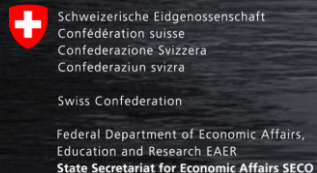


Worth the Drop?

What Young Professionals Really Think About Careers in Water



UTILITY OF THE FUTURE
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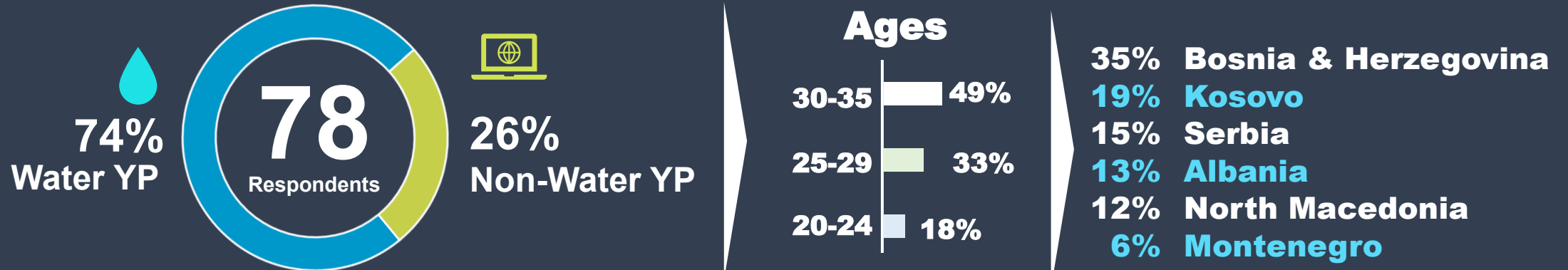
JUNIOR WATER PROFESSIONALS
OF THE WESTERN BALKANS



WORLD BANK GROUP
Water

The Survey

78 young professionals from six Western Balkans countries participated in this survey — 58 currently working in the water sector and 20 from other sectors. Two thirds are women, nearly half are aged 30–35, and 63% hold a Master's degree



Water Young Professionals



Non-Water Young Professionals



Key Findings and Insights



Recommendations and Call to Action



World Bank in Action:
Closing the Gaps



Water Young Professionals



Non-Water Young Professionals

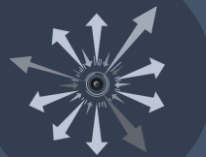
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Insights from young professionals working in the water sector



Why did they join?

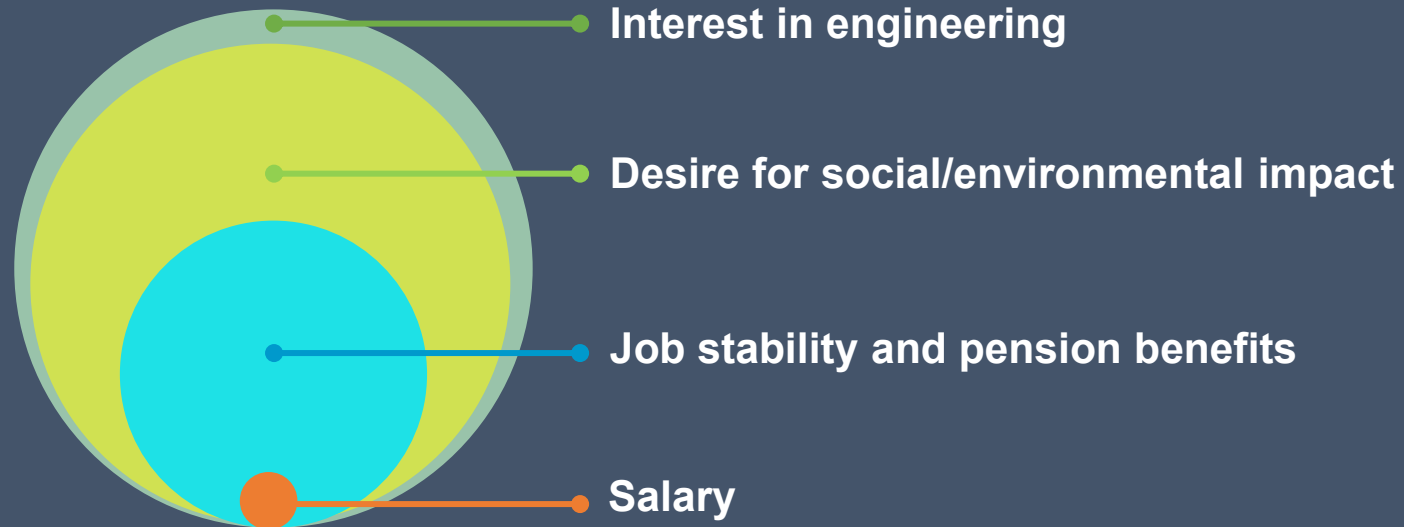
Young professionals chose water because they wanted to **make a difference**. The sector's challenge now is living up to that choice.

? What is the motivation?



They came for purpose, not pay. Engineering curiosity and environmental commitment brought most young professionals into water — salary was barely a factor

Top motivations to enter the water sector mentioned in the survey



Mission drives recruitment — but **the sector cannot rely on purpose alone to retain talent.** Motivation to join and reasons to stay are two very different things



How did they get their jobs?



33% all water sector professionals **got their job through who they know — not what they know**. Open, merit-based hiring is still the exception, not the rule



33% through personal contacts / networking — #1 entry route



29% through public job announcements



16% headhunted directly



9% through the employment bureau or public employment service



Only 10% via internships or volunteering



Only 5% through a university, academic project or scholarship



Formal pathways — internships, academic programs, scholarships — account for less than 15% of entries. **The talent pipeline starts with connections, not credentials.**



How do they feel about their jobs?

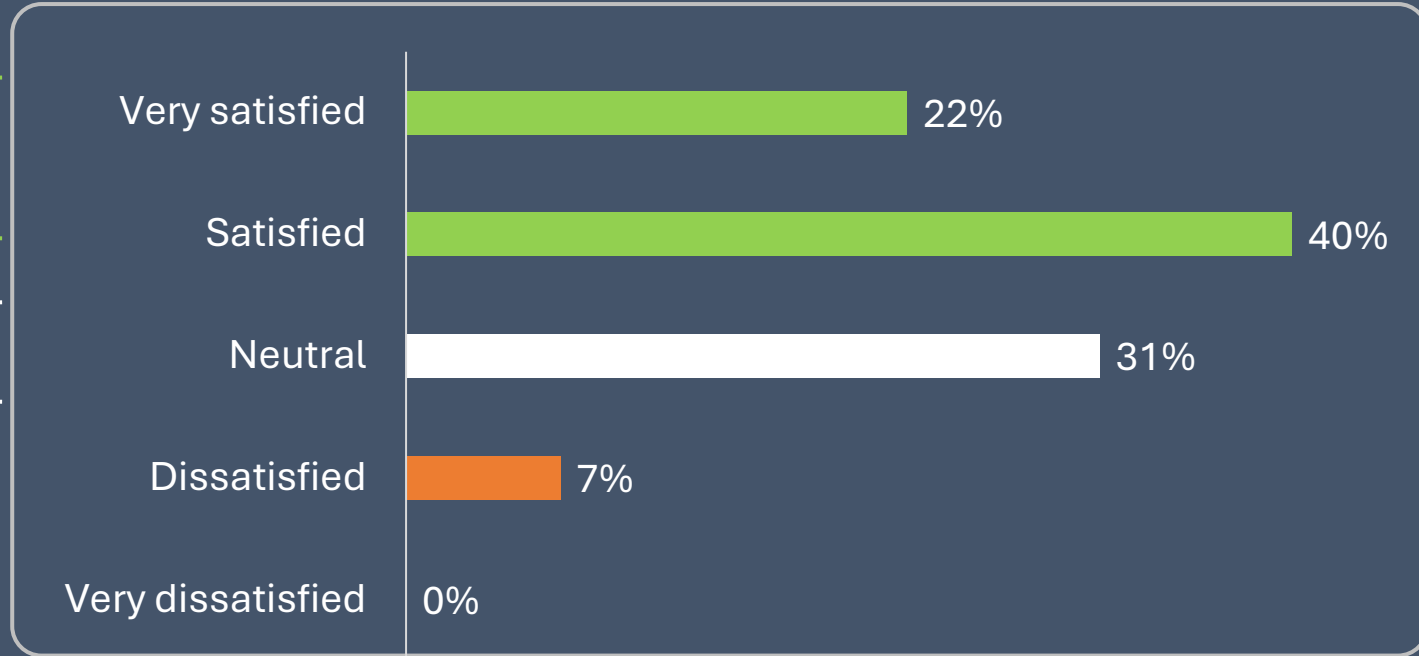


Most young water professionals are satisfied with their jobs — but a significant minority is not, and that minority is large enough to matter

62% rate their satisfaction high and very high



31% sit at neutral or below — a quiet but real retention risk



Satisfaction is positive overall — but **nearly 1 in 3 is unconvinced**. In a sector already struggling to attract talent, that is not a comfortable margin.



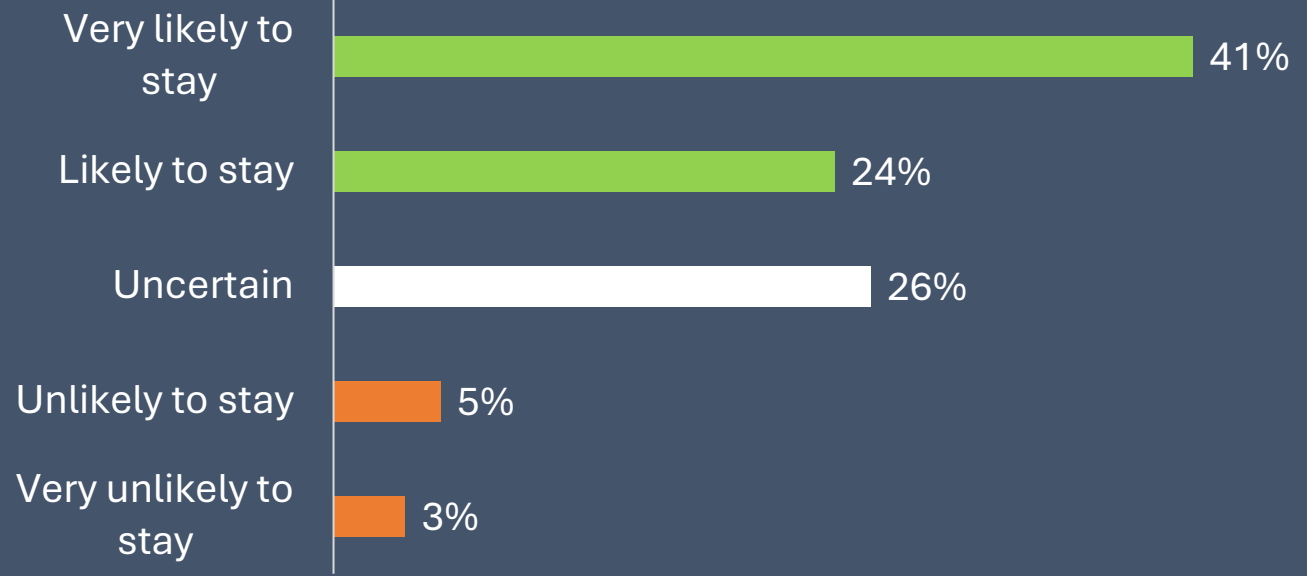
Will they stay?



The **majority plan to stay** — but intent is clustered around 'likely', not 'certain'. A meaningful share remains undecided, and a few are already looking elsewhere.

65% are likely or very likely to remain in the sector

26% are uncertain — the sector's most at-risk group



Two thirds plan to stay — but intent is conditional, not unconditional. The 26% sitting on the fence will go where the better conditions are. The sector still has time to make its case



? What would make them stay?



The ask is consistent across all six countries: **pay better, show a path forward, and let young professionals learn, contribute, and be heard**

Top motivations to enter the water sector mentioned in the survey:

Factor	% mention it
Higher salary / benefits	64%
Rotations and learning opportunities	52%
Clear career path and promotions	47%
More recognition and involvement in decisions	47%
Flexible working arrangements	41%
Innovation / climate resilience projects	40%
Access to regional/international exchanges	36%
Formal mentorship / coaching program	10%



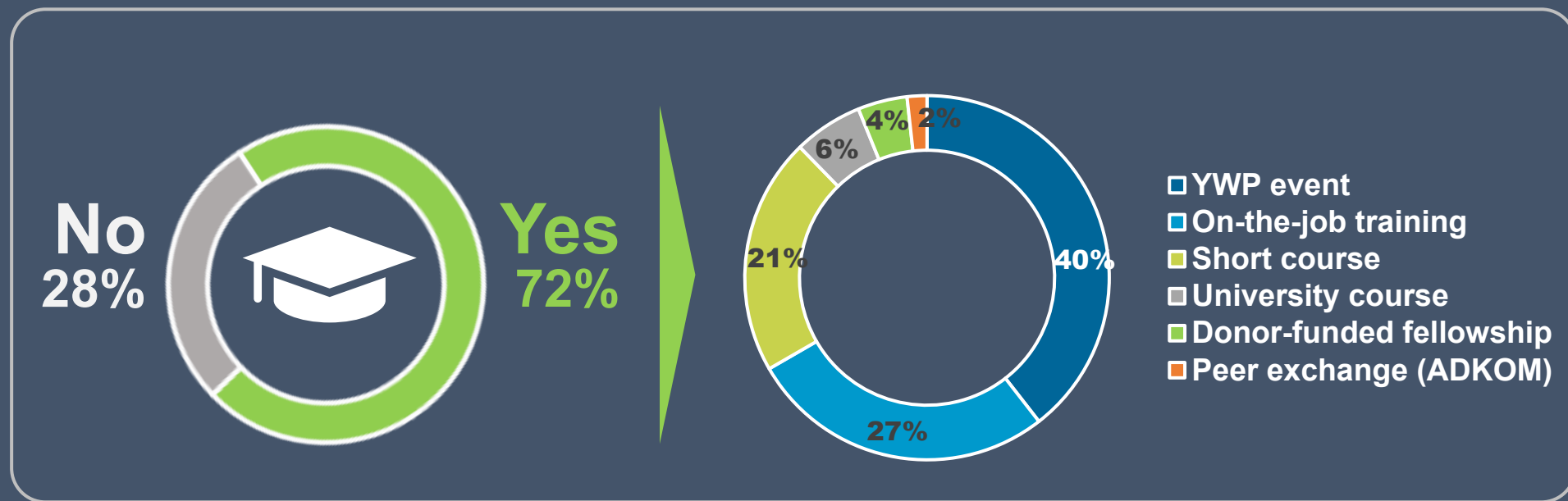
The Salary leads — but it is not the whole story. Recognition, learning, and flexibility follow closely. Young professionals want to grow, be heard, and work in ways that fit their lives. Mentorship, despite being a proven retention tool, ranks last — suggesting it is not yet seen as available or real.



Do they have professional development paths?



Most young water professionals are actively developing their skills — but the type of training tells a more nuanced story: learning is happening, but structured, formal pathways remain scarce.



72% participated in training — but mostly through events and on-the-job learning. **Structured, career-building formats like fellowships and formal courses remain the exception.** YWP events are filling a gap that utilities and institutions should be filling systematically.



What are the biggest barriers in their current job?



The barriers perceived by young water professionals face are not random — they cluster around the same themes, in every country, across every employer type. **This is a systemic problem, not a local one.**

1. Low salary and poor financial conditions
2. Lack of recognition and exclusion from decisions
3. Limited training and learning opportunities
4. Bureaucracy and slow institutional processes
5. Out-dated tools and infrastructure
6. Poor or incompetent leadership
7. Unrealistic deadlines and high workload
8. Resistance to change and traditional culture
9. Limited career advancement
10. Closed sector / same circle of professionals



Ten barrier categories. Zero surprises. Young professionals across six countries are telling the same story — which means the solutions are also shared. The sector knows what needs to change

Water Young Professionals



Non-Water Young Professionals



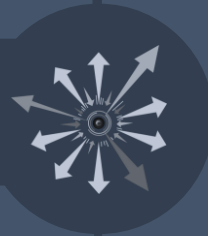
Key Findings and Insights



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World Bank in Action:
Closing the Gaps





The outside view. Young professionals from different sectors



**How attractive is the
water sector?**



Is the water sector attractive?



Half of professionals outside the sector have considered making the **move** — and their reasons reveal exactly what the water sector does well: purpose, relevance, and real-world impact.

No
50%



Yes
50%

▶ What would attract them?

- Environmental protection and sustainability
- Relevance to their field of study or work
- Innovation potential and new technologies
- Public health and social impact
- Curiosity / desire for something different



Those who considered entering the sector were drawn by **mission, relevance, and impact** — the same reasons current water professionals joined. The sector's appeal is consistent. What is inconsistent is the follow-through: conditions that turn interest into a career.



How attractive is the water sector?



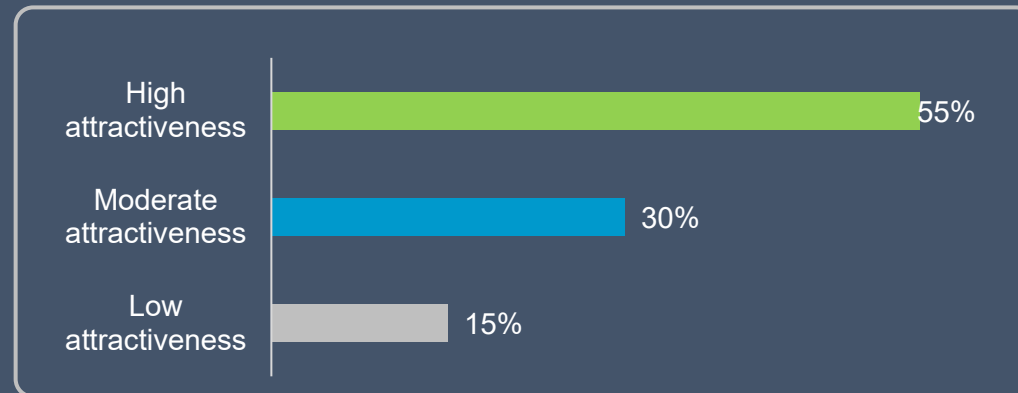
Outsiders find the water sector attractive, have realistic salary expectations — and yet not a single one has applied for a job in it. Interest without action is the sector's silent recruitment crisis.

Salary expectations:

- 85% expect €1,499 or less — relatively modest expectations
- The dominant expectation band is €1,000–€1,499
- Entry-level engineers in public utilities earn below €1,000/month net

Job applications in the past 12 months

- 0 out of 20 have applied — 100% said No
- One respondent noted: "I haven't applied yet but I'm thinking about it"



A sector rated 7.25/10 by outsiders, with modest salary expectations, and zero applications in 12 months — **that is not a demand problem. That is a visibility and access problem.** The pipeline exists; it just has no entry point

? What would make the sector attractive?



- **Outsiders want the same things insiders already ask for.** The convergence is striking — and it tells us exactly where to focus
- **Outsiders want to make an impact** — but not at the cost of their financial wellbeing. The water sector offers the mission. Delivering on the salary is what closes the gap

? What does the sector look like from the outside?



- You don't need to work in water to know its reputation. **Outsiders name the same barriers insiders live every day** — confirming that the sector's image reflects its reality.
- Three barriers dominate: **low pay, no growth, poor conditions.** These are not perceptions — they are facts confirmed by insiders. The sector cannot rebrand its way out of this. Only structural change will shift the narrative

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7 findings, one clear message: the sector is losing the talent race



The salary gap is the #1 issue

1

Compensation is the single most repeated concern. Water sector salaries simply cannot compete with IT or energy — and everyone knows it.

Attracts on mission, losses on conditions

2

Young professionals join because they care about water. They leave — or think about leaving — because the workplace doesn't care enough about them

Career paths are invisible

3

Most young professionals cannot name their next role or what it takes to get there. Learning in isolation is the norm — not the exception

It's still about who you know

4

33% got their job through personal contacts. Talent without connections stays on the outside

The sector looks stuck in the past

5

Outdated software, resistance to change, no digital tools — the water sector's innovation image is a recruitment liability

Young voices are shut out

6

They are told to wait their turn. But by the time they get a seat at the table, many have already left

International exposure: wanted, rarely offered

7

Regional exchanges and international programs rank among the top retention levers — yet they remain the least available

Water Young Professionals



Non-Water Young Professionals



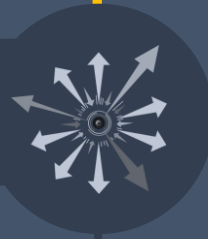
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**7 actions to
strengthen the youth
workforce in the
water sector.**



Fix the wage gap

1

Benchmark and advocate for competitive salaries.

Create clear career paths

2

Define roles, promotion criteria, and rotation opportunities in utilities and public agencies.

Launch structured mentorship

3

Pair junior professionals with senior mentors through YWP and sector associations.

Expand traineeships and exchanges

4

Use the high interest from outsiders to build a formal 3–6 month traineeship pipeline across the region.

Invest in digital tools

5

Provide access to modern software and build digital literacy into onboarding and training.

Open up hiring

6

Replace informal recruitment with transparent, publicly advertised processes, and engage universities early to build a visible, accessible talent pipeline.

Include young voices in decisions

7

Establish formal mechanisms for junior staff to participate in project planning, technical committees, and sector forums — not as observers, but as contributors.



No single actor can close this gap alone.

Utilities, governments, universities, and development partners each hold a piece of the solution. The question is not what needs to change — the data answered that. **The question is who moves first**

Water Young Professionals



Non-Water Young Professionals



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The World Bank in action: Closing the gaps



**The Utility of the Future
Center of Excellence**



UTILITY OF THE FUTURE CENTER OF EXCELLENCE



What is the Center of Excellence?

- The Utility of the Future Center of Excellence (CoE), supports the transformation process of water and sanitation utilities.
- The CoE is led by the World Bank in partnership with the Swiss State Secretariat for Economic Affairs (SECO),
- The initiative combines global knowledge, innovation, and practical solutions.
- Operates in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Albania, and Serbia, working with 30 water and sanitation utilities.
- The goal is to improve performance and accelerate universal access through coordinated hands-on support, capacity building, training, and strategic development.



UTILITY OF THE FUTURE
CENTER OF EXCELLENCE



What is the Center of Excellence doing for Young Professionals in the Western Balkans?



Data without action is just diagnosis

Key Objectives

1. Attracts and retains new talent in the sector
2. Builds the next generation of water professionals
3. Strengthens skills, career pathways, and sector engagement

Components:

1

Young Water Professionals Network

A global community connecting young leaders in the water sector through networking and peer-led knowledge sharing.

2

Innovation Challenges for Young Professionals

Open competitions that engage young professionals to develop innovative solutions for water and sanitation challenges.

3

First Work Experience Program

A mentorship and training program providing hands-on first job experience to young professionals entering the water sector.

First Work Experience Program



Six Young Professionals 2025-2026

- Recent graduate
- Six countries
- One requirement: no prior experience needed



Under the Utility of the Future – Center of Excellence, six young professionals—one from each Western Balkans country—were engaged to support the program, working with water utilities under the coordination of the partnership with **SUEZ-SAFEGE**. The only eligibility criterion was being a recent graduate, with no prior experience required



6 New Young Professionals Joining in 2026–2027

3 Pillars:

1

Experience

Real utility placements. Real challenges: non-revenue water, energy efficiency, digital systems, business planning.

2

Knowledge

Tailored **learning pathways aligned with each participant's interests** — technical training, workshops, and sector exposure. The first job becomes a structured learning journey, not a trial by fire.

3

Mentorship

Water specialists provide continuous **coaching, feedback, and career guidance.**



**How the First Work
Experience Program
directly closes the
findings?**



Finding

How the program responds



1

The salary gap is the #1 issue



Participants receive compensation during the program — removing the unpaid internship barrier

2

Attracts on mission, losses on conditions



Structured conditions — mentorship, learning, real work — match the mission with professional support

3

Career paths are invisible



Tailored learning pathways and mentorship give each participant a visible trajectory from day one

4

It's still about who you know



Selection based on graduation only — no networks, contacts, or prior experience required



Finding

How the program responds



5

The sector looks stuck in the past



Participants work on digital integration, energy efficiency, and NRW reduction — real innovation challenges

6

Young voices are shut out



Participants contribute to real utility decisions, not just support roles

7

International exposure: wanted, rarely offered



Program includes cross-country exposure and World Bank network access

This is a proof of concept — not a finished product. The model works. **Now it needs to scale.** Utilities, governments, universities, and development partners across the region and beyond can replicate it.

The invitation:

- 1. Remove experience requirements** for entry-level positions
2. Pair participants with **senior mentors** from day one
- 3. Assign real work** — not observation or administrative support
4. Build a tailored **learning pathway** alongside the placement
- 5. Connect** participants to a regional network of peers



The sector's future depends on the professionals it cultivates today.

Investing in first jobs is not charity — it is the most strategic thing the water sector can do right now

Survey and report developed by:

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www.worldbank.org/uof

Disclaimer: This is a discussion document based on a voluntary, self-initiated survey of young professionals in the Western Balkans water sector. It is not an official World Bank publication and does not represent the views of the World Bank Group

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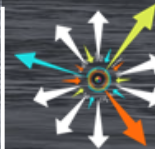


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