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Revisiting the Pre-apprenticeship for Integration: Who Has Access, Who Does Not, and Why?

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Abstract

Context: To enhance the vocational qualifications and job prospects of refugees, temporarily admitted persons, and late-arriving young adults from outside the asylum system, the Swiss government has introduced the pre-apprenticeship for integration (PAI). The one-year programme prepares those groups of migrants for a regular apprenticeship, qualified work, and a sustainable career. The PAI is structured similarly to two-year apprenticeships and is offered in various occupational fields. Since 2018, it included more than 4000 migrants aged 16 to about 36 from more than 90 countries.

Approach: The introduction of the PAI is accompanied by a research project that evaluates the quality of the learning provisions in the workplace and VET school and investigates the career prospects of the PAI participants. It is based on resource theory, the job characteristics model, and their adaptations to VET, and uses a mixed-method approach with surveys and interviews with all stakeholders of the six PAI cohorts. While previous publications have investigated the career prospects of PAI participants, at ECER 2024, we will focus on those migrants who were not admitted to the PAI or did not finish the programme. To this end, we will analyse monitoring data from the 18 participating cantons and the federal statistical office.

Findings: The analyses are ongoing, and findings cannot be provided yet. Results from the survey with employers and the interviews with the contact persons of the cantons suggest, however, that nonparticipation in the PAI and early leaving may have different and multiple reasons. They highlight that limited individual, social, and situational resources may lead to a misfit with the programmes' requirements or the chosen career path.

Conclusions: Based on the findings, we will discuss possible measures to reinforce refugees' individual resources and access to pre-vocational programmes and regular apprenticeships. We will elaborate on how situational resources in the workplace and VET school can be strengthened to support refugees effectively in their careers.

Keywords

refugees, temporarily admitted persons, pre-apprenticeship, integration, resources



1 Introduction

In Switzerland, as in many European countries, refugees face significant employment challenges, often lacking the necessary educational and vocational credentials for qualified work (Aerne & Bonoli, 2021; Spadarotto et al., 2014). To enhance the job prospects and improve the conditions for the integration of recognised refugees and temporarily admitted persons, the Swiss government has launched the Integration Agenda Switzerland IAS. The integration measures are intensified and start earlier, considering the refugees' specific needs, age, and background. The provisions focus on personal information, identifying and utilising refugees' potential, rapid language learning, targeted accompaniment and support, and familiarisation with the Swiss lifestyle. Young refugees are to be prepared for post-compulsory education, while adults are supported in acquiring skills to enter the workforce. Specific targets include that within five years, two-thirds of refugees aged 16 to 25 should be in post-compulsory education, and within seven years, half of all adult refugees should be sustainably integrated into the primary labour market.

One of the key initiatives of the integration agenda is the one-year pre-vocational programme *pre-apprenticeship programme to support integration* (PAI; German: Integrationsvorlehre INVOL; French: pré-apprentissage d' intégration PAI; Italian: Pre-apprendistato di integrazione PAI), which was launched in 2018 (Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft et al., 2018; Stalder et al., 2024).

The PAI offers recognised refugees and temporarily admitted persons between the ages of 16 and around 35 the opportunity to prepare for a regular VET programme, find a meaningful job, and design their own career. At the same time, it aims to provide employers with qualified young people in sectors with a shortage of skilled workers. The PAI is offered in 18 cantons, covering all language regions in Switzerland and various occupational fields like catering and hospitality, construction, sales, and healthcare. Since 2021, the PAI has also been opened to late-arriving migrants from outside of the asylum system who do not have any vocational qualifications or who have not completed upper-secondary-level education.

From 2018 to 2023, more than 4000 people started a PAI programme, of which more than 80 per cent completed it. Upon completion, around 70 per cent have found a two- or three-year apprenticeship (Stalder & Schönbächler, 2024). Based on the successful outcomes of the PAI, the federal programme will be made permanent as a standard offer in the participating cantons starting in the summer of 2024.

1.1 Key elements of the PAI programme

The PAI is based on close inter-institutional cooperation between the federal government, the cantons, the employers and professional organisations, and the VET schools. Together with the cantons and professional organisations, the Swiss federal government has developed a framework and benchmarks for the design of the PAI (Staatssekretariat für Migration SEM, 2020a, 2020b). Key elements of the PAI include the combination of in-company training with school-based education and, depending on the sector, inter-company courses. In most cantons, the PAI is organised similarly to the two-year apprenticeship. Specific attention is paid to acquiring and improving language and academic skills (e.g., maths, digital skills), transferable competencies, and teaching work-related norms and values. Essentials also include targeted individual support for participants and in-company trainers provided by specialists.

1.2 The national research project

The introduction of the PAI is accompanied by a national research project conducted on behalf of the State Secretariat for Migration and co-financed by the Bern University of Teacher Education. The research project's main aim is to explore the educational and training quality of

the programme and its role in fostering the career success of the participants (Stalder et al., 2024; Stalder & Schönbächler, 2024). The trilingual study runs from 2019-2025 and includes six cohorts. It is based on a mixed-methods design with written surveys and/or interviews with participants, in-company trainers, teachers, coaches, and contact persons from all cantons involved in the PAI. Monitoring data collected at the cantonal level and data from the Federal Statistical Office¹ will also be analysed. Participants come from more than 90 different countries, most frequently from Eritrea, Afghanistan, and Syria. On average, they are 25 years old, and three-quarters are male.

Drawing on resource theory (Hobfoll et al., 2018), the job characteristic model (Hackman & Oldham, 1980), and their application to the field of dual VET (Lüthi & Stalder, 2018), it is proposed that both situational resources (i.e., high-quality learning environment in the workplace and vocational school) and refugees' individual and social resources contribute to their successful transition to a regular VET programme. Essential situational resources include high learning opportunities, close guidance from workplace supervisors, teachers, and coaches, and the possibility of transferring what is learned in one learning location to the other (Aarkrog, 2005; Stalder et al., 2021). A trustful and engaged collaboration of all stakeholders is vital to provide participants with a supportive environment (Wehrle et al., 2023). Crucial individual resources are, amongst others, refugees' language skills, effort, and career aspirations, which are essential drivers of positive career development (Billett, 2001; Wehrle et al., 2019). Social resources focus on PAI participants' living situations outside of the PAI and their social integration. Career success is assessed by objective (e.g., successful completion of the PAI, transition to and completion of regular VET programmes) and subjective criteria (e.g., participants' satisfaction with the PAI) (Stalder et al., 2024).

Expanding our knowledge about the effectiveness of the PAI programme, this contribution focuses on the less successful refugees: Those without access to the PAI or who left the programme before its end. The latter concerns about one out of six persons.

1.3 Access to the PAI

Access to the PAI is regulated by the national guidelines set by the state secretariat for migration (Staatssekretariat für Migration SEM, 2020b) and implemented by the cantons. The cantons ensure that the PAI aligns with their educational system. They decide on the number of available PAI places and which occupational fields they want to offer. Refugees and temporarily admitted persons must apply for the PAI with a recommendation from a specialist, such as a municipal reference person. Admission is based on assessing their potential at a career guidance centre. This assessment evaluates the candidates' work and school experience, language skills, career goals and wishes, and individual resources. It evaluates not only whether candidates can cope with the requirements of the PAI but also their ability and capability to succeed in a regular apprenticeship afterwards.

Refugees and temporarily admitted persons may face several obstacles in accessing the PAI due to their challenging life paths and living situations in the host country. These difficulties can include ongoing mental and physical health issues, insufficient language or academic skills, lack of social support, challenging housing conditions, and insufficient childcare facilities for those with children (Aerne & Bonoli, 2021; Gei & Matthes, 2017). Findings from the first PAI cohort show that many refugees and temporarily admitted persons live in difficult housing situations with limited opportunities to find a quiet place to learn and relax (Stalder & Schönbächler, 2020).

¹ Bundesamt für Statistik: Längsschnittdatenanalysen im Bildungsbereich LABB [Federal Statistical Office: Longitudinal analyses in the education sector LABB]

Aiming to learn more about PAI candidates not taking part in the programme, our research questions are: 1a) What characterises refugees and temporarily admitted persons who apply for a PAI but are not admitted to/do not start with the programme? 1b) Which follow-up solutions open up for the refugees and temporarily admitted persons concerned?

1.4 Early leaving from the PAI

Early leaving from the PAI might have different reasons, each pointing to limited situational, individual, or social resources, which may accumulate and lead to a specific misfit with the PAI programme. This misfit can refer to, for example, the requirements and characteristics of the job and the occupational/vocational field of the PAI or the learning situation in the company and school (Coleman Gallagher et al., 2021; Stalder & Schmid, 2016). According to the employers' survey of the first PAI cohort, insufficient prior schooling and language skills (poor P-J fit), a lack of interest to be trained in the specific occupational field (poor P-V fit), health reasons, or the desire for gainful employment (poor P-J fit) are the main reasons of participants not to finish the PAI (Stalder & Schönbachler, 2020). Research on early leaving from apprenticeships suggests that the risk for early leaving might be exceptionally high for refugees and temporarily admitted persons with poor language and maths skills, those unable to start the PAI in their desired occupation, those who feel unsupported by their in-company trainers, and those working in fields with skills shortage (Kunze et al., 2023; Maué et al., 2021; Stalder & Schmid, 2016).

Aiming to learn more about PAI candidates who leave the programme early, our research questions are: 2a) What characterises refugees and temporarily admitted persons who leave the programme early? 2b) Which follow-up solutions open up for the refugees and temporarily admitted persons concerned?

2 Data

We use cantonal and national monitoring data of 1500 applicants from the first three PAI cohorts to elaborate on our research questions. Data provided by the cantons include information about the candidates' age, gender, language skills, and suitability for the PA. For those who started with a PAI, the cantons described the occupational field of the PAI and indicated whether the participants finished it successfully. For those who did not start with a PAI or left it early, the cantons described whether the candidates/participants had found another educational programme. Data provided by the Federal Statistical Office included information about the candidates'/participants' year of birth and gender, the age at which they arrived in Switzerland, their country of origin and their migration status.

3 Analytical strategy and expected results

First, we examine the individual resources of those who did not follow the programme and explore their alternative pathways and opportunities to enter a regular VET programme directly. We compare their resources and career success with refugees and temporarily admitted persons participating in the PAI programme. We assume that those who did not enrol in the PAI have more limited individual resources than participants and, consequently, have lower chances of entering a regular VET programme.

Second, we analyse the individual resources of those who left the programme early and describe their pathways after the early leaving. Moreover, we compare the early leavers' resources with those of refugees and temporarily admitted persons who successfully finished the PAI. Of particular interest is finding out how many of them re-enter an educational programme.

4 Discussion

The findings will be discussed in the light of resource theory and previous findings about displaced people's educational and employment pathways. We will highlight the challenges and risks of educational measures such as the PAI and reflect on its contribution to integrating refugees and temporarily admitted persons in education and work.

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