Tasks and benefits of social work in vocational rehabilitation (ANSAB)

Background

Various vocational rehabilitation service providers offer a diverse portfolio of measures to specifically support people in their rehabilitation process. These providers have multi-professional teams that also include social workers and social pedagogues. At the same time, however, social work in vocational rehabilitation has hardly been the subject of research to date. There is a lack of systematic knowledge about the tasks of social work and social services, as well as about the successful conditions of vocational rehabilitation processes as seen by those working in this field. Furthermore, there is a lack of insight into the benefits of social work for the people undergoing vocational rehabilitation themselves.

Objectives and Research Questions

From an interdisciplinary perspective, the research project 'Tasks and Benefits of Social Work in Vocational Rehabilitation' (ANSAB), conducted between December 2021 and March 2025 by the University of Applied Sciences Düsseldorf and funded by the German Pension Insurance (DRV) Southern Bavaria (Bayern Sued) as part of the research focus 'Further Development of Vocational Rehabilitation' addresses these research gaps. The following research questions were central to the project: How do social work professionals support and empower people undergoing vocational rehabilitation in their rehabilitation processes? How is cooperation with other actors structured? How do social work professionals working for vocational rehabilitation service providers weight the tasks described for their professional group in the DRV's classification of services in vocational rehabilitation (LBR)? What, from their perspective, contributes to seamless rehabilitation processes and sustainable labour-market (re)integration? Finally, what benefits does social work provide to the people undergoing vocational rehabilitation themselves, and what strategies do they use to access these benefits?

Study design and methods

The ANSAB research project adopted a participatory research approach, meaning that most participants in the project advisory board were vocational rehabilitants. To investigate the research questions, a mixed-methods design was used. It consisted of qualitative survey methods, including focus group interviews, expert interviews, episodic interviews with vocational rehabilitants, and additional narrative interviews with vocational rehabilitants from the project advisory board, as well as a standardised online survey of social work professionals. The results obtained from all data sources were combined.

Results

Social workers employed by vocational rehabilitation service providers are extremely important, as the material from the focus group and expert interviews shows. In terms of their tasks, social work in the field of vocational rehabilitation is characterised by 'overall responsibility' for all issues that arise and takes a holistic view of and supports people undergoing vocational rehabilitation. Those working in this field take on mediating, accompanying, advising and informing functions in all directions and at all interfaces. Specifically, this includes individual and needs-oriented competence development, psychosocial counselling, establishing a trusting working relationship, acting as a guide, case-related networking, managing transitions between interfaces, cross-case networking and administrative tasks. In addition, the tasks mentioned in the LBR could be empirically classified from the perspective of those working in social work. For people undergoing vocational rehabilitation, social work has many benefits and is perceived as supportive. These benefits require a trusting working relationship. However, there are also aspects that can lead to a lack of benefits. Social work services must be accessible and available so that they can be used or perceived as usable. An easily accessible contact structure seems to be particularly relevant for people with mental illnesses. The participatory research style implemented in ANSAB has proven successful and has led to better knowledge acquisition and contributed to the empowerment of people affected by the research.

Discussion

The results confirm some of the existing challenges in the vocational rehabilitation process. ANSAB further shows that long waiting times during the rehabilitation process are challenging for all parties involved. People undergoing vocational rehabilitation are more frequently affected by mental illness and often have complex support needs. The provision of follow-up care by service providers appears to be relevant to the success of the process. A noticeable shortage of skilled staff among service providers is also evident. The rehabilitation system must respond to these challenges. ANSAB highlights the different terms used to refer to social services among service providers. It must be clear to all parties involved what is meant in each case. If people undergoing vocational rehabilitation do not make use of social work services, this may be due to individual reasons (e.g. difficulties in seeking help, no need for support) or institutional reasons (e.g. the culture of the institution). Accessibility must be ensured when needed.

Applications/ Implementation

The identified implications are incorporated into recommendations for action and practice in social work within the field of vocational rehabilitation. In addition to a description of the tasks, ANSAB demonstrates the relevance of successful transition support and effective interface management. For rehabilitants, preventing material and personnel gaps in care as well as uncertainties in the rehabilitation process are particularly relevant, alongside transparency. The project results are also intended to contribute to the further professionalisation of social work in vocational rehabilitation and to secure qualified professionals in this field. Accordingly, curricular modules and course formats were developed for degree programmes in social work and social pedagogy, as well as for continuing education and additional qualifications for social work professionals active in vocational rehabilitation. To ensure the transfer of the project results, a science-practice dialogue was held in October 2024. Regarding vocational rehabilitation participants, a brochure in easy-to-read language was also produced to encourage their self-determined use of social work in the context of vocational rehabilitation.