greater attention to systematic staff training.

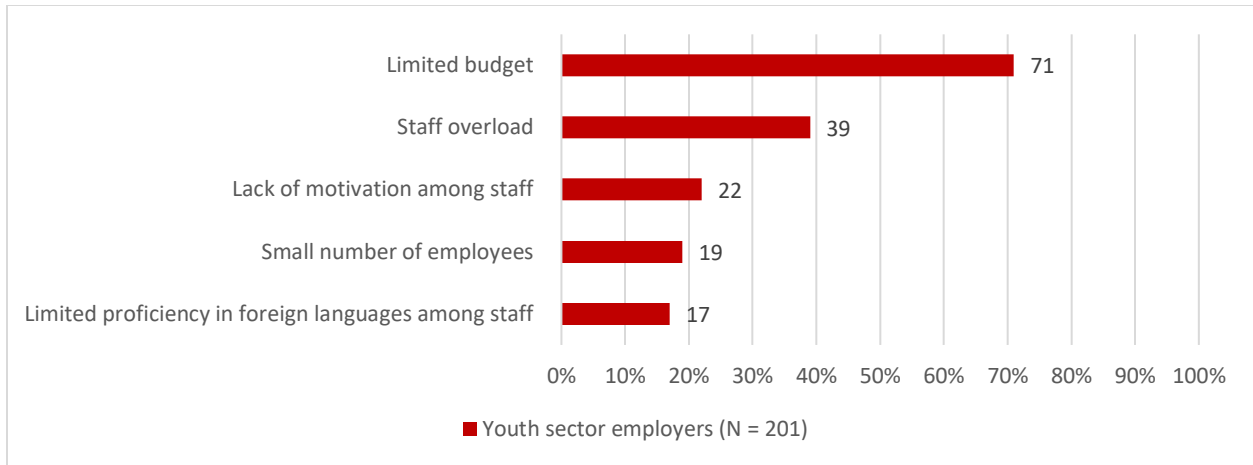


Figure 16. What hinders the creation of professional development opportunities for employees? % (Employers, N = 201) Top five responses

19. Managers often fail to provide targeted constructive feedback that supports the professional self-development of their staff. Just under half of the workers do not receive the necessary information about their job skills when receiving feedback or are uncertain whether they do.

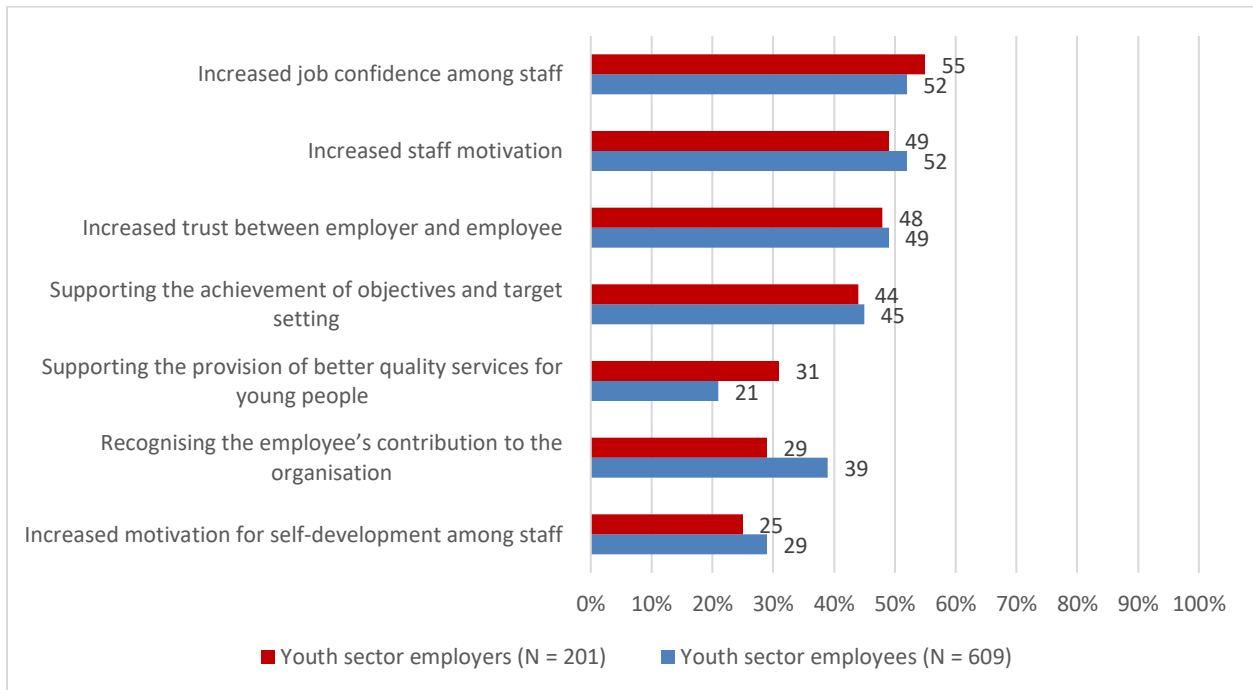


Figure 17. Select up to three main reasons why receiving/providing feedback is important for you (employee/employer), % (employers, N = 201; employees, N = 609)

20. The processes of getting a job in the youth sector and self-development are often random and non-linear. It is essential for employers to be aware of employees' self-development opportunities and to guide them towards learning, acquiring qualifications, attending training or experience-sharing events, or finding mentors or coaches, as employees may not be aware of their own development needs or opportunities.

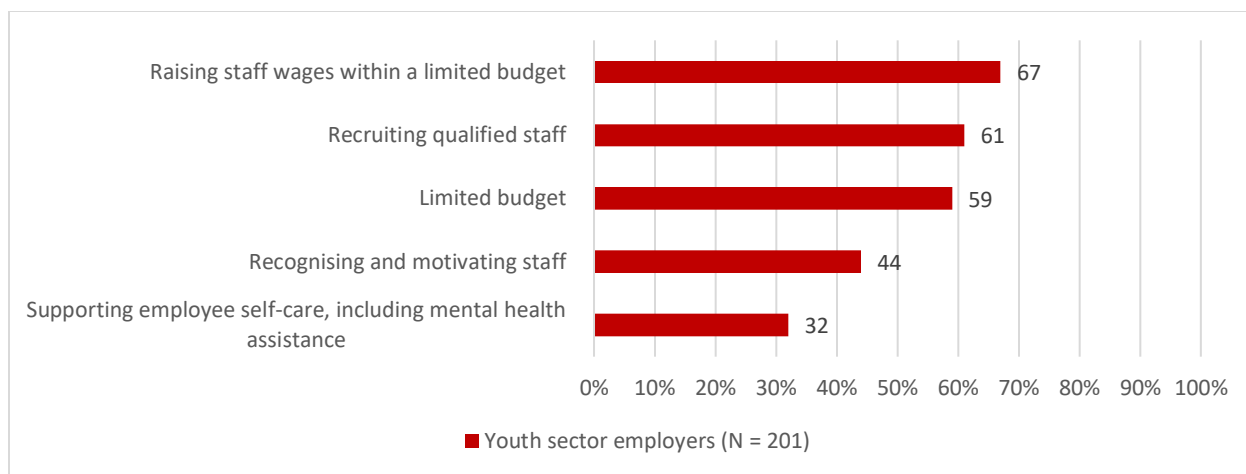


Figure 18. Which work-related issues are the most challenging for you as an employer? % (Employers, N = 201) Top five answers

21. **The study reveals distinct profiles for various occupational groups within the youth sector as follows:**

- 1) **Hobby instructors:** They are older and more highly educated, often working under the most unstable contracts and conditions compared to the other groups. Hobby instructing is not their primary job; they work with a lower workload, receive small wages and have no fringe benefits. Many do not receive feedback on their work from their managers and lack opportunities for training or other forms of professional self-development. They tend to be less satisfied with the different aspects of their job, especially the work environment and digital tools. Among this group, the percentage of employees who would like to change some aspects of the organisation of their work is the highest.
- 2) **Youth workers:** Younger with lower education levels and shorter work experience, this group has a higher proportion of women and is more likely to consider leaving their jobs. Compared to other groups, they feel more encouraged in their professional self-development but are considerably less likely to be members of professional organisations.
- 3) **Hobby school teachers:** Older and more educated, this group is less likely to consider changing jobs and is motivated by an interest in their teaching subjects.
- 4) **Coaches:** This group has more male members and stands out in their motivational factors. Compared to other groups, coaches place higher value on wages, flexible working hours, interest in their field of expertise, and bonuses for good performance as important motivators. They believe in the positive image of their occupation and that higher qualifications lead to higher pay.
- 5) **Youth officers at local governments:** They work at higher workloads compared to the sector average, with their part-time workload mostly not being their choice. They receive higher wages and more fringe benefits, and are more satisfied with their wages. Compared to other groups, coaches tend to have lower seniority, express less satisfaction with the content of their work, and exhibit less confidence in their future career prospects within the sector. They feel they receive insufficient feedback on their work.

- 6) **Leaders of institutions, youth associations or youth work organisations:** They tend to work at higher workloads in their field and receive higher wages. They show higher job satisfaction, particularly regarding the work environment and equipment.
22. **Treating and coordinating hobby education and youth work as a single youth sector poses a challenge due to their diverse identities, histories and challenges.** Currently, hobby education is part of youth work in the legal framework. While improving the quality of work for hobby school teachers and instructors could benefit from a learner-centred approach, there is no such understanding within the sector. Attempts to find a common identity are seen as coercion and an underestimation of hobby education. The identity problem is exacerbated by the fact that the youth sector is sometimes perceived as synonymous with youth work and other times not (e.g. at the state level vs. the local government level or by different organisations), and hobby education workers are selectively involved in funding programmes, youth work training and recognition events.
23. **Hobby schools lack regulation** and supervision of licences. Municipal hobby schools have more funding than their private counterparts, leading to a perceived unequal starting position as they compete in the same field. Some hobby school leaders feel competitive pressure from regular schools that are expanding their range of extracurricular activities or opening new hobby schools connected to the school, rather than guiding students to attend regional hobby schools.
24. **Employers generally rate the situation in the youth sector more positively than employees do.**
25. **Youth sector representative organisations have significant potential as advocates for the sector,** mediating between national and local government levels and addressing the needs of youth sector workers. **However, this potential is not fully realised.** These organisations can play a vital role in raising awareness of the issues highlighted in this study report.





RECOMMENDATIONS

Below are the main recommendations for improving the working conditions of youth sector workers, with references to the related conclusions on which each recommendation is based. The overarching aim of these recommendations is to enhance the visibility, involvement, support and social integration of young people.

Broadly speaking, the **role of the national level** is to provide a framework for development and change, bring together and mentor organisations and workers in the sector, and support local governments as youth sector organisers. The **role of local governments** is to add value to the sector and take ownership of the framework and responsibilities. Close cooperation between the state and local authorities is crucial.

The party responsible for the implementation of each recommendation and the roles of the other actors involved must be jointly agreed upon.







Table 2. Recommendations







No. and priority ¹⁶	For whom? ¹⁷	Recommendation	Related conclusions
I Youth sector funding and coordination			
1. 	National level and local governments	Increase the national and local youth sector budgets to improve the wage bill, enhance the quality of work content, and promote cooperation between agencies and levels. Additional funding through project applications, sponsorships and other channels could help diversify activities, experiment with new methods and expand skills rather than serving as the sole means for core activities.	3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 20
2. 	National level in cooperation with representative organisations	Support local governments in preparing strategies and financing plans	10
3. 	National level	Specify terms, definitions, content and boundaries of occupations and areas of hobby activities, and include them in policy documents while communicating decisions to all stakeholders. ¹⁸	8, 21, 22
4. 	Representative organisations, networks	Review how the action plans of representative organisations contribute to the objectives of the National Youth Sector Development Plan, ensuring	8, 10, 13, 16, 17, 22, 25








¹⁶ The recommendations marked in red are the most urgent, followed by orange and blue.






¹⁷ These are the main target groups of the recommendation. The party responsible and the roles of the those involved must be agreed upon.

¹⁸ It is essential to carefully consider and determine whether and under what conditions the various activities in the youth sector should be unified under one umbrella term. Additionally, the identities of occupations and the desired changes in them should be formulated, along with a plan for achieving these changes through dialogue with representative associations. It is also necessary to define the roles of youth workers, hobby group leaders, coaches and hobby instructors, as well as identify the coordinating entity for the support structure, training system, funding scheme and networks for each occupation.

No. and priority ¹⁶	For whom? ¹⁷	Recommendation	Related conclusions
		alignment with what, why and for whom actions should be taken, engaging the people they represent and raising awareness among target groups about activities and benefits for staff.	
5. 	Local governments	Local governments should support their agencies, including with budget and staffing concerns. Local government staff, such as accountants and IT specialists, could also assist the agencies.	10
6. 	National level and local governments	Take into account regional peculiarities in the development of the sector, and provide more support for the development of smaller regions by introducing new regional policy incentives to attract workers, such as reimbursing living costs. Harmonise the wages of youth workers across Estonia to reduce pay gaps within the sector. Give more consideration to accessibility when planning training, and introduce transport allowances for training for workers from smaller regions.	10
7. 	National level, local governments, representative organisations	Consider the specific needs of occupational groups in sectoral development, as the study revealed that the most significant statistical differences exist between occupational groups. Recognise differences in competencies, qualifications and job content.	22
II Recruitment and professionalisation of youth sector staff			
8. 	Representative organisations in cooperation with the national level, educational institutions, providers of continuing professional training and employers	Raise awareness of professional self-development opportunities, various methods, the importance of self-assessment and lifelong learning, and the purposes of the profession. Highlight the specifics of schools and curricula offering degree studies in youth work.	3, 13, 17, 18, 19
9. 	National level, universities, trainers, representative organisations	Provide more opportunities for youth work education and professional self-development. Consider adding a youth work module to pedagogical and hobby education curricula. Offer micro degrees for acquiring and upgrading qualifications	7, 8, 10, 11
10. 	National level, local governments	Ensure competitive wages in the youth sector. Link the wages of youth sector workers and managers to those of formal education teachers or the Estonian average wages. Make wages in the sector dependent on the level of education, professional qualifications, occupation, competencies and responsibilities. If necessary, the Ministry of Education and Research	3, 4, 7, 10

No. and priority ¹⁶	For whom? ¹⁷	Recommendation	Related conclusions
		could offer a qualification-based wage subsidy. Provide a state guarantee for the agreed rates even if the local government runs into financial difficulties.	
11. 	Representative organisations in cooperation with the national level	Raise awareness among local government youth officers to support the development of the youth sector in the region , to support staff (e.g. if they have no one to discuss their concerns with) and to exchange experiences. Identify opportunities for the systematic sectoral training of local government youth officers. Encourage them to make it a good practice to visit sectoral organisations in the region.	7, 9, 10
12. 	Representative organisations	Improve the leadership quality of youth organisation leaders , including the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • prioritise leadership education in the recruitment of leaders; • provide (centralised) leadership programmes and training, workshops and other forms of professional self-development specifically for leaders; • provide mentoring and coaching to leaders; • support networking and the exchange of experience; • consider consolidating small organisations under a single leader. 	3, 18, 20
13. 	National level	Gradually implement mandatory qualifications within the youth sector , starting with at least one qualified staff member in each organisation responsible for supporting colleagues, including reflection on the significance of activities. Consider requiring renewal of the qualification also for occupations requiring higher education.	7, 8, 9, 12
14. 	National level in cooperation with representative organisations	Continue providing free training for youth sector workers , including in-depth training in youth work fundamentals. Offer training closer to the workers and tailor it to the background of the target group, such as staff with specific education and experience, or staff working with a specific target group.	7, 8, 9
15. 	All levels, especially representative organisations	Raise awareness among parents and the general public about the importance of the qualifications of specialists working with young people , using social media and the media.	7
16. 	National level in cooperation with representative organisations and local governments	Give management priority to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • supporting staff self-development, professional feedback and communication skills; • employee involvement, including creating a secure environment, encouraging initiative and responsibility; 	18, 19, 20

No. and priority ¹⁶	For whom? ¹⁷	Recommendation	Related conclusions
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> regularly monitoring and improving factors that can influence work motivation (including the possibility of fringe benefits) and making these known to employees. 	
III Working conditions and the work environment in the youth sector			
17. 	Employer	Improve the organisation of work and communication to promote mental health and provide a secure and supportive environment for staff. Clearly present the objectives of the activities for better understanding.	15
18. 	Employer	Due to limited budgets, focus on the social aspect of the work environment, including developing peer support skills, giving feedback, working with other organisations to share facilities and other resources, and modernising the environment to attract young people.	16, 17, 18, 19
IV Appreciating the youth sector and rewarding staff			
19. 	National level, representative organisations	Improve the image of the youth sector through outreach events, campaigns and media coverage. Share information and stories about the sector's content and importance. This requires, among other things, the preparation of a communication strategy in cooperation with the Ministry of Education and Research, the Estonian Association of Youth Workers and other stakeholders.	16
20. 	National level in cooperation with representative organisations and youth organisations	Raise awareness among staff and young people about the importance of recognition and opportunities for recognition. For example, conduct training, awareness-raising events, and campaigns for this purpose.	6, 10, 16
V Cooperation			
21. 	National level in cooperation with representative organisations	Establish a support network of local government youth officers for cooperation, experience exchange and multilateral communication, enabling local governments to seek advice from the ministry responsible for the field and other local governments.	9, 10
22. 	Local governments	Establish regional networks of youth sector workers with the objectives of advocacy, knowledge and experience exchange, workload adjustment (which is considered the most desirable added benefit), finding replacements and promoting wider use of the competencies of specialised workers, for example, by facilitating their involvement in other local governments as well.	7, 9
23. 	National level, local	Develop a national vision for the integration of formal and non-formal education, defining the youth	8, 10, 22, 23

No. and priority ¹⁶	For whom? ¹⁷	Recommendation	Related conclusions
	governments in cooperation with representative organisations	and education sector coherently from the perspective of young people as the target group. Offer increased support to local governments in their efforts to integrate formal and non-formal education and to adopt a learner-centred approach in all areas of hobby activities, involving all stakeholders. Provide cross-sectoral training and other events and establish a platform for discussions to facilitate dialogue.	
24. 	National level	Empower representative organisations to act as spokespersons for the youth sector, reaching out to employers and employees to raise awareness of issues, facilitate problem-solving, organise training initiatives and work towards improving the sector's image. This requires (1) an adequate budget allocation and (2) responding to the proposals presented by representative organisations, including considerations for legislative changes and wage subsidies, to demonstrate that these organisations are regarded as serious partners.	25
VI Registers and future studies			
25. 	National level	Organise a study on hobby education and activities to foster the development and streamlining of the youth sector , focusing on licencing, competencies and quality requirements, and relevance to the needs of the target group.	23
26. 	National level in cooperation with representative organisations	Streamline the registration of youth sector workers, including the following steps: (1) organise the job titles of youth sector workers in the employment register; (2) register all workers of the sector, including volunteers, in the employment register; (3) make a specific notation in the employment register to identify workers engaged in activities involving young people; (4) improve communication between registers and the consistency of data so as to enable a quick overview of the sector's workforce.	1
27. 	National level	Organise a survey of youth sector leaders, categorised by area of hobby activities or by their respective positions, to better support youth sector leaders (including in the formulation of training plans) , focusing on leaders' career trajectories, leadership training and competencies, and development needs.	19
28. 	Representative organisations	Organise a study or a competition (e.g. an essay competition) to explore what young people and parents value in youth work and the reasons behind these perceptions, in order to improve the image of	8, 16

No. and priority¹⁶	For whom?¹⁷	Recommendation	Related conclusions
		youth work and to involve young people and society.	

SUMMARY

The aim of this study was to determine the size and composition of the youth sector workforce in Estonia and to gain a comprehensive overview of the working conditions and work environment, organisation of work and motivation, professional self-development, and feedback practices of specialists working with young people. An analysis of secondary sources and registry data, an online survey of youth sector employees and employers, expert and focus group interviews, and data requests to local governments were used to answer the research questions.

There are an estimated 12,300 youth sector workers in Estonia. According to registry data, 43% of them are teachers, 28% coaches, 15% instructors and 14% youth workers. The workforce is predominantly female, with 67% women and 33% men, and has diverse educational backgrounds. Based on registry data, nearly half of the workforce hold a master's degree or higher qualification. The highest proportions of such degrees are observed among hobby school teachers (61%) and hobby instructors (58%), while the lowest proportion is seen among youth workers (27%). According to survey results, 42% of employees and 53% of employers have higher pedagogical education; 18% of both employees and employers have higher education in youth work.

Based on registry data, the majority of youth sector workers earn less than the average Estonian wages. Approximately 70% of full-time youth sector workers have gross monthly wages below €1,500, and 55% of them earn below €1,300. Professional qualifications significantly impact around half of the workers' pay, with the closest link observed among coaches and the weakest for heads of institutions.

Survey results show that only a third of the workers are satisfied with their pay. The main reason workers consider changing jobs in the youth sector is low wages. Additionally, many of the job benefits are perceived by workers to be accessible to less than a fifth of them. A third of those who have contemplated changing jobs cite the lack of fringe benefits as one of the reasons.

Employers are particularly concerned about excessive staff workload, as reported by 40% of them, especially heads of youth centres and general education schools. Around one-third of youth sector workers have multiple jobs to maintain wage stability. This is the main cause of dissatisfaction, along with poor pay, especially among coaches and hobby school teachers.

Where employees have a low workload, which is most common among hobby instructors, employers are less willing to invest in their professional development. On the other hand, part-time work is typically a choice made by workers themselves to increase their income. Flexible working hours, as well as a pay increase, would motivate part-time workers to consider full-time positions.

There is a low labour market entrance rate in the sector, with around two-thirds of hobby school teachers and hobby instructors having over ten years of experience in the field, usually in the same position. However, few workers pursue a career within the organisation, largely due to limited awareness of career opportunities in the wider youth sector. Youth workers perceive youth work as a restricted range of activities or as being confined to specific organisations, which creates obstacles to their professional self-development and career advancement. Enhancing awareness of career opportunities could foster motivation for self-development.

Overall, workers express high satisfaction with the content of their work and their colleagues. Most workers report that they feel competent in their tasks and enjoy the autonomy to organise their work. According to theories of motivation, this high satisfaction may explain why people continue to work in the sector despite low pay.

Around 80% of workers are satisfied with the work environment, although some report a lack of space and the need for renovations. Hobby instructors, in particular, express dissatisfaction due to obsolete premises and a lack of technical equipment. More broadly, workers express dissatisfaction with the need to seek additional funding and to constantly convince funders and the public of the importance of their work. Further, there is significant room for improvement in providing feedback and support through training, coaching and education.

Almost half of youth sector workers in all occupational groups, but most of all youth workers, have considered changing jobs in the past two years, with two-thirds of employers citing the challenge of raising wages within limited budgets. Employers also face organisational concerns related to budget constraints, staff shortages and low qualifications.

The low pay and lack of appreciation in the sector negatively affect its image. The unclear image of youth work is further influenced by the varying quality of activities and a general perception that youth centres do not address crucial issues. To enhance the image of youth work, representatives of youth workers believe that conducting a nationwide information campaign is essential.

Youth sector workers are primarily motivated by their interest in the field, youth development, interaction with young people, the diversity of their work and opportunities for self-development. However, entry into the sector is not always straightforward, with many arriving by chance and with limited professional knowledge. Therefore, employers should encourage their employees to pursue learning, qualifications, training, and other self-development opportunities.

While Estonia has a robust system of degree studies and professions in youth work, there is no clear system in hobby education. The perceived lack of added value demotivates professionals from acquiring qualifications across the youth sector.

Many leaders have a specialist background without management qualifications or competencies, which directly affects their ability to guide the professional self-development of their employees. Employers assigned a low priority to enhancing their competencies in supporting employees' self-development. At the same time, they tend to rate the professional development opportunities available to employees higher than the employees themselves do, across all aspects. Youth workers are the most likely to agree with the availability of self-development opportunities, while hobby school teachers and hobby instructors are the least likely. The main concern is the situation of young teachers in hobby schools: they should be supported early in their careers with quality feedback, mentoring and effective promotion of their lessons.

Almost all employers and employees who responded to the survey felt that individual feedback was crucial in supporting their professional development, while more than a fifth of employees said they did not get the feedback they needed on their job skills and a quarter were hesitant about their response. Employees may not give as much weight to feedback received on an ongoing basis throughout the work process compared to feedback presented in a specific format, like periodic development interviews.

The various occupations and areas of hobby activities within the sector have very different identities. Treating youth work, hobby education, and hobby activities as a single youth sector raises doubts among many employees, employers and representatives.

The identity of youth workers is relatively cohesive and becoming more robust. However, there is a clear connection between low pay, frequent job changes, and the hesitancy to invest in the professional self-development of staff at youth centres. The identity of hobby school workers is strong but strained, as they perceive themselves as part of the education sector rather than the youth sector.

Hobby instructors have the most precarious status, as they lack a coherent career path or professional qualification system, have no access to fringe benefits, and rely on their own resources and motivation for self-development. Just over half of hobby instructors work for additional income. They are more likely than other occupational groups to have fixed-term contracts or authorisation agreements, and approximately three-quarters of them work part-time with less than a 0.75% workload.

A systemic obstacle to the self-development of both hobby school teachers and hobby instructors is the confusion surrounding their affiliation and the uncertainty of which budget should be used to offer them self-development opportunities.

In conclusion, the youth sector workforce consists mainly of intrinsically motivated individuals who care about the content of their work, young people's development and the development of their area of hobby activities. Challenges include low pay, shorter holidays compared to the formal education system, inflexible working hours, workload, stress, and to some extent, a lack of recognition and positive image of the field.

The authors of the study recommend increasing the national and local governments' youth sector budget to address these challenges. This would enable the following:

- (1) increasing wages to attract qualified staff, enhance the quality of activities, encourage specialisation, foster collaboration, promote sectoral and self-development activities, which have been overlooked so far, and enable workers to promote the youth sector to improve its image;
- (2) facilitating participation in paid training courses relevant to the organisation, managers and employees, including leadership training;
- (3) improving the work environment;
- (4) developing a package of fringe benefits to motivate employees;
- (5) establishing a staff replacement and support structure.