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Pre-Apprenticeship for Refugees in Switzerland

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Abstract

This paper explores a new pre-vocational programme (*Integrationsvorlehre*, INVOL) that aims to prepare refugees and temporarily admitted persons aged 16 to 35 for an apprenticeship. Using a sample of 552 INVOL-participants, it was tested whether situational (workplace and school characteristics) and individual resources (language proficiency at the beginning of the INVOL, self-efficacy, and persistency) predict participants' learning outcomes at the end of the programme. We found that workplace resources were related to participants' practical and transferable competencies, while school-related resources and language skills predicted language proficiency levels at the end of the programme. Self-efficacy and persistency were not related to learning outcomes. Overall, the programme seems to contribute successfully to refugees' competence development and preparation for subsequent VET programmes; however, learning across the boundaries of workplaces and schools needs to be strengthened.

Keywords

refugees, learning, resources, pre-entry VET-programme

1 Introduction

In Switzerland, a VET qualification is an important prerequisite for a sustainable entry into working life and participation in society. So far, refugees and temporarily admitted persons had insufficient access to the Swiss VET system - despite often high motivation and, in some cases, good prior schooling and work experience (Spadarotto, 2015). To foster the integration of refugees and temporarily admitted persons aged 16 to 35 and in response to the flow of refugees from 2015-2017, a one-year pre-vocational training programme called "pre-apprenticeship for integration" (*Integrationsvorlehre*, INVOL) has been launched (Bundesrat, 2015; Scharnhorst & Kammermann, 2019). INVOL is organised similarly to the two-year apprenticeship, including a strong involvement of employers, who offer company-based practical training in a vocational field, education at a vocational school, a focus on the acquisition of language skills, the



learning of cultural norms and values, and close guidance and support provided by specialists (Stalder & Schönbächler, 2019). It is based on a national framework and benchmarks set by the State Secretariat for Migration; the cantons are responsible for the concrete implementation¹. The goals of INVOL are manifold. The pre-apprenticeship should make refugees and temporarily admitted persons “fit” to take up and successfully finish a regular VET programme, enable them to find a meaningful job, and empower them to design their own career. Moreover, it should provide employers with the opportunity to find a new labour force, especially in fields where there is a lack of qualified workers. Introduced as a pilot programme, the pre-apprenticeship has yet to be evaluated, and it is open, whether its goals can be fully reached.

Drawing from resources-theory (Bakker & Demrouti, 2003), this paper explores the learning outcomes of the INVOL-participants at the end of the programme. It is based on four key aspects of competence development in vocational education and training: 1. *Theory and practice*: Evidence demonstrates that both theoretical knowledge and practical skills and the integration of learning experiences from the workplace and school are crucial for the development of vocational competence (Aarkrog, 2005). The pre-apprenticeship thus fosters learning within and across different learning locations: the workplace, the vocational school and (in some of the programmes) specific courses at intercompany training centres. 2. *Situational resources*: Research shows that learners with higher situational resources (e.g., access to high-quality teaching and training, supportive colleagues, tasks that stimulate learning) learn more and faster (Filliettaz, 2012). Also, individual support and guidance have been proven to be crucial for enhancing successful learning as well as successful completion of training in low-level VET programmes (Scharnhorst & Kammermann, 2020). Educators in the pre-apprenticeship programme are thus asked to create favourable learning environments that are adapted to the needs of the INVOL-participants. They often act as coaches who support the INVOL-participants in their learning process and advise them in managing everyday challenges. 3. *Individual resources*: Effective learning is only possible if learners are motivated to engage in learning and work activities and capable of using the various opportunities for learning (Billett, 2001). Research shows that learners with higher individual resources (e.g., education, language skills, self-efficacy, motivation, confidence, persistency) have better learning outcomes (Nägele & Stalder, 2019). The cantons thus select the participants carefully, and the promotion of individual resources during the pre-apprenticeship is an essential element of the programme.

Based on these considerations, we

- a) describe the learning outcomes of the INVOL-participants in language proficiency (written, spoken), their practical competencies and transferable skills; and
- b) test to what extent situational resources (workplace and school characteristics), as well as individual resources (self-efficacy, persistency, language proficiency level at the beginning), contribute to positive learning outcomes.

2 Method

Data. The analyses are based on a subsample of 552 INVOL-participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 24.8$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 4.95$; male 83.5%) who had completed the INVOL programme in 2019 or 2020 (German-speaking part: 52.9%; French and Italian parts: 47.1%). Half of the participants (50.5%) originate from Eritrea, Sudan, or Somalia; 36.6% from Syria, Afghanistan, or Iran, and 12.9% from other countries.

Measures. Participants rated their situational resources at the end of the programme, including learning opportunities in the workplace and school (3 items each) and the pedagogical

¹ <https://www.sem.admin.ch/sem/de/home/integration-einbuengerung/innovation/invol.html>

competencies of their teachers and trainers (5 items each); they also self-evaluated their self-efficacy and persistency (2 items each), on a 5-point response scale. The language proficiency level at the beginning was assessed by specialists responsible for the assessment and selection of the participants, based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (GER), with 1 = *A1 or lower* to 5 = *C1 or higher*. Learning outcomes (spoken and written language proficiency, practical competencies, transferable skills) were evaluated at the end of the INVOL programme by teachers and trainers. Practical competencies and transferable skills (reliability, resilience) were assessed globally on a four-point scale (1 = *not fulfilled* to 4 = *excellent*). Age, gender, cohort membership, region of origin (Eritrea/Sudan/Somalia, Afghanistan/Iran/Syria, or others) and language region of the programme (German or French/Italian) were assessed as control variables.

Analyses. Regression analyses were conducted to examine whether situational resources and individual resources predict learning outcomes. Age, gender, cohort membership, region of origin, and language region were included as control variables in all analyses.

3 Results

3.1 Descriptive results

Means, standard deviations, and the range for all variables are presented in Table 1. Descriptive results show that participants reached good levels regarding practical competencies ($M = 3.15$) and transferable skills ($M = 3.26$). As to their language skills, results are mixed. On average, proficiency levels were higher in spoken than in written language (Spoken: $M = 2.83$; with A1/A2: 27.4%, B1: 62.0%, B2 or higher: 10.6%; Written: $M = 2.65$; with A1/A2: 42.3%, B1: 48.6%, B2 or higher: 9.1%).

Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, and Range for all Assessed Variables

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Min.	Max.
Situational and individual resources				
Language proficiency level at beginning	2.22	0.62	1.00	5.00
Learning opportunities in the workplace	4.11	0.66	1.25	5.00
Pedagogical competencies trainer	4.26	0.76	1.20	5.00
Learning opportunities in VET school	4.29	0.64	2.00	5.00
Pedagogical competencies teachers	4.50	0.58	1.60	5.00
Self-efficacy	4.05	0.66	1.50	5.00
Persistency	4.32	0.63	2.50	5.00
Learning outcomes				
Language proficiency level at end: Spoken	2.83	0.66	1.00	5.00
Language proficiency level at end: Written	2.65	0.70	1.00	5.00
Practical competencies	3.15	0.62	1.00	4.00
Transferable skills	3.23	0.74	1.00	4.00

Note. $N = 552$.

3.2 Language Competencies

Spoken as well as written language proficiency was most strongly predicted by the initial language reference level ($\beta = .403, p < .001$; $\beta = .381, p < .001$), indicating that higher levels of language proficiency at the beginning of the programme were associated with higher reference levels of spoken and written proficiency at the end of the programme (Table 2). Furthermore,

participants' higher evaluations of the teachers' pedagogical competencies significantly predicted higher language reference levels ($\beta = .137, p = .013$; $\beta = .185, p = .002$). Hence, experiencing more support and interest from the teacher was associated with higher language proficiency at the end of the programme. The evaluation of learning opportunities in school negatively predicted language proficiency, both concerning written ($\beta = -.106, p = .041$) and spoken ($\beta = -.120, p = .031$) language. The more participants perceived the content of their lessons as diverse and novel, the lower their spoken and written language proficiency was at the end of the programme. Finally, besides a trend towards significance observed for trainers' pedagogical competencies predicting written language proficiency ($\beta = .076, p = .096$), workplace characteristics, self-efficacy, and persistency did not predict language proficiency at the end of the INVOL programme, indicating that language proficiency seem to be influenced primarily by school characteristics.

Table 2
Regression Results for Language Proficiency at the End of INVOL

Variables	Language proficiency at end					
	spoken			written		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β
Learning opportunities in the workplace	.065	.046	.065	.025	.049	.024
Pedagogical competencies trainer	.036	.039	.042	.070 [†]	.042	.076
Learning opportunities in VET school	-.106*	.052	-.102	-.120*	.055	-.110
Pedagogical competencies teacher	.137*	.055	.120	.185**	.059	.153
Language proficiency level at beginning	.403***	.044	.379	.382***	.048	.337
Self-efficacy	.025	.044	.025	-.009	.047	-.009
Persistency	-.003	.046	-.003	-.001	.050	-.001
<i>R</i> ² (corrected <i>R</i> ²)	.184 (.162)			.185 (.164)		

Note. *N* = 552. Controlled for cohort membership, age, gender, language region, and region of origin.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$. [†] $p < .10$.

3.3 Practical Competencies and Transferable Skills

Only learning opportunities at work significantly predicted practical competencies ($\beta = .104, p = .024$) (Table 3). The higher participants rated the number of novel tasks and the diversity of their work, the better were the assessments of their practical competencies. The transferable skills were significantly predicted by the learning opportunities in the workplace ($\beta = .122, p = .026$) and the trainers' pedagogical competencies ($\beta = .103, p = .028$). Hence, perceiving the work as more diverse and experiencing higher levels of support and interest from the trainer was associated with better evaluations of participants' transferable skills at the end of the programme. Finally, besides a trend towards significance observed for teachers' pedagogical competencies predicting practical competencies ($\beta = .099, p = .074$), school characteristics, self-efficacy, and persistency did neither predict practical competencies nor transferable skills at the end of the INVOL programme.

Table 3
Regression Results for Practical Competencies and Transferable Skills at the End of INVOL

Variables	Practical competencies			Transferable skills		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β
Learning opportunities in the workplace	.104*	.046	.111	.122*	.055	.109
Pedagogical competencies trainer	.050	.039	.061	.103*	.047	.105
Learning opportunities in school	-.031	.052	-.032	.022	.061	.019
Pedagogical competencies teacher	.099 [†]	.055	.092	.051	.066	.040
Self-efficacy	-.015	.044	-.016	-.052	.052	-.047
Persistency	.045	.046	.046	-.004	.055	-.003
<i>R</i> ² (corrected <i>R</i> ²)	.084 (.059)			.082 (.058)		

Note. *N* = 552. Controlled for language proficiency level at the beginning, cohort membership, age, gender, language region, and region of origin.

* $p < .05$. [†] $p < .10$.

4 Conclusion

The overall positive evaluation of INVOL-participants' competencies at the end of the pre-apprenticeship suggests that the programme successfully prepares refugees and temporarily admitted persons for their entry into regular VET programmes. Perceived resources in the workplace seem to foster practical competencies and transferable skills; resources at school showed to have a positive effect on language proficiency. However, increasing learning opportunities at school seem to hinder the development of language skills, suggesting that too varied timetables and learning contents seem to be overburdening and stressful. Against what we expected, characteristics of the school environment did only little contribute to practical competencies or transferable skills at the end of the INVOL programme. As learning across learning locations is crucial for the development of vocational competencies, a closer look at the interplay between workplaces and schools is needed. The missing effect of persistency and self-efficacy is surprising. It is possible that the participants found it difficult to assess their individual resources or that there is a mismatch between self- and external assessment. Further research should examine more closely how individual and situational resources of the INVOL-participants are related and how they contribute to successful transitions into subsequent VET programmes.

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