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Professionalisation and Competencies of Staff in Emergency Shelters in Germany and Australia: A Comparative Study

Research article

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Abstract

The provision of needs-oriented care to vulnerable populations, particularly homeless individuals in emergency shelters, is closely linked to the competencies of the staff. Needs-oriented care, tailored to individual needs, is essential for effective support. Yet research focusing on the professional qualifications of emergency shelter staff remains scant, with the existing literature primarily addressing the care and housing of homeless individuals. This international comparative study investigates the perspectives and experiences of staff engaged in working with homeless populations concerning their professionalisation and competency levels in emergency accommodation environments in Germany and Australia, regions with distinct welfare approaches and cultural contexts. Understanding these differences is useful for social work and welfare practice, as it reveals how diverse policy frameworks and local practices shape staff competencies and professional development.

This qualitative comparative study aimed to explore the levels of professionalisation, and training needs of the personnel employed in emergency shelters in Germany and Australia through semi-structured interviews. The data were analysed using qualitative content analysis. The findings of this study have important implications for training and practice in this area as they highlight how different educational backgrounds, political frameworks, and cultural contexts influence the professionalisation and competencies of staff at homeless shelters. These insights are invaluable for the development of inclusive and diversity-conscious training and support strategies.

Keywords: *Emergency Shelters, Homelessness Workforce, Professionalisation, Competencies, Needs-Oriented Care, Staff Training*

Background

According to official UN statistics, 1.6 billion people worldwide find themselves homeless or living in precarious conditions (United Nations, 2025). Homelessness thus represents a problem that is not limited to specific regions or countries, but which is defined and viewed differently in various contexts. This comparative study aimed to explore the levels of professionalisation and proficiency exhibited by the personnel employed in emergency shelters in Germany and Australia.

The determinants of homelessness are multi-layered and include, but are not limited to, critical life events such as job loss, divorce, separation, the death of a loved one, illness, discrimination, addiction, mental health issues, displacement due to conflict or war, and domestic or partnership violence, often culminating in the loss of one's home (ASH Berlin, 2018; Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2019, 2021a). Homelessness affects diverse demographic groups, including young and elderly individuals, those from migrant backgrounds or Indigenous Australians, and encompasses genders, children, adolescents, individuals grappling with mental health or addiction issues, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, members of the LGBTQI+ community, survivors of domestic and family violence, those prone to substance misuse, and ex-prisoners (Cripps & Habibis, 2019; Neupert & Lottie, 2018).

Recruiting suitably qualified staff for the challenging roles in emergency shelters tends to prove difficult. A wide range of professional groups, including social workers, support workers, caseworkers, housekeepers, administrative staff, psychologists, medical professionals, and case managers, work in these settings, each playing a key role in addressing the complex needs of homeless individuals. Support workers and caseworkers, in particular, are essential in providing direct assistance to individuals, offering emotional support, connecting them with services, and helping them navigate the often-overwhelming systems required for long-term stability (Cortis & Blaxland, 2017; Diakonie Berlin-Brandenburg, 2014; Michling, 2024). The primary objective of these roles is to mitigate the impacts of homelessness, yet, despite the crucial nature of their work, training specific to these demands remains scarce and unorganised. The development of necessary skills and expertise for shelter workers remains largely overlooked in both practice and academic research (ASH Berlin, 2018; Lutz et al., 2021). For social workers, support workers, caseworkers, housekeepers, and administrative staff, understanding the intricacies of homelessness—including trauma-informed care, crisis management, and advocacy—is critical. This lack of structured training directly impacts the quality of service provided to individuals experiencing homelessness (Michling, 2024).

Terminology

Homelessness is viewed differently in different contexts, and this is reflected in the terminology used to describe the phenomena. In Germany, the terminology surrounding the lack of permanent residence differentiates between "obdachlos" (rough sleepers) and "wohnungslos" (homeless). The term obdachlos refers to individuals who have lost their homes due to various causes such as floods, fires, or financial inability to maintain housing. Irrespective of the specific cause, these individuals are classified as homeless (Lutz et al., 2021). Conversely, wohnungslos describes those without a permanent place to reside, encompassing those living in temporary shelters, asylums, hostels, or transitional housing, without a long-term home or lease (Ethos-BAWO, n.d.).

In Australia, homelessness is categorised into three levels: primary, secondary, and tertiary. Primary homelessness refers to individuals without conventional accommodation, who may reside on the streets, in deserted buildings, improvised dwellings, under bridges, or in parks. Secondary homelessness involves transient movement between various forms of temporary shelter, such as stays with friends, in emergency accommodation, youth refuges, hostels, and boarding houses. Tertiary homelessness is identified among individuals residing in private boarding houses, occupying single rooms without personal bathroom facilities, kitchen amenities, or security of tenure (ABS Berlin, 2021). This classification underscores the broader recognition of homelessness in Australia as the absence of a steady home or permanent place of dwelling.

Homelessness data

The German government conducts an annual count of all individuals lacking fixed accommodation. Additionally, a biennial report is published, offering detailed analyses and insights into various aspects of homelessness, including the prevalence of street homelessness. This data collection and dissemination are crucial in informing governmental strategies aimed at addressing and mitigating homelessness (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2025).

In Germany, homelessness statistics capture the number of individuals who received overnight accommodation, regardless of whether they hold a tenancy agreement or own the property. This includes those without a permanent residence, residing in temporary locations such as shelters, shared flats, hotels, or with friends, as well as those in group accommodations or sheltered housing for the homeless. Notably, individuals temporarily staying with friends or relatives and those living on the streets are typically excluded from these counts (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2025). As of January 31, 2024, approximately 439,500 people were accommodated due to homelessness in Germany, according to municipalities and organisations (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2025).

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) categorises homelessness into six different groups on Census night. This classification system includes individuals without permanent homes who may reside in places like tents, shelters, or overcrowded dwellings with other families, as well as those in temporary housing arrangements.

Additionally, the ABS records data on individuals who lack stable housing but do not meet the criteria for homelessness. It is important to note that in Australia, homelessness encompasses more than the absence of a physical shelter, with only a small fraction of the homeless population sleeping rough—approximately 6.2% (Homelessness Australia, 2023).

Statistical data reveal a notably higher prevalence of homelessness in Australia compared to Germany. According to the Statistisches Bundesamt (2023), Germany recorded a total of 37,260 individuals classified as wohnungslos (homeless) in the latest census. In contrast, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) reported 122,494 homeless persons in Australia as of 2021 (ABS, 2021, 2023). The Statistisches Bundesamt conducts an annual count of homeless people in Germany, while the ABS in Australia undertakes this exercise only every five years, reflecting a different approach to monitoring and addressing homelessness (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2025; ABS, 2021, 2023).

State support and regulations

In Germany, the concept of a *housing shortage* has long fuelled discussions on suitable ways of addressing the problem of homelessness. In response, during the 1980s, a network of central bureaus (Zentrale Fachstellen für Wohnungsnotfälle und Prävention [ZfW] was initiated to prevent housing crises before they occur. ZfW assists individuals in securing housing, either to prevent the loss of their current home or to relocate. Support includes assistance with rent debts, securing new housing, and providing furnishings. For those at risk, social welfare offices offer the necessary support in finding accommodation or emergency shelters, with the aim of an eventual transition to more permanent solutions (Lutz et al., 2021). Other groups, such as the Arbeitsgemeinschaft (ARGE) Wohnungslosenhilfe München & Oberbayern, promote collaboration among various agencies to enhance service delivery, ensuring comprehensive communication and planning to meet diverse needs. They engage in public education about homelessness issues (Reifferscheid & Duschinger, 2013).

Extensive support services and programs are enshrined in German legislation and are executed through institutional homelessness support organisations. These services include emergency and overnight accommodations, day centres, counselling and support centres, hostels, assisted living facilities, heated spaces ("Wärmeräume") in winter, and designated buses ("Kältebusse") offering mobile aid to protect homeless persons from suffering frostbite and hypothermia during cold winter nights. Additionally, every homeless individual has the right to shelter in facilities such as emergency shelters, hostels, boarding houses, and shared accommodations, typically in conjunction with social work support provided by welfare organisations (ASH Berlin, 2018; Lutz et al., 2021).

In Australia, collaborative efforts between federal and state governments aim to reduce and prevent homelessness through various agreements (Flatau et al., 2015). The federal government allocates funding to state governments to provide housing services. Notably, in 2009, the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) was superseded by the National Affordable Housing Agreement (NAHA), which channels funds into services designed to assist the homeless, referred to as Specialised Services for the Homeless.

NAHA, alongside the National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness (NPAH), strives to facilitate stable accommodation and societal integration for individuals facing homelessness. Furthering these efforts, the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement (NHHA) was introduced in 2017. Its objective is to aid individuals in securing safe, affordable, and environmentally sustainable housing. The NHHA particularly focuses on assisting those without homes or at imminent risk of losing their housing, supporting a broad spectrum of preventative and direct aid initiatives (AIHW, 2021b).

Australian states and territories implement tailored plans to address homelessness. These strategies emphasise early intervention and prevention rather than crisis responses. For example, the Queensland Government has committed to multi-year funding for services that assist the homeless or those at risk, enabling organisations to plan sustainably and maintain vital services. This approach prioritises the prevention of homelessness and explores innovative solutions to ensure stable housing and independence for affected individuals. Collaborative efforts include partnerships across government, private, and non-government sectors to maximize impact and outreach (Queensland Government, 2018, 2017, 2021).

In contrast, Germany's way of tackling the problem of homelessness is characterised by a strong reliance on legal frameworks and certifications, with the legal foundation for homeless assistance codified under legal codes. The system provides for various forms of support, including regular accommodation, assisted living for singles or couples, therapeutic shared flats, transitional housing, socio-psychiatric residential homes, inpatient facilities for older homeless individuals, low-threshold services, counselling centres, services for homeless women, and transitional homes for employed individuals (ASH Berlin, 2018; Lutz et al., 2021).

In Australia, Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) play a crucial role in supporting individuals who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. These services provide temporary accommodation, address immediate needs, and facilitate connections with other supportive services (AIHW, 2019). SHS agencies vary in size and scope, offering a range of interventions. Some focus on homelessness prevention and crisis intervention, providing services such as advice, meals, housing support, and counselling. Others cater to a broader demographic, assisting not only the homeless but also individuals facing various life challenges. In the fiscal year 2019/2020, a total of 1,625 organisations assisted approximately 290,500 people experiencing homelessness across Australia (AIHW, 2022).

Staff qualifications

Both in Germany and Australia, staff employed in homeless service are generally appropriately qualified. Research conducted by the Diakonie Berlin-Brandenburg (2014), Nienhanus and Harth (2020) highlights that staff in German emergency shelters possess diverse academic qualifications ranging from degrees in social work, psychology, youth education, and curative education to humanities, law, business, social sciences, health-related teaching, and manual and domestic professions. Additionally, some personnel bring specialised experience from fields such as psychiatry, integration, or drug support, and tenant worker counselling.

Essential functions include assisting with application processes and fostering collegial exchanges among staff (Diakonie Berlin-Brandenburg, 2014; Nienhanus & Harth, 2020).

Initiatives launched in 2014, 2019, and 2020 aimed to counteract the deprofessionalisation of personnel in emergency shelters in Germany. These projects, endorsed by the Diakonie Berlin-Brandenburg and research by Nienhahus and Harth, specifically targeted individuals working within these settings without necessitating formal academic qualifications (Diakonie Berlin-Brandenburg, 2014; Nienhahus & Harth, 2020).

Conversely, in Australia, four significant studies conducted between 2012 and 2017 have explored the skill sets of those working in emergency accommodation. Researchers such as Martin et al. (2012) and Cortis and Blaxland (2017) have focused on examining how these workers develop their professional capacities and achieve professionalisation within their roles. These studies underscore a keen interest in the professional development of staff engaged in addressing homelessness, highlighting varying approaches to capacity building in the field.

In Australia, homelessness workers are typically university-educated, specialising in areas such as social work and psychology. Their expertise extends to individual case support, management and counselling, legal advice, crisis intervention, drafting support plans, documentation, referral and networking, and case management. They collaborate with various institutions including legal support services and probation offices, manage legal matters for clients, and liaise with authorities (Diakonie Berlin-Brandenburg, 2014; Nienhaus & Harth, 2020).

The present paper synthesises insights from the first author's doctoral research, which was inspired by her experiences in the homeless sector. It is there that she became aware of the complex and demanding nature of work within emergency shelters and the lack of adequate professional support and training for the staff involved. As part of her studies, she undertook data collection in Australia and thus developed a comparative perspective exploring the competencies and ideas for professional development of staff in homelessness settings in Germany and Australia.

Method

Research design, aim and questions

The research design adopted was exploratory in nature, characterised by the collection of qualitative data through semi-structured interviews with participants. This methodological approach aligned seamlessly with the objective of the study, which was to capture a contemporaneous overview of the landscape of social work field education as perceived by the academics responsible for overseeing this area of education.

The principal research questions addressed in this study are as follows:

1. To what extent are staff members satisfied with their competencies in emergency shelters within Germany and Australia?
2. What areas of tension exist concerning the professionalisation versus de-professionalisation debate in the context of emergency shelters in Germany and Australia?
3. What are the current requirements for operating emergency shelters in Germany and Australia?
4. How do staff members evaluate the availability and quality of post-qualifying training opportunities, and what is their willingness to pursue ongoing training in relation to caring for the homeless in emergency shelters across both countries?

Data collection

In total, 32 qualitative interviews were undertaken. The primary author conducted 17 interviews with professionals in who are actively engaged in work with homeless individuals within emergency shelters in the Munich area, Germany. The cohort consisted of 10 women and seven men. The average tenure of these professionals in emergency shelters was 3 years. The educational backgrounds varied: seven possessed degrees in social pedagogy, four held qualifications in pedagogy or psychology, and six did not have a tertiary degree. Age ranges of the interviewees spanned from 25 to 56 years, with a median age of 38 years.

The researcher conducted interviews with 15 individuals who work with the homeless people in Townsville, Australia. Among the Australian interviewees, two were men and 13 identified as female. On average, these professionals had been employed in emergency shelters for 4 years. The educational backgrounds varied, with six holding degrees in social work, six in related fields such as social services, and three without any university qualifications. The average age of the interviewees was 48 years. Analysis of the English-language interviews identified three distinct groups: social workers, managers, and social workers in training.

The interviews were conducted in person, ranging from 49 to 107 minutes in duration. In Germany, the discussions took place within the participants' facilities. In Australia, interviews were conducted either at James Cook University or at the interviewees' places of work. The author communicated with the participants in German and English, using an Olympus LS-P1 voice recorder to capture the discussions accurately.

The semi-structured nature of the interviews was guided by a list of open-ended questions, allowing for expansive responses. Transcriptions adhered to the meticulous standards set out by Dresing and Pehl (2018), ensuring verbatim accuracy and inclusion of time markers for each segment of the dialogue.

The qualitative interview questions were structured and researched around the objects of study. Before conducting a semi-structured interview, the researcher introduced herself and the purpose of the research, as well as obtaining permission to make audio recordings with the participants. Eligible participants were staff in homeless shelters; they were selected as experts in this field of practice. Basic demographic information about the experts (e.g., qualification, age, gender, nationality, school and university degree, professional experience) was sought in the interview. The interview guide for the expert interviews consisted of four thematic blocks in which questions about the following were posed: 1. employer and tasks (introduction); 2. qualification profile (actual analysis) with sub-blocks: career history, professionalisation/deprofessionalisation, self-concept/self-efficacy, self-worth/sense of work, self-care/work-life balance; 3. requirements profile (target analysis); 4. identification and definition of qualification needs (target-actual comparison)[1].

Process model, data analysis, and reporting

The data were systematically analysed employing a method known as qualitative content analysis, following the approach outlined by Kuckartz (2016). To facilitate this analysis, the computer program MAXQDA2020 was utilized. The categorisation system was structured into eight primary groups, each comprising 3–4 subcategories. These eight main categories were thus named: 1. Field of Work (Arbeitsfeld); 2. Competencies (Komeptenzen); 3. Further Education and Training (Fort- und Weiterbildung); 4. De/Professionalisation Debate (De/Professionalisierungsdebatte); 5. Social Relationships (Soziale Beziehungen); 6. Symbolic Capital (Symbolisches Kapital); 7. Self-Care (Selbstfürsorg); and 8. Current Challenges (Aktuelle Herausforderungen). During the analysis, the categorisation system underwent several revisions, differentiations, and adjustments. Category 8, Current Challenges, emerged inductively and was not initially planned, but it incorporated the current challenges mentioned by the interviewees. The categorisation system consists of eight main categories, each containing three to five first-order subcategories. When necessary, these subcategories were further elaborated into a third level. A detailed description of the entire categorisation system, including definitions, anchor examples, coding rules, category types, and methods of generation, is included in the coding manual[2]. Apart from category 8, all main categories were deduced in phase 2, while the subcategories predominantly emerged inductively. Despite the multilingual data base (German/English), German was used as the consistent analysis language to develop a categorisation system that describes both comparison cases (Germany/Australia). The level of abstraction of the categories was chosen in such a way that each category is applicable in both comparison cases, even if the content-specific features and focal points differ. To determine the categories, typical anchor examples from Australia and Germany were used for the eight main categories, with reference to the interview guide being documented. For all other categories, a corresponding anchor example was recorded in the coding guide (see Figure 1), (Michling, 2024, p. 185).

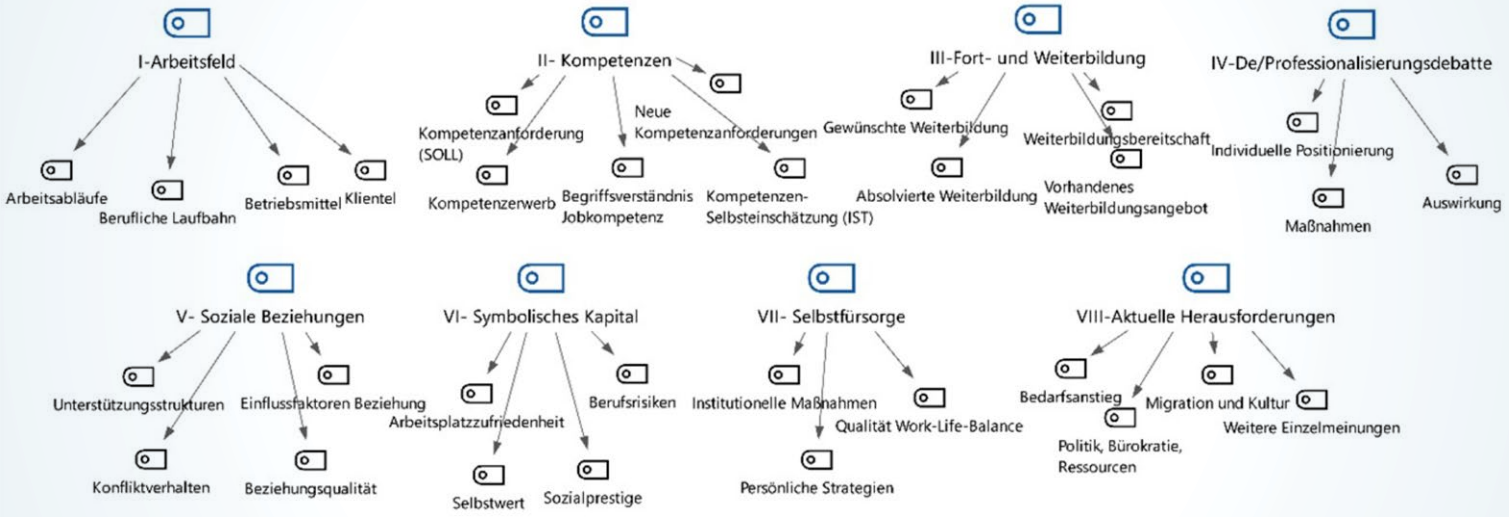


Figure 1. Overview of the Final Categorization System

Source: Michling, 2024, p. 185.

Coding Guide

Ethics[3]

In conducting qualitative research with shelter workers in Queensland and Munich, ethical considerations were prioritised to ensure the integrity and confidentiality of the study. Before any interviews were conducted, all participants were informed about the research purpose, the use of the data, and their right to confidentiality. Each participant was asked for explicit consent to take part in the interview process.

All interviewees were asked for written permission, which was obtained and confirmed prior to the interviews taking place. This step ensured that their participation was voluntary and based on a clear understanding of the research context. The ethical principles of respect for autonomy, informed consent, and confidentiality were strictly adhered to throughout the research process, ensuring that participants felt comfortable and confident in sharing their experiences.

Results/Findings

The analysis of the data reveals that the approach to homelessness services in Queensland and Munich is structured but differs in organisation and focus. In Munich, the work is highly functionally differentiated and formally organised, emphasising adherence to established rules and laws. A participant from Munich explained how their role follows a clear system:

> The city of Munich assigns clients to the accommodation, and then they are given an appointment with me for an initial interview, during which I find out what led to their homelessness, what kinds of problems exist—addiction issues, parenting, mental illness, unemployment, and so on.

In contrast, in Queensland, while the field is also organised, it is characterised by smaller teams and NGOs. One Queensland participant shared:

> It is a small organisation, and even though I have a team leader who works with the workers and directs them on a day-to-day basis, I am still very heavily involved in what happens in the organization with clients.

When it comes to the competencies required in this field, there are noticeable differences between participants comments. In Munich, there is a strong emphasis on legal foundations. For example, one participant noted:

> Where is the legal basis? Because ultimately, everything is legalized, all the facts. But not getting stuck in the legal, because reducing it to the legal... is also a one-way street. And that's where social work comes in.

On the other hand, Queensland participants placed significant value on social and psychological competencies. As one participant explained:

> You have to know how to deal with people pedagogically, you also have to know how to deal with people psychologically... we have a large proportion who are mentally ill. And they also have major behavioural deficits.

Additionally, the ability to work both as part of a team and independently was highly valued, as several comments indicated.

The analysis of the participants' responses revealed specific competencies that homelessness professionals in both regions are seeking to advance their careers. In Munich, respondents expressed the need for more specialised legal competencies, qualification programs at universities of applied sciences, workshops for internal and external exchange, methods in social space orientation with marginalised groups, professional advice for homeless people, and intercultural pedagogy. In contrast, Queensland respondents were more focused on gaining competencies for directly working with homeless people, such as further training on stress management, de-escalation techniques, suicide prevention, training in social psychiatry, case studies in social work (especially for Indigenous people dealing with racism and sexism), and further development of soft skills like dealing with oneself and others and collaboration.

Thus, the need for further training is an area where the two regions show differences. While training was seen as important, the focus on what training was necessary was different. For Munich respondents, the need for further education mainly focused on staying updated on legal matters, with less demand for other types of training due to the division of labour.

A participant stated:

> ...so, escalation training and perhaps even more intensive debt counselling and always this updating of legal advice.

For participants from Queensland, there was a strong desire for further training, especially among workers with lower qualifications. However, financial constraints are a major barrier to accessing training, as one participant noted:

> I've already asked for [another course]. ... Nothing's come up. ... It's about $550, yeah. For two days. ... It was in Townsville, but we didn't pay for it. It was attached to another service who invited us along because we couldn't afford it.

Whether people were qualified and how important this was for professionalisation of homelessness services elucidated slightly different responses. In Munich, the shortage of skilled workers has led to a trend of deprofessionalisation, where subject-specific studies are seen as essential for employment. One participant noted:

> The problem with the shortage of skilled workers is not just that they can't fill positions, but that they have to fill them with the wrong people. That's bitter and it also creates stress. And if they advertise a position and no one applies, the train has already left the station, and there's nothing they can do about it.

Conversely, the respondents from Queensland highlighted that professionalisation was ongoing, and studies are viewed as beneficial qualifications, but an ongoing process as highlighted by this participant:

> In Queensland we've got those diplomas and certificates. So, they're just like small parts of working with human beings. And I think they're good to have. You need to have some qualifications,

Social relationships in the workplace also differ between the two regions. In Munich, the relationship with clients was seen as more distant and professional. Moreover, the relationship with colleagues were seen as being grounded in professionalism, with a clear division of labour. One participant described this dynamic in the following way:

> I know that I can also have professional discussions with my colleagues or logically talk to them about how we should approach this case together. So, there is a collegiality, also with the common goal that we want the best for the family together.

In Queensland, team relationships were described as built on trust and shared values.

As one Queensland participant shared:

> We trust each other. We feel comfortable with each other. We trust each other's competence to be able to work with the women that we're working with and the children." The relationship with clients also balances friendly professionalism.

Regarding symbolic capital, the social significance of the work is emphasized in both regions but in different ways. Munich participants view their work as essential for the wellbeing of society. One participant, for instance, stated:

> Basically [the social significance of my work is] relatively high, because I do something for society... I do think that these advice centres have a positive effect or a positive social effect, because they can, of course, help families or parents or people who live there to find their own apartment in the best possible way, to lead or guide them to a completely independent life.

For participants in Queensland, the focus was more on empowering clients to regain independence and self-sufficiency.

> I think [my work] is very important, I watch people move forward by themselves, solve their own problems, and get on with life,

As to self-care, participants from both regions recognised the importance of distancing themselves from client work after work to maintain personal wellbeing. For participants in Munich, this often involved physical and social separation. One participant described this practice:

> I get in the car and drive out, and I'm just somewhere else physically. And nothing reminds me of it. So that's actually this separation, which is important, I think, in order to limit it again and again.

Participants in Queensland had similar practices of physical and social distancing are in place, but some raised the important of support from the team.

> I enjoy the people I work with. I actually enjoy their company...that's why I like to employ people who have the same sense of humour, and who...would be part of the staff team.

Participants' contributions highlighted the challenges faced in each region reflecting the different social and political contexts. In Munich, participants mentioned the growing refugee movement and bureaucratisation as significant challenges. One participant noted:

> What we're heading towards now, more and more of these foreigner and asylum issues. They are falling completely behind here.

Whereas for participants in Queensland, challenges such as housing shortages, floods, and an increase in mental health issues and drug use were more in the foreground. One participant explained:

> ...when I first started working here, there were young people coming in. And there was a conflict at home, but there was not the level of underlying issues around mental health, drugs, and alcohol. Whereas there's more complexities now.

These findings highlight the differing yet complementary approaches to homelessness services in Munich and Queensland. While both regions face challenges and value competencies in working with homeless individuals, their professional landscapes reflect distinct political, social, and institutional contexts.

Discussion

Comparative insights into homelessness approaches in Queensland and Munich

The comparison of staff responses between Queensland and Munich provides valuable insights into how homelessness is addressed in regions with different socio-economic, cultural, and demographic characteristics. The distinct challenges faced by each region—such as higher Indigenous homelessness in Queensland and urban homelessness in Munich—allow for an exploration of how these contextual differences impact the professionalisation and training of shelter staff. By comparing these two regions, we can better understand how shelter systems and training needs vary according to different causes of homelessness, such as migration, mental health issues, or systemic inequality. This comparison highlights gaps and potential improvements in both regions' approaches to homelessness, with a focus on developing more targeted and professional shelter services (Queensland Government, 2017, 2018, 2021).

Roles, responsibilities, and competencies in homeless shelter work

This study provides valuable insights into the different roles, responsibilities, and challenges faced by social work and human services education providers in Germany and Australia. It reveals that in both countries, staff in homeless shelters support their clients through four main action areas: facilitating processes, providing targeted counselling, offering support and education, and delivering low-threshold support and encouragement. However, the practice in both regions varies in terms of professional requirements and competencies expected from staff. The study delineates the competencies possessed by employees in both countries and their desires concerning these four types of actions, as classified by Heiner (2023):

A) In Germany, there is a focus on specialised skills (hard skills, interactions with law enforcement, and serving societal needs). It appears that this has led to a demand for further training in areas such as sanctions and support options, understanding the organisational structures of other bodies, homelessness law/aliens law/asylum law, and workshops for internal and external exchange with various organisations and authorities. Additionally, there is an interest in intercultural pedagogy and methods for engaging with marginalised groups within social spaces.

B) In Australia, there is an emphasis on universally applicable competencies (soft skills, dealing with migrants as well as with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and client-centric service). It seems that this has generated requests for further training in managing trauma, suicide prevention, counselling, case work, substance abuse, mental health issues, play therapy, violence prevention, and case studies, with a particular focus on enhancing soft skills.

Enhancing shelter staff training and professional development

Recruiting suitably qualified staff for the challenging roles in emergency shelters tends to prove difficult. A wide range of professional groups, including social workers, support workers, caseworkers, housekeepers, administrative staff, psychologists, medical professionals, and case managers, work in these settings, each playing a key role in addressing the complex needs of homeless individuals. Support workers and caseworkers, inparticular, are essential in providing direct assistance to individuals, offering emotional support, connecting them with services, and helping them navigate the often-overwhelming systems required for long-term stability (Cortis & Blaxland, 2017; Diakonie Berlin-Brandenburg 2014; Michling 2024).

In Germany, every homeless individual has the right to shelter in facilities such as emergency shelters, hostels, boarding houses, and shared accommodations, typically in conjunction with social work support provided by welfare organisations (ASH Berlin, 2018; Lutz et al., 2021). This legal right necessitates that German staff have more guidance on laws and procedures. Conversely, Australian states and territories implement tailored plans to address homelessness, emphasising early intervention and prevention. For example, the Queensland Government has committed to multi-year funding for services that assist the homeless or those at risk, enabling organisations to plan sustainably and maintain vital services (Queensland Government, 2017, 2018, 2021).

The enhancement of employee skills in homeless shelters across Germany and Australia focuses on career development, target audience orientation, and professionalism. This enhancement can be achieved through various training opportunities, including lectures on homelessness and professional work in shelters. Students in social sciences and social work degrees could be offered subjects covering homelessness support, where they gain insights into the structures of homelessness support systems, the specifics of working with various groups in need, and the relevant laws. Additional training for shelter staff and the completion of practical projects could further prepare the homelessness workforce.

New methods for recruiting staff and improved teaching techniques could be considered to enhance these educational efforts. Collaboration between German and Australian faculties could develop an educational exchange, creating opportunities for students to study abroad and engage in research projects. The involvement of practitioners in the teaching and decision-making processes ensures that the training remains relevant and informed by current practices in the field.

The findings of this study underscore the imperative for welfare organisations and local authorities to leverage this data to enhance the training and skills development of staff within emergency accommodation settings. Such skills are crucial for effectively addressing the complex challenges faced by homeless individuals. Furthermore, it is vital that staff take proactive steps towards their own professional development to elevate the quality of care provided in shelters.

Conclusion

In Germany and Australia, homelessness services typically involve a range of professionals, including psychologists, medical staff, and social workers. The employment of qualified and well-trained staff is essential to the delivery of services, as they apply scientific methods to solve problems and ensure that clients receive appropriate support. This holistic approach enhances the effectiveness of services across different levels, from direct client interaction to broader advocacy efforts.

By comparing these two regions, it becomes evident that, while different professional groups contribute to homelessness services, staff in homeless services are interested in further training and development. There are differences in the type of training that is sought, with a focus on hard skills in Germany and soft skills in Australia. For effective service delivery, a balanced integration of both hard and soft skills is vital. In Germany, the strong foundation in legal knowledge and policy frameworks ensures that shelter workers can address the bureaucratic complexities and barriers that individuals experiencing homelessness face. Meanwhile, in Australia, the emphasis on soft skills ensures that shelter workers can provide emotionally supportive, psychologically sensitive, and culturally competent care. Both sets of skills are equally important, complementing each other to offer comprehensive and effective support to homeless individuals in these two diverse contexts.

Notes

1 The category names are retained in their original German for conceptual clarity and alignment with the terminology used in the original thesis.

2 The coding manual used for data analysis was developed in the context of the doctoral thesis and can be found in the thesis appendix.

3 For this doctoral research, a formal ethics review process by an institutional review board was not required by the Catholic University of Eichstätt-Ingolstadt. The research adhered to the ethical standards of the university and the general principles of research ethics, including informed consent, voluntary participation, and data confidentiality. All participants were informed about the aims and procedures of the study, that they could withdraw from the research at any time prior to data analysis and provided written informed consent.

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