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# Innovative ways of handling staff shortages in ECEC? Increasing flexibility in the regulatory frameworks for non-traditional and non-German professional staff qualifications

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## Abstract

The staff shortages in the early childhood education and care (ECEC) sector in Germany are an important issue. They impact centres that are forced to close earlier, shut down entire groups or are unable to open at all due to the lack of pedagogical staff. However, the federal states have been making efforts to address this problem. This article discusses innovative ways of handling staff shortages based on qualitative analyses of current regulations regarding qualification requirements for the ECEC sector in Germany. Our analysis focused on the question concerning the degree to which a multi-professional orientation is already widespread in the 16 licensing laws of the federal states and what other conditions have to be met by individuals wishing to work in the ECEC sector who have no pedagogical qualifications. The second focus regarding the handling of staff shortages was on the formal recognition of migrant pedagogical staff with non-German qualifications. The results revealed first a tendency to open the labour market to individuals with non-pedagogical qualifications in the majority of the federal states. Second, most of the federal states have created ways of recognising non-German qualifications and of putting in place special regulations for Ukrainian pedagogues. In summary, it can be said that despite the relaxing of the licensing laws, no major changes in team composition could be observed. This is a positive sign given the unchanged division of tasks and positions in the teams, as there are currently no structures in place to adequately support team members with non-pedagogical qualifications.

**Keywords:** Early childhood education and care (ECEC), Staff shortages, Pedagogical staff with non-pedagogical and non-German qualifications, Ukrainian pedagogical staff, Professionalisation, Licensing

## Introduction

In the German early childhood education and care (ECEC) sector, the year 2000 has marked a change. Up to then, ECEC centres offered parents mainly of children from the age of 3 years the option of supplementing care in the family. Given the outcomes for German children in the 2000 PISA study, the educational mandate of ECEC was

reinforced and further reforms were implemented (Grgic, 2020). In addition, the sector became more and more crucial for family life because of the growing number of mothers who wanted or needed to go out to work (Neuberger et al., 2022). In 2013, the German state widened the existing law for legal entitlement to early education and care to 1- and 2-year-old children. For the expansion of the ECEC system, it provided funds for investments by the federal states over a period of several years. This change did not affect the eastern federal states as much as it did the western ones. In the former German Democratic Republic, the provision of day care was mandatory for all children. As a result, the places were in line with demand but after unification in 1989, many young people migrated to West Germany. This means that the eastern federal states had to reduce the number of childcare places, whereas they were in short supply in the western federal states (Böttcher & Gebauer, 2020). Even today, there are still differences between the take-up of day care for under 3 years, and the shortage of places is particularly apparent in the western federal states. Germany is now looking to another law that will enshrine a legal entitlement to after-school care for elementary school children. Overall, these developments have resulted in a massive shortage of ECEC staff. Current projections predict a staff shortage in west Germany of up to 70,000 by 2025 (Autorengruppe Bildungsberichterstattung, 2022).

The changes mentioned also had an impact on the composition of teams in German ECEC centres. Under the conditions of a licensed ECEC labour market in Germany in which access is regulated by licensing laws in all federal states, various options for staff recruitment have been applied over the last 20 years. The strategies adopted by the federal states to cope with the necessary ECEC expansion first entailed extending the training system, second recruiting unemployed pedagogical staff, third recruiting pedagogical staff who have work experience but who are not currently looking for jobs (the so-called 'silent reserve') and fourthly initiatives to attract new types of staff (e.g., men, career changers) (Grgic et al., 2014; Autorengruppe Fachkräftebarometer, 2021). Whereas the eastern federal states were able to draw on larger reserves of unemployed pedagogical staff, the western federal states were forced to significantly expand their training systems very early on (Grgic et al., 2014). This led to the recruitment of numerous ECEC professionals. In 2006, German ECEC centres employed 379,006 professionals. By 2022 their number had already risen to 637,630. 93% of them are female (Autorengruppe Bildungsberichterstattung, 2022). The recruitment of men and career changers for early childhood education training was only successful to a limited degree (Grgic et al., 2018).

Another solution to the staff shortages is to relax the official regulations for professional team members in ECEC centres by incorporating more and more individuals with non-pedagogical qualifications into the teams or by giving migrants with non-German qualifications in early childhood education the opportunity to work in ECEC centres. In addition, all 16 federal states have different regulations. This makes it difficult to offer sufficient access for certain occupational groups to the regional ECEC labour market. Nonetheless, all these strategies to deal with staff shortages have already changed the composition of teams in ECEC centres and the way the staff members work together.

The aim of this paper was first to discuss the composition of German ECEC teams based on a qualitative content analysis of current regulations that sets out the qualification requirements for the ECEC sector in Germany laid down in 16 laws in the federal

states. The analysis focussed on the degree to which a multi-professional orientation is already widespread in the licensing laws of the federal states and what other requirements must be met to enable individuals who have no pedagogical qualifications to work in the ECEC sector. Our second focus was on the situation of migrants with non-German qualifications. We provided an overview of additional regulations regarding the recognition procedure of their qualifications in Germany and shed light on the heterogeneous options for dealing with non-German qualifications in team compositions. We also examined whether special regulations have been put in place for pedagogical staff from Ukraine who fled to Germany to escape the war.

The following section gives an overview of the theoretical background to professionalisation and the importance of qualifications in the context of regulations pertaining to the German ECEC labour market. Sect. "[Methods](#)" describes the analytical methods and Sect. "[Results](#)" presents the findings of the analysis, including non-pedagogical and non-German qualifications before we move on to our conclusions in Sect. "[Conclusion](#)".

## Theoretical background

### Different theoretical perspectives on professionalisation

Professionalisation of the ECEC workforce is an ongoing academic topic in Germany. However, there is no consensus regarding the term 'professionalisation'. This has to do with the different underlying theoretical approaches to professionalisation (Thole, 2008). The formal approach is often used, for example, as described in the report *Fachkräftebarometer in Germany* (Autorengruppe Fachkräftebarometer, 2021). This interpretation sees professionalisation as a sociological approach (classic approach) (Kurtz, 2014) and rates professions as specialist qualifications. From this point of view, individuals working in these professions must possess specific knowledge and the skills to resolve society's problems. Usually, professional qualifications encompass an academic qualification and the capacity to tackle certain tasks (Kurtz, 2014; Mieg, 2015).

Other German approaches to professions of Oevermann (1996) or Schütze (1992, 1996) point out that the most important components are knowledge and skills for resolving problems with clients. Professions are recognisable as they entail a high quality job but not a specific diploma. Nevertheless, doing a job in a professional way is challenging, because it involves working in situations with individuals—so no two pedagogical situations are the same. This is a challenge for all professionals, because they have to adapt their knowledge and skills to individuals and situations. Rabe-Kleberg (1996) assumes that professionals need a 'surplus of qualifications' (ibid., p. 295) to enable them to deal with the uncertainty that comes with the situations and individuals. Every child is different and situations in ECEC vary depending on the children, the families and the local conditions. Highly qualified, experienced and reflective practitioners are needed to tackle these challenging tasks. Nevertheless, Schütze (1992) insists that a professional is someone who has a mandate and a licence to do a certain job. From this point of view, it is not an academic qualification that is the basis for professional work, but rather every qualification mandated by the state. In the ECEC labour market in Germany, early childhood professionals must have a qualification that documents their ability to do the job. The federal states regulate entry onto the labour market to establish which qualification is appropriate.

From this perspective, there have been gains in professionalisation in early childhood education over the last decades. Historical analysis shows that up to the 1970s Germany experienced major changes resulting from an increasingly strong educational mandate in ECEC centres. Working opportunities for individuals without any professional training or with public health qualifications (e.g., nurses) were restricted in all federal states. The licensing laws increasingly focussed on social pedagogical qualifications (educators, social pedagogues), i.e., persons who have been specifically trained for social work tasks.<sup>1</sup> In the 2000s the opening up of possibilities for other academic pedagogical qualifications began (special needs pedagogues, pedagogues, teachers). These professionalisation processes on a collective level led to a disproportionate exodus of unqualified workers over time and, in the long run, to a professional (mainly pedagogical) ECEC labour market in Germany (Grgic, 2020).

Today, 67% of staff members have a specific qualification to work with young children on an educational basis. They can be designated as professionals according to Schütze's interpretation. The staff members have undergone training at least to ISCED level 6 and possess special ECEC knowledge and skills. However, only 6% of them have undergone academic training (Autorengruppe Bildungsberichterstattung, 2022). This shows that it was not possible to establish academisation in the sense of the classical approach, but rather that Schütze's mandate principle has prevailed. This is reflected in the regulations of the federal states.

A specific qualification is necessary, because, in German ECEC centres, there is no division of labour. This means that all team members perform the same pedagogical tasks aside from the centre leader (Fröhlich-Gildhoff et al., 2021), which requires pedagogical knowledge. However, the lack of staff has now prompted discussions and led to the first openings of the labour market for individuals with non-pedagogical qualifications. This can be seen as a shift towards multi-professional teams that, in the long term, will lead to greater heterogeneity within the workforce. In terms of the classical approach, a profession is connected to an academic discipline, which delivers the knowledge for a profession and is crucial when it comes to resolving problems in this special field. To put in place a real multi-professional team, professionals from other disciplines, such as psychologists, speech therapists or, for example, musicians need to be part of it. The relaxing of the licensing laws led to an increase in qualifications in ECEC centres today, but not necessarily to more professions or a shift towards multi-professional teams. Cloos (2017) points out that German ECEC teams can even be termed 'mono-professional', because most of them have a pedagogical qualification. The question arises whether persons with non-German qualifications contribute to the development of multi-professional teams or merely introduce a greater degree of heterogeneity.

<sup>1</sup> In Germany, the day care centres are part of the social welfare sector. The staff qualifications in this sector have a socio-educational orientation. The education sector has schools and the main qualifications are held by teachers. Social pedagogy is part of the discipline pedagogy and adopts a more holistic approach. Social pedagogical qualifications encompass education and care, help people integrate into society and affect all aspects of their personality. In the German tradition, there is a difference between *Bildung* and *Erziehung*. In English both are covered by the term 'education'.

### Professionalisation and its relation to federal regulations

Besides the theoretical perspective, the licensing laws form the basis for the current multi-professionality or heterogeneity within ECEC teams in Germany. The 16 federal states in Germany enjoy considerable independence in education issues in the ECEC sector. The legal basis for regional ECEC laws is a federal law (Social Code Book Eight [SGB VIII]). It regulates the conditions of early childhood education, and stresses that early childhood education is part of the social welfare system. This law also stipulates that only persons who are qualified and personally suited are to be employed (Sect. 72) (Schulz et al., 2022). In their ECEC regulations the federal states set out detailed qualification requirements for access to the regional ECEC labour market. The staff shortages in the ECEC sector that have persisted for 20 years have resulted in the first relaxing of licensing laws. This means that individuals with qualifications other than classic ones<sup>2</sup> have been given access to early childhood education (Grgic & Friederich, 2023). However, it is still not clear whether this will lead to increased heterogeneity in the ECEC centres.

Furthermore, all the licensing laws mention the possibility of recognising non-German qualifications on a case-by-case basis. Germany is a country with a steadily growing migrant community. In 2020, 26.7% of the population had a migration background (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2022). A growing number of gainfully employed persons on the labour market have a migration background, in 2018 24%. However, in ECEC centres, only 17% of pedagogical staff members have a migration background (Autorengruppe Fachkräftebarometer, 2021, p. 140). The reasons are diverse. First, the ECEC labour market in Germany is a licensed market (as detailed above). You have to hold a specific, recognised qualification to gain access. This is not a problem for people with a migrant background who have completed their school education and training in Germany but it is a problem for people who arrive with non-German qualifications. Second, it is less frequent on average for migrants in Germany to have a qualification. This means that some members of the migrant population without any qualifications do not have the opportunity to work in early childhood education in Germany. For those who have a qualification and gain access, it becomes apparent that there are more members with an academic qualification. This could be an indication that a high number of people have entered the field of ECEC work through recognition, since an academic degree is a prerequisite for working in early education in most European and non-European countries (Autorengruppe Fachkräftebarometer, 2017, p. 173). The German recognition procedure consists of an individual examination and entails a few obstacles (e.g., costs for translation, examination, time to obtain recognition) during the period needed to determine whether the non-German qualifications are equivalent to the German ones. The assumption is that there are many individuals with non-German qualifications who could be won for the ECEC workforce.

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<sup>2</sup> For more information about the classic qualifications in German ECEC centres, see Sect. "Results".

## Methods

We wanted to determine whether the opening up for non-pedagogical qualifications and the formal recognition of non-German qualifications will change the composition of teams in ECEC and whether this will lead to multi-professional or heterogeneous teams. We, therefore, analysed the current licensing regulations in all federal states (ECEC laws, implementing provisions, professional staff agreements between the federal states and providers; current status of analysis: 31/10/2023). In addition, we took into account the special situation of Ukrainian pedagogues, for whom some federal states have put in place special regulations.

We drew on methods of multi-level qualitative content analysis according to Kuckartz (2018). The focus of the analysis was first on identifying the qualifications that give access to the ECEC system in each federal state. A distinction was made depending on whether access was granted to all three positions (centre leader, group leader, assistant) or only partially. We used a deductive approach to build categories for the types of qualification (main category) and job positions (subcategory). In the course of coding, another category scheme was developed inductively based on the analysis material for the subcategories of further requirements for gaining access to ECEC labour market, for instance, further pedagogical training or work experience in the ECEC sector. The results of the overall coding were then compared at the federal state level as part of a typological content analysis to derive typologies for access regulations. We used the MAXQDA 18 software. We undertook additional research on new regulations and online sources to analyse the situation of Ukrainian pedagogues.

## Results

The following results are broken down into results about the qualitative analysis of the licensing laws in all federal states, the results about the recognition procedures for individuals with non-German qualifications and the results about regulations for Ukrainian pedagogues.

### Results of the qualitative analysis of licensing laws regarding the access of individuals with non-pedagogical qualifications to the German ECEC labour market

Table 1 gives the results of the qualitative analysis. It lists all the qualifications mentioned in the numerous licensing laws of the federal states. For each qualification, we indicated how many of the 16 federal states accept these individuals in all possible job positions in the centres, i.e., also as centre leader ('fully accepted') or only in defined positions, i.e., as professional staff (group leader or second-line staff in the group) or assistants (second-line staff in the group, both 'partially accepted'). We added, if necessary, the number of federal states that do not mention the respective qualification in their laws. For each qualification, we highlighted in grey the licensing regulation that is currently in force in most of the German federal states. The next column indicates for all qualifications whether the licensing laws define further requirements for access to ECEC labour market, for instance further pedagogical training or work experience in the ECEC sector. The last column gives the percentage of individuals with different

**Table 1** Results of a qualitative analysis of German licensing laws regarding qualifications with access to the ECEC labour market

Qualification	Qualification level	Qualification	Number of German federal states (N = 16)		Sum Fully and Partially accepted	Fully accepted as... Leader*	Partially accepted as...		Not listed	Further requirements to get access to ECEC labour market	% of all ECEC staff
			English	German			Professional	Assistant			
Social pedagogical Pedagogical/psychological	Non-academic	Educators	ErzieherInnen	16	16	–	–	–	–	None	63
	Academic	Social Pedagogues	SozialpädagogInnen	16	16	–	–	–	–	–	3
	Academic	Childhood Pedagogues	Kindheits-/FrühpädagogInnen	15	15	–	–	–	1	–	1
	Academic	Pedagogues	PädagogInnen, ErziehungswissenschaftlerInnen	11	14	1	2	2	2	6 states: specific specialisation of study 6 states: professional ECEC experience 3 states: further training	1
Assistance	Academic	Teacher	LehrerInnen	7	12	2	3	4	4	2 states: specific specialisation of study 4 states: professional ECEC experience 2 states: further training	–
	Academic	Psychologists	PsychologInnen	6	6	–	–	–	10	3 states: specific specialisation of study 3 states: professional ECEC experience 3 states: further training	14
Special needs	Non-academic	Childcare Assistants/Social Assistants	KinderpflegerInnen, SozialassistentInnen	2	16	2	12	–	–	2 states: professional ECEC experience 3 states: further training	3
	Academic/non-academic	Special needs Pedagogues, Special needs Educators	HeilpädagogInnen, HeilerziehungspflegerInnen	11	16	4	1	–	–	1 state: professional ECEC experience 2 states: further training 1 state: only for care of children with special needs	–

**Table 1** (continued)

Qualification	Qualification level	Qualification	Sum Fully and Partially accepted	Fully accepted as... Leader*	Partially accepted as...		Not listed	Further requirements to get access to ECEC labour market	% of all ECEC staff
					Professional	Assistant			
Number of German federal states (N = 16)									
Therapeutic	Non-academic	Speech therapist	7 federal states	3	3	1	9	5 states: professional ECEC experience	1
	Non-academic	Occupational therapist	6 federal states	3	2	1	10	6 states: further training	
	Non-academic	Physiotherapists	5 federal states	2	2	1	11	1 state: only for care of children with special needs	
	Non-academic	Occupational and Work therapists	2 federal states	1	1	–	14		
	Non-academic	Nurses	10 federal states	3	3	4	6	3 states: professional ECEC experience 4 states: further training 2 states: only for care of children with special needs 4 states: only for care of under 3-year-olds	
Public health	Non-academic/ since 2020 academic	Midwives	4 federal states	2	1	1	12	3 states: professional ECEC experience 3 states: further training	
	Non-academic	Family carer	5 federal states	1	2	2	11	2 states: professional ECEC experience 3 states: further training	
	Academic/non-academic	e.g., childminders, persons with academic qualifications	13 federal states	–	1	12	3	8 states: professional ECEC experience 10 states: further training	4

\* Further requirements for the position of the centre leader: 10 states require several years of professional experience, 4 states require specific further training, 3 states require a university degree for the leadership in large centres; current status of analysis: 31/10/2023; column % of all ECEC staff: shown are the percentages of staff with qualification; in addition there is staff without qualification (2%) and staff in training (7%); source: Kinder- und Jugendhilfestatistik 2022, own calculations



qualifications out of total ECEC staff in Germany. This is an overview of the current degree of heterogeneity regarding staff qualifications in Germany.

Our analyses show that the licensing laws in Germany still mention educators and social pedagogues (in German *ErzieherInnen* and *SozialpädagogInnen*) as ‘fully accepted’ professional staff (Table 1). They can work in every position in ECEC centres. However, there are additional requirements for the position of the centre leader, for instance, ten states require several years of professional experience. Few federal states require specific further training or a university degree for leadership positions in large centres (see notes in Table 1). The non-academic qualification *ErzieherIn* (educator) is a German specificity: they attend a 4-year<sup>3</sup> training course in a vocational school or (in new training formats) involving combined training in school and at the workplace. They are eligible to work in all institutions in the social work system with children and young adults up to the age of 27 (Kultusministerkonferenz, 2020). Educators are classified as having ISCED level 6 and have the same work opportunities as academically trained staff, such as social pedagogues or childhood pedagogues. The academically trained social pedagogues or social workers have even wider qualifications and can work with children or adults across their lifespan. Both qualifications—educator and social pedagogue/social worker—have a social pedagogical focus, i.e., they encompass qualifications for the social work sector. In 2022, individuals with the educator qualification were the largest group among employed ECEC staff (63%). 3% of the staff are social pedagogues (see Table 1). In addition, almost all federal states define childhood pedagogues as ‘fully accepted’ professional staff. The academically trained childhood pedagogues (in German *KindheitspädagogInnen*, ISCED level 6) have a relatively new qualification that was introduced in 2004. They specialise in the education of children aged 0 to 12. In fact, they only account for 1.5% of pedagogical staff. To sum up, 67% of the pedagogical staff have a specific qualification to work with young children on a professional level.

Most of the federal states also mention academically qualified pedagogues as professional staff but require a specific study specialisation (early childhood), further training or professional experience in the ECEC sector. Pedagogues are broadly trained for different fields of education, including adult education. Twelve federal states also allow teachers with a school-based qualification to work in ECEC centres (‘partially or fully accepted’) but the access requirements differ. Currently, only 1% of the staff has an academic qualification as a pedagogue or teacher. Six federal states have opened up work in ECEC centres to psychologists, too, but the majority of federal states do not currently mention this occupational group in their licensing laws.

Academically and non-academically qualified special needs pedagogues or special needs educators (in German *HeilpädagogInnen* and *HeilerzieherInnen*) are another generally accepted occupational group in ECEC centres. The opening up procedures for these qualifications began in the 1990s when they were mentioned in conjunction with education and care in ECEC centres caring for children with special needs (Grgic, 2020). They are currently accepted in all ECEC centres as professionals and they account for 3% of ECEC staff.

<sup>3</sup> The duration of the training depends on the federal state and the school qualification. It can vary between three to five years in total (Weiterbildungsinitiative Frühpädagogische Fachkräfte, 2023).

All federal states mention non-academic childcare assistants and social assistants as ECEC staff, mostly as ‘partially accepted’ assistants in ECEC centres (in German *KindepflegerInnen* and *SozialassistentInnen*). Before they took on the function of assistants in ECEC centres, childcare assistants were defined up to the 1990s in most states as professionals, especially for the care for children under the age of three (Grgic, 2020). The qualifications of childcare assistants or social assistants primarily entail a 2-year training course in a vocational school. The structure and thematic focus of the training differs from federal state to federal state (Autorengruppe Fachkräftebarometer, 2021). Childcare assistants and social assistants are categorised at ISCED level 4. They are the largest occupational group (14%) with a qualification lower than ISCED level 6.

In addition to these mostly pedagogically oriented qualifications, we were able to identify in our analysis the start of the opening up processes for non-pedagogical, mostly non-academic qualifications, in some federal states, first for therapeutic qualifications, second for public health qualifications and third for a broad range of other qualifications (see Table 1). In public health qualifications, most of the federal states again mention more particularly nurses as mostly ‘partially accepted’ staff in ECEC centres. Similar to the childcare assistants, nurses were accepted up to end of the 1990s as professionals for the care of children under the age of three (Grgic, 2020). After a period of restricted access to ECEC centres, 11 federal states currently offer access to ECEC centres if nurses have completed further training or have work experience in the ECEC sector. Six to seven federal states mention therapeutic qualifications, especially speech therapists or occupational therapists (in German *LogopädInnen* and *ErgotherapeutInnen*). This is again subject to their having undergone further training. However, the majority of federal states did not mention therapeutic qualifications in ECEC centres until now. Despite these opening up processes, only 1% of ECEC staff members hold therapeutic or public health qualifications.

The staff shortages have also led to unstructured opening up processes on the basis of the licensing laws and mostly for work as assistants, e.g., for childminders, who normally have to undergo 160 h of training before they are allowed to work as childminders. One federal state opened the labour market to all individuals with any academic qualifications who would do then a short training course and then start work as assistants in an ECEC centre. Other federal states mentioned that centres may employ assistants who supplement the team with their specific useful (not defined) qualifications. About 2% of the staff work without any qualifications and 4% with other, non-pedagogical qualifications. Behind the 6% total, the percentage of staff members without any or with non-pedagogical qualifications ranges from 2% to 10% in the federal states (Grgic & Friederich, 2023). 7% of the German ECEC staff members are currently undergoing training.

Overall, we have identified three types of licensing law. The majority of federal states (eight) currently focus on pedagogical qualifications (including pedagogues and teachers as staff). Two states focus only on social pedagogical qualifications (educators, social and childhood pedagogues) and six states had implemented multi-professional oriented licensing laws, with an additional focus on public health and therapeutic qualifications (Grgic & Friederich, 2023). No differences were observed between western and eastern federal states, even if they had different preconditions during the expansion of the ECEC system. In terms of the actual heterogeneity of ECEC staff, 71% of the pedagogical staff

have a pedagogical qualification allowing them to work at a professional level and 14% work on the basis of assistance qualifications. If the staff in training is taken into account (7%), only a small proportion of the staff remain without pedagogical qualifications (Table 1). The academic qualifications doubled between 2006 and 2020 from 3% to 6%, but the academisation of the ECEC staff is progressing only slowly. The percentage of early childhood professionals has decreased slightly over the years, but only to a minor extent between 2006 and 2020 (Autorengruppe Fachkräftebarometer, 2021).

To ensure professionalism, ten federal states introduced a professional staff quota into their licensing laws that limits the percentage of non-pedagogical staff (with short training) or assistants. In most of the federal states, the quota is between 70% and 80% of the staff or the working time of the staff. In two federal states the quota is only 50%. Prior to this, the distinction was made more at the level of the groups by specifying that the leader and the group leader must be professionals and that the second person may also have undergone assistant training (Grgic, 2020). The regulation of heterogeneity based on a professional staff quota corresponds more and more to the staff regulations in the elderly care sector in Germany that has had to tackle similar challenges for years (huge staff shortages, integration of new forms of short-term qualified assistants and persons with non-German qualifications).

In conclusion, we have not seen a large degree of heterogeneity or multi-professionalism in German ECEC teams regarding their staff qualifications up to now.

### Results about the recognition procedures for people with non-German qualifications

The licensing laws mention the possibility of also recognising non-German qualifications,<sup>4</sup> but on a case-by-case basis. There are structural issues when it comes to the recognition procedures for individuals with non-German qualifications. Recognition is based on European Directive 2005/36/EG and addresses qualifications for restricted labour markets. Non-EU-citizens are treated equally. There are no federal standards for the formal recognition of early childhood education qualifications (as there are for medical doctors), which would allow automatic recognition. Therefore, the legal basis is the *Berufsqualifikationsfeststellungsgesetz* (BQFG) that has integrated the EU provisions and is the template for federal laws in the federal states. For the ECEC sector, the federal states are responsible for the formal recognition of qualifications. The way in which the recognition procedure is implemented, therefore, depends on the federal state. If individuals wish to work as early childhood professionals, they have to obtain recognition of the equivalence of their non-German qualification with the German one. When differences are observed, the candidate can offset the differences through compensatory measures. Another requirement is the proof of German language skills at B2 or even C1 level (IQ Fachstelle Beratung & Qualifizierung, 2021). In 2020, the biggest demand for the recognition of regulated qualifications on the federal state level was for engineers, teachers and educators (BiBB, 2022). In 2021 there were 2,229 applications for the qualification educator,

<sup>4</sup> It is also possible to work in ECEC centres without official recognition. In this case, the authorities establish whether the non-German qualification is appropriate and may only give their permission for a specific position in a certain centre, not for work in general as an ECEC professional in Germany.

followed by social pedagogue (393) and childhood pedagogue (252). Compared to qualifications regulated on the German government level, the number of recognition procedures in the ECEC sector is significantly lower than, for example, in the medical sector (nurses: 19,752 procedures in 2021, doctors: 9,636 procedures) (Grgic, 2023).

Given the nature of the German ECEC system, it is difficult for people with non-German qualifications to gain full recognition immediately. This applies primarily to bachelor degrees with a specialisation in early childhood education (Autorengruppe Fachkräftebarometer, 2017; Oberhuemer & Schreyer, 2018). The main qualification in Germany is educator (*ErzieherIn*) which prepares people to work in the social field with children and young adults up to the age of 27 as well as with people with special needs. The training consists of a general, 4-year course on average (KMK, 2020) and has no academic component. These differences lead to partial recognitions and necessitate compensatory measures to gain full recognition (Friederich & Gisdakis, 2021).

If partial recognition is given, there is also the possibility of partial occupational access to the labour market. This has to be proven on an individual case-by-case basis and may mean, for instance, permission to work with children of a certain age (e.g., only elementary school children). In Bavaria, for example, there is a qualification list, where providers (the employers of ECEC staff) can easily see which non-German qualifications are appropriate for working with children. In most cases, this permission is only given when requested by a provider and only in this federal state (see footnote 4, IQ Fachstelle Beratung & Qualifizierung, 2021, p. 13). This makes it very difficult for people with non-German qualifications to switch jobs and means they have to complete compensatory measures to gain full recognition in the long term.

Our analysis of the licensing laws showed that 11 federal states incorporated special regulations for the formal recognition of non-German qualifications for ECEC professionals into their laws. Three states have specific regulations for professionals from neighbouring European countries, for instance, France, the Czech Republic and Poland. Eight federal states have developed faster ways of attracting staff with non-German qualifications. For instance, they are given a work permit and can go through the recognition procedure simultaneously or they provide more information about appropriate qualifications and recognition. The recognition procedure is often fee-based and takes several months. If there is a need to complete compensatory measures, because only partial recognition has been granted, the whole procedure can take years (IQ Fachstelle Beratung & Qualifizierung, 2021).

It is very difficult to estimate the total number of recognition procedures in the field of ECEC and it varies considerably from federal state to federal state. This has to do with the migrant population in each federal state but also with structures for the recognition procedure. Baden-Württemberg is one example of a federal state that has a large migrant community and established recognition structures. In 2021, 888 applications for recognition of the qualification educator were submitted, but only 28.1% were fully recognised. 42.4% had to complete compensatory measures and 29.5% were rejected (Statistisches Landesamt Baden-Württemberg, 2022). It is

fair to assume that due to the regulations in the federal states and the structures of the field of work, the numbers are lower than they could be.

### **Current regulations regarding the access of Ukrainian professionals**

Over the last year, the authorities in some federal states drew up special regulations for pedagogical staff from Ukraine who fled to Germany to escape the war. This was prompted not least by the need to create fast access to the ECEC and school system for refugee children. We, therefore, supplemented our qualitative analysis with research on current additional regulations for Ukrainian ECEC professionals.

Our research showed that eight out of 16 federal states created possibilities to start working as professionals in early childhood centres directly, but mostly granted temporary recognition for 12 months. There are some facilitations compared to the usual recognition procedure in these eight states and this should enable Ukrainian professionals to get to work quickly in ECEC centres.

- *German language skills:* Whereas for immigrant ECEC professionals, a B2 level in general is initially required, for Ukrainian professionals there is currently room for other levels ('basic language skills' at the beginning), especially when Ukrainian children are cared for in the ECEC centres.
- *Pedagogical qualifications:* Most of the federal states defined specific Ukrainian qualifications that were temporary recognised for work in ECEC centres.
- *Other requirements:* Normally all ECEC staff members have to present a police clearance certificate and the employer is legally bound to verify this document. For Ukrainian professionals, other ways of fulfilling this requirement have been defined.
- *Status:* The regulations give the possibility for (temporary) recognition as professionals or assistants if not all the requirements have been met. Ukrainian professionals can begin work and, at the same time, they are encouraged to start the recognition procedure and language classes in parallel to their work.
- *Access to work in ECEC centres:* In most of the eight federal states, the providers, in their capacity as employers, are authorised by law to check whether Ukrainians meet the above-mentioned requirements and to register them as professionals with the Youth Welfare Office. They have to assist them with the formal recognition procedure, too.
- *Non-pedagogical Ukrainian staff:* Three out of these eight also allow ECEC centres to employ non-pedagogical Ukrainian staff, as supplementary assistants or for language support in the care of Ukrainian children.

The other half of the German federal states currently only have the formal measures for initiating the recognition procedure for working in ECEC centres. Four federal states give Ukrainian ECEC professionals the option of working in special settings for Ukrainian children (e.g., so-called 'welcome groups', playgroups and other projects).

## Conclusion

In summary, the results of our analysis showed that, as a result of the staff shortages, opening up processes for cooperation in qualification-specific heterogeneous or multi-professional teams became visible in the licensing laws in the federal states. Even though most federal states continue to focus on socio-pedagogical or pedagogical staff for work on the ECEC labour market, opening up processes for very different groups of employees, for instance childminders or 'suitable occupational groups' that are not defined in more detail, can be observed in all federal states. The opening up processes are justified from the perspective of multi-professional cooperation. However, what is missing is a theoretical competence discussion about occupational groups that bring useful qualifications for ECEC teams with them. The unspecific relaxing of licensing laws, therefore, tends to point rather to deprofessionalisation in the ECEC system. Quantitative results showed that (despite the opening up processes) at least two-thirds of the employees still have a pedagogical qualification. However, the percentage of persons with other, non-pedagogical qualifications or without any training has risen to 6%, with differences between the federal states. Overall, a pedagogical basis is essential for all qualifications approved for early childhood education.

The analysis of the recognition pathways of ECEC professionals with non-German qualifications demonstrated that it is difficult to gain full recognition. For one thing, not so many recognition procedures are initiated. On the other hand, not all qualifications are taken into account (e.g., only educators, not childhood pedagogues). In response to staff shortages, 11 federal states have adopted special regulations for non-German qualifications, three federal states have specific regulations for professionals from neighbouring European countries, for instance France, the Czech Republic and Poland, and eight federal states have developed faster ways to attract staff with non-German qualifications.

However, the German Recognition Act also states that only equivalent qualifications may receive partial or full recognition. Based on the qualifications approved in Germany, it is to be expected that primarily pedagogical qualifications will be classified as equivalent. The different orientation of qualifications in Germany (social pedagogical) and in other countries (early childhood education) prevents rapid formal recognition on a larger scale. Nevertheless, there is a need to standardise the regulations of the federal states, for instance, in the form of an agreement between the federal states (KMK-Rahmenvereinbarung).

Half of the federal states have changed their entry requirements for the group of Ukrainian professionals, especially with regard to the examination of requirements, which can initially be checked by providers, and with regard to the required German language skills. There are no statistics yet on how many Ukrainian professionals currently work in German ECEC centres.

In summary, it can be said that, despite the relaxing of the licensing laws for years, no major changes in team composition could be observed. Staff composition has not changed fundamentally and a shift towards multi-professional teams could not be observed up to now. This is positive, because there is still no diversification of tasks and positions in the teams, and there are actually no structures to adequately support team members with non-pedagogical qualifications. The centres normally work on

the basis of structures that have been established over decades, in which leader, group leader and second-line staff take on the same tasks. They all have pedagogical qualifications. Positions or tasks for people with non-pedagogical qualifications are usually not defined in everyday teamwork. So far, only a few concepts have been presented that include and define positions and tasks of persons with non-educational qualifications in the daily practice of ECEC.

Responsibility for integrating individuals with non-traditional qualifications or with non-German qualifications must, therefore, be borne by the leader and the other staff members. In most cases, only limited resources are available for this, for instance, in the form of practical guidance (in German *Praxisanleitung*). Working together in heterogeneous teams (without a conceptual or structural basis) will probably initially lead to additional demands on the leadership and the other staff.

Recognition of non-German qualifications, on the other hand, does not seem to imply deprofessionalisation, as only equivalent qualifications are recognised, which are pedagogically oriented. This means that professionals from abroad will not be the drivers of heterogeneity in ECEC teams based on their qualifications. However, there are challenges, too, when they start to work in German ECEC centres: not only the language but also cultural differences or the idea of working together could differ. In Baden-Württemberg, the project 'Vielfalt willkommen' takes into account the fact that the centres have to change as well when it comes to successfully integrating staff with non-German qualifications properly (Robert Bosch Stiftung, 2023). Ultimately, the initiatives and ideas adopted to counter staff shortages showed that this places new demands on ECEC centres. If the teams are to become more heterogeneous and individuals with non-pedagogical qualifications are to be integrated, the structures will have to change. A differentiation of activities, combined with more support for the staff from leadership, and practical guidance will be needed. Staff members with non-German qualifications need guidance in the beginning. They bring with them new ideas for the centres, and will increase heterogeneity. If the ECEC system in Germany does not adapt to these changes, a clear pedagogical orientation should be maintained to continue to uphold pedagogical quality in the centres.

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