

Hautz, H., Junmin, L., & Helms Jørgensen, C. (2021). Access and barriers to VET for refugees – a comparison of Austria, Denmark and Germany. In C. Nägele, B.E. Stalder, & M. Weich (Eds.), *Pathways in Vocational Education and Training and Lifelong Learning. Proceedings of the 4th Crossing Boundaries Conference in Vocational Education and Training, MuttENZ and Bern online*, 8. – 9. April (pp. 147–152). European Research Network on Vocational Education and Training, VETNET, University of Applied Sciences and Arts Northwestern Switzerland and Bern University of Teacher Education. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4563022>

Access and Barriers to Vet for Refugees – A Comparison of Austria, Denmark and Germany

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Abstract

Vocational education and training (VET) plays a crucial role in refugees' social inclusion. This paper aims to examine how the VET systems of Austria, Denmark and Germany responded to the arrival of refugees since 2015. The study investigates the research question on two levels. At the political level, refugee integration policy in the three countries is analysed. At the operational level, the experiences of practitioners who implement these VET policy measures are examined using qualitative interviews. The analysis reveals substantial differences in the access to VET for refugees between the investigated countries. In Austria and Denmark, refugees have only a few opportunities for getting access to regular VET programmes and experience social and institutional exclusion leading to the fact that successful participation in VET is only possible in individual cases. On the contrary, Germany enhanced access to apprenticeships for asylum seekers and introduced various initiatives to support refugees' integration. Nevertheless, barriers for refugees at the operational level are also evident in Germany. Comprehensive support measures are necessary for all three countries to help refugees overcome various barriers that result from their disadvantaged position in VET.

Keywords

refugees, social inclusion, VET system, access to VET, barrier

1 Introduction

An inclusive vocational education and training (VET) system is a key to decrease social inequalities and offset the growing dualisation of labour markets (Busemeyer, 2014). Therefore, in many European countries, VET participation is one of the promising factors for successfully integrating refugees into education and employment. VET provides specific skills relevant to the labour market and offers a viable pathway to employment. VET systems centre on practical learning, and consequently, refugees can acquire vocational skills with limited mastery of the native language. From their countries of origin, they often have work experiences that may be recognised in VET. During work-based learning in VET, refugees can enter the labour market, which is the precondition for a self-determined life in the host country (Neuhoff, 2015).



Prior research, however, indicates that immigrants are disadvantaged in the education systems in Europe (Hillmert, 2013). Generally, immigrants have lower achievement and higher dropout rates at the upper secondary level and a higher risk of not being in employment, education or training (Dicks et al., 2019; Eurostat, 2019). Especially the group of refugees is in many European countries “extremely marginalised and as such tends to be ignored by traditional VET and integration policies” (Gag et al., 2013, p. 288). This situation makes it relevant to ask if the VET systems in the receiving countries can include refugees and support their social integration and transition to the labour market.

The paper examines and compares how the VET systems of Austria, Denmark and Germany responded to the arrival of high numbers of asylum seekers in 2015 and the subsequent years. The study explores the opportunities offered by VET for refugees and the barriers that they encounter in each national VET system. The paper discusses the various capacities of the three national VET systems to include refugees in the findings section. These capacities are taken as an indicator of these VET systems’ current strength in dealing with vulnerable groups and the risk of labour market dualisation.

2 Research design

The study’s central aim is to compare access and barriers to refugees’ participation and completion of VET in Austria, Denmark, and Germany. All three countries have a VET system with both an apprenticeship and a full-time school structure (e.g., Hippach-Schneider & Huismann, 2019; Jørgensen, 2018; Lassnigg, 2011), and their VET systems are categorised as systems of collective skill formation (Busemeyer & Trampusch, 2012). The study investigates the research question on two levels. At the political level, the refugee integration policy in the three countries is analysed to focus on access to VET and the labour market. At the operational level, the experiences of practitioners who implement these VET policy measures are examined. For this purpose, we conducted both a qualitative analysis of policy documents (Prior, 2003) and qualitative problem-centered interviews (Witzel, 2000) with key actors in VET for refugees in each country.

We investigated the legal and educational policy framework regarding access to VET for refugees in a first step. We selected and analysed relevant policy documents for each country through a semi-structured analysis sheet to work systematically and comparably based on a comprehensive literature review. The findings of the document analysis enabled a comparison of the legal access regulations to VET for refugees. However, structural and social factors influence refugees’ opportunities to access and complete VET programmes. Therefore, we conducted a total of 18 qualitative problem-centered interviews on barriers and possibilities of actual participation in VET with managers of VET programmes for refugees and with experts in refugee integration.

The analysis method used for both the interviews and the documents examined was the content analysis, according to Mayring (2014). We carried out the categorisation based on a combination of deductive and inductive procedures. Main categories were determined during the literature review and subsequently modified and supplemented by categories inductively derived from the data. The findings of the analysis were divided into six categories: admission requirements, language training, validation of prior learning, vocational guidance, social support and access to apprenticeships.

3 Findings

The analysis reveals substantial differences in the access to VET for refugees between the investigated countries. In Austria and Denmark, the government’s response to the ‘refugee crisis’ introduced many anti-immigration measures. These policies have rendered the future more un-

certain for refugees and made it less appealing to take up education with a long-term perspective. It has also reduced the inclination of employers to take on refugees in apprenticeships. Especially asylum seekers have been disadvantaged and excluded from VET in Austria and Denmark. Currently, there is no legal access to apprenticeships for asylum seekers in these two countries.

In contrast, in Germany, asylum seekers are legally allowed to start and complete an apprenticeship without being threatened with repatriation. They can receive the benefits of vocational orientation and career entry assistance regardless of the length of stay without special requirements under the law on foreigners. If asylum seekers are recognised and receive a residence permit, they acquire most of the same formal rights to education and training as native citizens in Austria, Denmark and Germany. However, there are considerable barriers to VET participation even without legal access restrictions for all three countries. The findings show structural disadvantages of the target group. In addition to general barriers, such as resettlement and acculturation stress due to family separation, discrimination and the insecure situation in the host country (see also Bauböck & Tripkovic, 2017; Rummens et al., 2008), refugees face various specific challenges in VET.

The *admission requirements* for VET differ not only between countries but even within a single country. Access to VET in Denmark and full-time VET schools in Austria requires a successful school graduation certificate, which many refugees cannot prove. For access to the dual system in Austria and Germany, compulsory education is needed. Apprenticeship companies determine further admission requirements based on their criteria. Due to incomplete primary education and insufficient language skills, it can generally be challenging for refugees to meet the entrance requirements in VET.

Especially in Austria and Denmark, inadequate language skills make VET almost inaccessible for refugees because, during the asylum process, *language training* is available only to a limited extent for asylum seekers beyond the age of compulsory schooling. The mandatory language courses for recognised refugees in Austria are usually only offered to language level A2 and, therefore, provide limited support for starting and completing a VET programme. More advanced German courses are mostly not provided free of charge and continuously vary, depending on funding (Rabl & Hartz, 2018). In Denmark, asylum seekers must participate in 10 hours of weekly Danish language training. However, the level of language training is far below the entrance requirements for IVET, and the early compulsory job training (work first policy) weakens the refugees' Danish language skills (Arendt & Bolvig, 2020). In Germany, the government has implemented various mandatory language support measures, e.g., the so-called integration courses (BAMF, 2016). The language courses' quality suffers partly from the lack of teachers and the providers' poor standards (Kaufmann, 2016).

Many refugees have existing qualifications or occupational experiences, which could shorten their way to occupational certification in VET. However, in none of the three countries, *validation and recognition of refugees' prior learning* are standard parts of the VET programmes. Moreover, studies show (e.g., Eggenhofer-Rehart et al., 2018) that refugees' educational certificates are largely devalued by authorities and assigned to lower domestic education levels.

Vocational preparation and guidance are essential for integrating refugees, as they inform the refugees about the host country's VET system and potentially reduces dropouts (Rummens et al., 2008). In all three countries, preparatory vocational courses for refugees are part of the integration programme. In Austria, vocational preparation and guidance are offered as part of the integration year for recognised refugees and Syrian asylum-seekers with expected residence permission who have completed compulsory schooling (AMS, 2020). Asylum seekers who are not from Syria, however, are excluded from this offer. In Denmark, only limited vocational guidance for refugees is included as part of the standard integration plan for the three- to six-

week introduction courses and the following repeated internships in companies, which are typically 13 weeks (Bolvig & Arendt, 2018). In Germany, preparatory vocational courses for refugees are available in some vocational schools for school-aged refugees. Companies and other IVET providers can apply for funding for preparatory courses for non-school-age refugees.

To start a VET programme and complete it, refugees require intensive preparation and support during education and training. In Austria and Denmark, the *social support* offered for refugees during VET differ considerably between the municipalities and the educational institutions (e.g., Asylkoordination Österreich, 2020; Bolvig & Arendt, 2018). In Austria, the continued existence of most social support measures depends on the efforts of volunteers and NGOs (Rabl & Hautz, 2018). In Denmark, many support initiatives were abandoned after 2016. A comprehensive nationwide support system, which would help refugees replace a missing social and family environment, does not exist in either of these countries. In Germany, various measures help companies integrate refugees; for example, the external support measure *assistance during training*. However, many companies are not aware of these support measures (Werner, 2018).

Refugees have fewer chances than other young people to obtain an apprenticeship contract because many apprenticeship places are distributed via informal social networks. Employers are partly cautious about taking on ethnic minorities due to perceived cultural and language barriers (see Phillimore & Goodson, 2006). Refugees are clearly at a disadvantage compared to native students in all three countries examined. In most cases, *access to an apprenticeship* in Austria is only successful if social workers and volunteers give refugees intensive support in finding and applying for an apprenticeship, in bureaucratic matters and finding accommodation (SOS Mitmensch, 2017). Access to an apprenticeship for refugees is also difficult in Denmark, although vocational schools offer support in finding an apprenticeship place. In the special apprenticeship programme for refugees, the IGU, many vocational schools and municipalities cooperate with employers to offer the refugees training placements in comprehensive two-year programmes (Rambøll, 2018). In Germany, refugees have a greater chance of finding a training place in companies with a shortage of skilled workers. Although there are various support measures for integrating refugees in Germany, companies' experience with immigrants seems to play the most critical role in access to apprenticeships for refugees (Pierenkemper, 2019).

4 Conclusion

This paper examines how three European VET systems responded to the large influx of refugees in the last five years. Although all three VET systems have structural similarities and are characterised as systems of collective skill formation (Busemeyer & Trampusch, 2012), the comparison shows significant differences in refugees' integration. In Austria and Denmark, refugees have only a few opportunities for getting access to regular VET programmes. Asylum seekers are not allowed to start an apprenticeship. Moreover, refugees experience social and institutional exclusion mechanisms leading to the fact that successful participation in VET is only possible in individual cases in these two countries. While Austria and Denmark restricted the possibilities for refugees in VET, Germany opened access to apprenticeships for asylum seekers and introduced various initiatives to support refugees' integration. Nevertheless, barriers for refugees at the operational level are also evident in Germany.

Overall, our study shows that comprehensive support measures are necessary for all three countries to help refugees overcome various barriers that result from their disadvantaged position in VET. In particular, sufficient language training, comprehensive social support, recognition of prior learning, and adequate vocational guidance are crucial for improving refugees' precarious situation and enhancing their social inclusion. VET programme providers also require a support system to better meet refugees' needs and value their existing competences.

These aspects are essential to give refugees the possibility of a self-determined life and reduce the dualisation of the labour market.

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