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From Aspiration to Apprenticeship: Insights from a Refugee Pre-vocational Programme

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Abstract

Context: Refugees in Switzerland face significant challenges when entering the vocational education and training system. The pre-apprenticeship for integration (PAI), a one-year pre-vocational programme which targets unqualified refugees aged 16 to 35, aims to support this transition by helping participants clarify their aspirations and prepare for an apprenticeship.
Methods: The study draws on survey and administrative data of 2479 refugees who completed the PAI programme between 2019 and 2023. We examined refugees' long-term career aspirations, group-specific characteristics, and post-PAI transitions into VET.
Findings: PAI participants expressed a wide range of long-term career aspirations, with the majority aiming to stay in their current occupational field; others aspired to change fields, pursue further or higher education, become self-employed, or were uncertain. Aspirations were shaped by age, family status, and satisfaction with the PAI and were linked to participants' likelihood of continuing into IVET.
Conclusions: The findings highlight the PAI's potential to foster motivating career aspirations and successful transitions to IVET, though support is still needed for refugees facing uncertainty or requiring additional time to prepare for an apprenticeship. Continued research on PAI-participants' pathways will be essential to explore whether refugees can translate their aspirations into sustainable vocational pathways.

Keywords

refugees, integration, career aspirations, apprenticeship, dropout

1 Introduction

Refugees face considerable employment challenges, often lacking the educational qualifications and occupational skills required for skilled work (Aerne & Bonoli, 2021; Bundesamt für Statistik, 2024). To improve their educational and job prospects, the Swiss government introduced the "pre-apprenticeship to support integration" (PAI) in 2018, aiming to prepare them for initial vocational education and training (IVET) and empower them to shape their careers proactively (Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft et al., 2018; Stalder et al., 2024). Setting clear

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career goals and developing aspirations beyond IVET might be particularly relevant for refugees lacking initial vocational credentials, as they must reorient themselves, start their careers from scratch, and align their aspirations with the labour market in their host country (Wehrle et al., 2019).

This paper investigates PAI participants' long-term career aspirations and how they link to post-PAI VET pathways. In particular, we examine whether participants who stay in VET after the PAI have different aspirations than those who drop out. Using the PAI programme as an example, we discuss the opportunities and challenges of vocational integration programmes in fostering successful transitions to initial vocational education and training (IVET) while supporting sustainable careers.

1.1 The PAI Programme

The PAI is a one-year programme covering occupational fields such as catering and hospitality, construction, sales, and healthcare. Its primary goals are to prepare recognised refugees, temporarily admitted persons, and late-arriving migrants for regular VET programmes and to supply employers with skilled workers. Between 2018 and 2023, over 4000 people aged 16 to 35 started a PAI programme in Switzerland's German, French or Italian regions (Stalder et al., 2024). In most cantons, the PAI is structured similarly to the two-year apprenticeship that targets academically weaker learners. Key elements include combining in-company training with school-based education in a particular occupational field, a focus on strengthening language, academic, practical, and transferable skills, and the provision of individualised support of PAI participants by specialists. Access to the PAI is granted to individuals with work experience who lack upper-secondary level vocational qualifications. An assessment prior to the PAI is carried out to determine, among other things, whether the candidates have sufficient language skills (level A2 or better) and are motivated and capable of fully engaging in the programme.

The PAI's structure, modelled on regular apprenticeships, offers clear advantages but also presents challenges in meeting the specific needs of its target group. Three examples illustrate this: First, the full-time nature of the programme may not be suitable for older participants with family responsibilities or for refugees with health-related impairments. Second, the absence of remuneration may prompt participants who rely on income to opt for unskilled employment rather than embark on a VET programme. Third, while focusing on specific occupational fields can support targeted preparation for a corresponding apprenticeship, it limits participants' flexibility to switch to another field, potentially reducing their motivation to stay in VET. These challenges arise in accessing and completing the PAI and may hinder the transition into an apprenticeship thereafter.

1.2 Career Aspirations

Aspirations reflect an individual's subjective orientation toward a desired near or distant future, shaped by imagination and emotion and influencing learning choices and practices. Career aspirations refer more specifically to one's goals and ambitions related to work and career development—such as roles, skills, advancement, lifelong learning, or work-life balance (Barhate & Dirani, 2021; Howard et al., 2011). They guide motivation and decision-making and contribute to career success (Lent & Brown, 2019; Niessen et al., 2023). Individual factors—such as personal skills, learning experiences, health, family obligations, and housing—and contextual factors—such as educational opportunities and support from institutional actors—play a key role in developing aspirations. Research suggests that refugees with higher individual and contextual resources are more likely to set clear goals and show curiosity in actively pursuing their careers (Wehrle et al., 2019).

1.3 Dropping out from VET

Dropping out of VET is a concern in many countries, including those with dual VET systems. Reasons for early leaving from VET include mismatches between desired and actual occupation, low wages, poor VET quality, insufficient skills, low motivation, health issues, older age, and migration background (Böhn, 2022; Stalder & Schmid, 2016). Several of these risk factors—such as limited language skills, older age compared to peers, or health problems—are common among PAI participants. In addition, key occupational fields targeted by the PAI programme, such as catering and hospitality or construction, are often perceived as less attractive and associated with high dropout rates. Finally, dropout is frequently linked to financial or family issues—challenges that may disproportionately affect refugees (Aerne & Bonoli, 2021; Coleman Gallagher et al., 2021).

1.4 Research Questions

The PAI programme aims to help participants develop long-term career aspirations beyond IVET. This goal aligns with a core principle of the Swiss VET system, which strives to enable all VET learners to obtain additional qualifications, such as an IVET diploma (three- or four-year apprenticeship) after an IVET certificate (two-year apprenticeship) or a higher VET degree (tertiary level) after an IVET diploma. Such qualifications can open access to more demanding, responsible, and personally fulfilling jobs and are key to long-term career development. How effectively the PAI supports the development of such aspirations remains unclear and is explored further in this paper.

Three research questions guide our investigations:

1. What are PAI participants' most salient career aspirations?
2. Are particular aspirations more common among specific groups of participants?
3. What distinguishes participants who continue in VET from those who drop out after the PAI?

2 Data and methods

We use survey data from a sub-sample of 2479 PAI participants — mostly refugees with a residence permit B (acknowledged refugees) or F (temporarily admitted persons) — who completed the PAI programme between 2019 and 2023. The refugees frequently came from Eritrea, Afghanistan, and Syria. They had an average age of 25.6, with three-quarters being male. Two thirds were trained in a programme in the service sector (e.g., retail trades, hospitality, health, domestic services), roughly one third in the manufactury and industry secor (e.g., construction, mechanics), and only a few in the agriculture.

Participants completed an online questionnaire during a vocational school lesson shortly before the PAI's end. The questions focused on the workplace and school learning environment, participants' educational plans for the time directly after the PAI, and their long-term career aspirations.

We assessed career aspirations with an open-ended question ("What kind of work would you like to be doing in 10 years?"). The responses were coded using qualitative content analysis. The cantonal authorities provided information about the occupational field of the PAI and participants' post-PAI pathways. We included information about participants' PAI field (administrative data) and educational plans (participants' survey) to capture occupational stability vs. change and the aspiration to obtain additional qualifications. Additional data included participants' individual situation (e.g., family, housing, health, planned pathway after the PAI) and their evaluation of the learning environment in the PAI (e.g., interesting work, satisfaction,

support). We used descriptive and multivariate analyses to explore participants' career aspirations and their connection with VET pathways after the PAI.

3 Results

3.1 Refugees' Aspirations

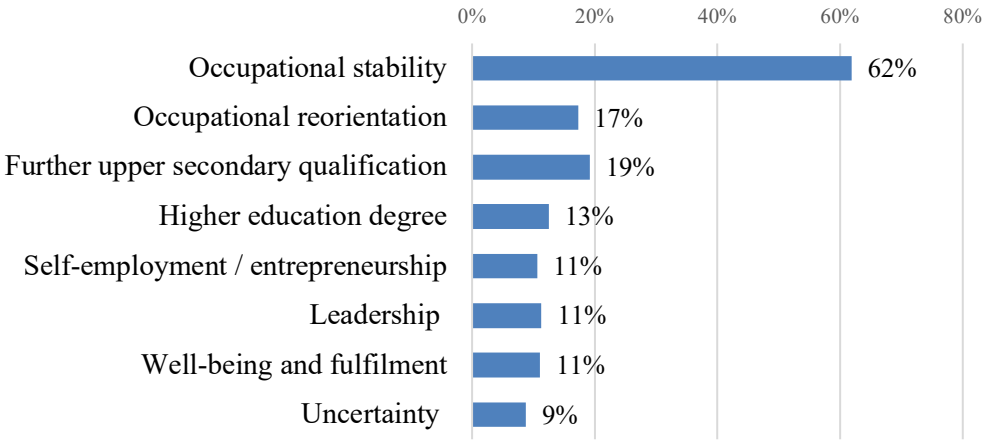
Content analyses revealed seven dimensions of long-term career aspirations and an eighth category indicating insecurity:

- *Occupational stability*: work in the occupational field of the PAI. Examples: «In ten years, I would like to work as a care specialist in a retirement home» (PAI in the health sector); «I want to work as a car body painter» (PAI in the car industry).
- *Occupational reorientation*: work in an occupation other than the current PAI field. Examples: «I want to work as a dental assistant» (PAI in housekeeping); «As a gardener» (PAI in the construction sector)
- *Further IVET qualification*: work that requires an alternative or additional IVET qualification—in an occupational field that differs from the one associated with the PAI or that builds on an existing IVET certificate (two-year apprenticeship) with an IVET diploma (three- or four-year apprenticeship). Examples: "I would like to expand my work – either as a crane operator or a lorry driver» (PAI in the construction sector); «As a cook or pastry chef» (PAI in hospitality, post-PAI IVET as kitchen assistant)
- *Higher education degree*: work that requires a higher vocational or academic qualification (tertiary A or B). Examples: «In ten years, I see myself as an architect or civil engineer»; «Work as a physics and mathematics teacher».
- *Self-employment/entrepreneurship*: working in one's own business. Examples: «I will establish my own business, either a carpentry shop or a hair salon»; «I would like to have my own business and be my own boss».
- *Leadership*: work in a leadership position, be "a chef". Examples: «I want to be a store manager»; «Work as head chef».
- *Well-being and fulfilment*: have decent work, a good life. Examples: «A good job»; «A healthy life».
- *Uncertainty*. Participants that expressed not being confident about what to work. Examples: «I don't know»; «I can't say anything about my future at this moment»; «I'm not sure yet».

The results show that many participants wish to remain in their occupational field (62%). One-sixth (17%) envisioned themselves working in an occupational field that differed from their PAI field and/or in roles that require further IVET (19%) or tertiary qualifications (13%) (Figure 1). One in ten participants aimed to start their own business or wished to pursue a leadership role as an employee in a company. An equal share of participants connected their career aspirations to broader goals such as workplace well-being and self-care. A significant proportion (9%) remained uncertain about their future.

The responses of most participants could be assigned to one (55%) or two (38%) categories. The others listed aspirations that covered three (6%) or more (1%) dimensions. Participants whose aspirations covered more than one dimension referred most often to staying in or changing the occupational field, combined with the aspiration to acquire another qualification, run their own business or take up a leadership position.

Figure 1
Refugees' Career Aspirations in 10 Years



Note. Source: Participants' surveys, cohorts 1 to 5, years 2019 to 2023; multiple responses are possible

3.2 Aspirations, Individual Characteristics and PAI Experiences

The second research question examined whether particular aspirations were more common among specific groups of refugees. Focusing on occupational stability versus change, educational qualifications, and uncertainty, we explored how these are linked to participants' age, family situation, work-related interest, supervisor support, and satisfaction with the PAI. Significant results are briefly described below.

Occupational stability. Participants who wished to remain in their current occupational field tended to be older and more often married with children. They reported greater interest in their work, more frequently felt they could learn a lot, and received better support from their supervisor. Generally, they were more satisfied with the PAI field than participants who did not mention wanting to stay in the PAI field.

Occupational reorientation. Participants who emphasised a desire to change to another occupational field were often younger, single, and without children. They perceived their work as less interesting and less often reported that they could learn a lot. Overall, they were less satisfied with the PAI than participants who did not explicitly plan to move to another occupational field.

Further upper secondary qualification. Participants who aspired to obtain a (further) IVET qualification did not differ in any of the examined characteristics from those who did not mention this aspiration.

Higher education degree. Participants who aspired to obtain a higher education degree—whether vocational or academic—were more often younger, female, and (still) living with their families. Regarding their learning experiences in the PAI, they did not differ from other participants.

Uncertainty. Participants who expressed uncertainty about their future were younger, often single, and without children. They found their work less enjoyable, indicated less often that it was conducive to learning, and reported feeling less healthy. In general, they were less satisfied with the PAI than participants who did not mention being insecure about their future.

3.3 Aspirations and post-PAI pathways

The third research question focuses on participants' post-PAI pathways. We examined the aspirations of stayers (i.e., those continuing VET and starting a two-year or three-/four-year

apprenticeship) compared to leavers (e.g., those dropping out from VET, starting employment, or becoming NEET).

Results based on cantonal administrative data revealed that 71% of the surveyed refugees engaged in VET after the PAI (stayers). Over half (53%) started with a two-year apprenticeship, and 18% with a three- or four-year apprenticeship. 27% of the participants did not enrol in an apprenticeship or another certifying upper secondary programme (dropouts). Some attended another bridging offer (9%), others started to work (5%), but many did not have a follow-up solution (16%, including those of whom the cantonal authorities did not have any information about their post-PAI pathway).

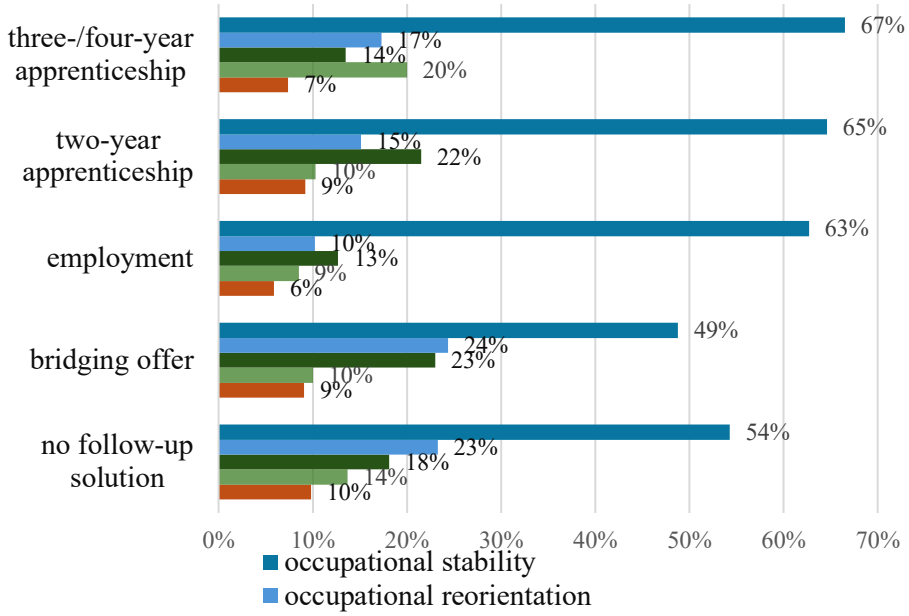
Regarding occupational stability versus change, educational aspirations, and uncertainty, results show that aspirations are noticeably linked to participants' educational pathways after the PAI (Figure 2).

While occupational stability was valued across all refugee groups, those continuing their VET pathway through an apprenticeship were significantly more likely to intend to remain in the occupational field of their PAI in ten years (65% resp. 67%). Among them, those who entered a two-year apprenticeship more frequently than others expressed the intention to work in an occupation requiring an additional VET qualification—often referring to the goal of obtaining a VET diploma (three- or four-year apprenticeship) after completing their initial two-year VET certificate. In contrast, participants in a three- or four-year apprenticeship more often aspired to work in a qualified position that requires a higher vocational education degree.

The aspirations of refugees who did not continue in apprenticeships ("dropouts") differed only partially from the stayers' aspirations. Those who entered another bridging programme or had no follow-up solution were more likely to indicate a desire to switch to a different occupational field and less likely to express the intention to stay in their PAI field. Those who started directly with a job unrelated to education or training did not differ significantly in their aspirations from participants in other pathways. Interestingly, the uncertainty about future plans was not significantly related to pathways: the share of participants who reported not knowing what they wanted to work in ten years ranged between 6% and 10% in all pathways.

Figure 2

Refugees' Aspirations and Post-PAI Pathways



Note. Source: Participants' surveys and cantonal administrative data, cohorts 1 to 5, years 2019 to 2023

4 Conclusion

Refugees expressed diverse long-term career aspirations, including staying in their current occupational field, reorienting to a new one, pursuing further IVET or higher education, entrepreneurship, leadership, well-being, or expressing uncertainty. Aspirations were linked to age, family status, work interest, and satisfaction with the PAI and post-PAI pathways. Stayers—those continuing in VET—were more likely to want to remain in the PAI field. Two-year apprenticeships were often associated with plans for further IVET, three- or four-year apprenticeships with higher education. Dropouts more often sought change. Uncertainty about future careers was not related to post-PAI pathways.

The high proportion of participants who wish to remain in their occupational field highlights that many companies and schools have succeeded in motivating them for their chosen occupational area and preparing them well for an apprenticeship. The fact that some participants envision themselves in positions requiring an additional qualification indicates a willingness to pursue further training and an awareness that the Swiss VET system offers such opportunities. That aspirations are linked to family background and age confirms previous findings. Like other learners, refugees with family responsibilities are more likely to be under pressure to qualify quickly (i.e. without interruption) and to enter employment. The result that only a few refugees transition directly into unskilled jobs is encouraging—additional analyses show that most respondents consider it important to obtain a VET qualification. For those who, for the time being, must do another year in a bridging offer, it will be necessary to examine whether they can transition to IVET at a later stage.

One limitation is that this study only includes participants who completed the PAI. It is possible that among those who did not finish the programme, there might be more individuals with poorer resources (e.g., language skills, social support), individuals who were unable to pursue their occupational interests or had to drop out from the PAI early due to personal or family reasons—and who, as a result, did not enter vocational education and training.

For those who complete the PAI, the overall outcome is predominantly positive. The federal government's goal of preparing refugees for vocational education and training through a one-year pre-vocational programme and offering them a long-term career perspective can be achieved for most participants. Whether the aspirations of the refugees can ultimately be realised remains to be seen. For now, the focus is on successfully starting, continuing and completing the apprenticeship.

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