

THEMATIC PAPER: APPRENTICESHIP

Bringing refugees into vocational education and training: The challenges of a pre-apprenticeship program for integration in Switzerland

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the evolution of a Pre-Apprenticeship program for Integration (PAI) designed to prepare refugees for vocational education and training (VET) in two French speaking Swiss cantons. Addressing the research questions of "Which aspects have prompted the changes to the structure of PAI" and "What structural and conceptual factors have influenced these changes", the study uses qualitative interviews with PAI experts and document analysis to understand program challenges and adaptations. Results highlight structural differences in program implementation, such as the degree of integration with vocational schools and different models of individual support. Challenges identified include inter-institutional collaboration, communication with companies and addressing the highly varied learning needs of PAI apprentices, particularly in language skills and some specific transversal skills development. Adaptations reflect efforts to balance general skills development with trade-specific knowledge, revealing the complexities of integrating refugees into the Swiss VET system within a short timeframe.

Key words: pre-apprenticeship for integration, refugees, skills development, program adaptation

INTRODUCTION AND RESEARCH QUESTION

As in many European countries, integrating refugees into the labor market has become an important concern in Switzerland in recent years (Bonoli & Wilson, 2019). The Swiss government aims to improve participation in the labor market and reduce dependence on social assistance, while also alleviating the shortage of skilled labor by better integrating refugees into initial vocational education and training (VET; Aerne & Bonoli, 2023). To this end, a "pre-apprenticeship program for integration" (PAI) has been developed to guide and support refugees with a specific profile, namely non-native speaking without upper-secondary qualifications, towards initial VET (Scharnhorst & Kammermann, 2019).

A research project at Swiss Federal University of VET (Switzerland), funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (N°100017_215130), analyses how training companies guide PAI apprentices. It also examines whether and how this guidance supports apprentices' development of agency at work, in training, and in their daily lives (Felder *et al.*, 2024). In this paper, we focus on the structural aspects of the PAI and the adaptation processes in two French speaking Swiss cantons. We address the following research questions: "Which aspects have prompted the changes to the structure of PAI" and "What structural and conceptual factors have influenced these changes". Our choice to present the programs of two cantons is motivated by the differences between them and by their distinctive implementation and adaptation since 2018.

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METHODS AND RESEARCH DESIGN

This paper is part of a project based on qualitative interviews with in-company trainers (40) and former PAI apprentices (22). Data collection is ongoing, as we will conduct group discussions with PAI apprentices (3) and professional practice analysis groups with in-company trainers (6). To gain a broad understanding of the PAI context and the implications of guidance in four cantons, we also conducted interviews with the experts (14) in charge of coordinating the PAI in terms of organization and inter-institutional collaboration, individual guidance of PAI apprentices and pedagogical coordination. A review of documents describing the specific PAI program in each canton and the expert interviews provided a detailed and systematic overview of the specificity of cantonal contexts. Those sources cover how the PAI program was implemented and operated, how institutions work together, what organizational issues emerged and how the program was continuously adapted to refugees' needs. For this study, we focus on data from two cantons and investigate the changes and evolution of their organization, collaboration and teaching content since 2018, highlighting the major challenges for guidance and support for foreign-speaking refugees in VET. Thematic analysis was used to identify significant factors influencing these changes.

THE PAI IN TWO CANTONS: THE COMMON AND THE SPECIFIC

The guidelines for the PAI program are set by the Swiss government ([Secrétariat d'État aux, 2025](#)). It is a one-year program designed to prepare apprentices for VET leading to an upper-secondary qualification. Based on the dual apprenticeship structure, it focuses on professional vocabulary and everyday language skills as well as basic skills classes (often mathematics, information technology [IT], general knowledge and vocational theory) at school. Additionally, PAI apprentices work in a company and, in certain cantons and trades, participate in inter-company courses at branch centers ([Stalder et al., 2024](#)).

PAI structures differ between cantons ([Busse et al., 2024](#)), e.g., in the number of days participants spend at vocational school. In these two cantons, this point is actually the common feature, with PAI apprentices spending two days in school and three days in the company.

In addition, both have implemented individualized support for PAI apprentices from a mentor, ensuring regular contact and exchange between the main people involved: The mentor organizes frequent meetings with the PAI apprentice, the teachers in the schools and the

in-company trainer. However, these mentors are institutionally attached to different bodies and have different roles: In canton A, they are vocational advisers employed by the department in charge of the PAI and are responsible for canvassing companies and selecting candidates. Canton B specializes in providing coaches for PAI apprentices who are not part of the PAI management structures. They deal mainly with the individual support of PAI apprentices, including the organization of individual school support.

An important difference lies in the way the PAI is integrated into initial vocational training. Whereas canton A has set it up as a separate transition program, canton B has opted to treat it as a year-long extension to the initial VET program. In this instance, the apprentices sign an apprenticeship contract for the entire duration of their initial vocational training, with a one-year extension to learn the language and get in shape. In canton A, as in all the other cantons offering PAI, a contract is signed with the company for one year. After this period, it remains open whether the company will hire the apprentice for the duration of the initial VET or if the apprentice will have to find a new company. Another difference, stemming from the latter, is that PAI candidates have access to all trades offered in initial VET in canton B, whereas not all trades are offered in the PAI program in canton A.

At the institutional level, the PAI in canton A is attached to the office for vocational guidance, and in canton B to the general direction of post-compulsory education. As a result canton B has been committed to offering its classes in vocational schools, whereas canton A is faced with the specific challenge of being completely separated from vocational schools. Here, apprentices aged 18-22 attend classes in a school hosting other transitional measures for young people without post-compulsory training solutions. Those aged 22-35 attend a continuing education establishment for foreign-speaking adults. At present, there are virtually no links or exchanges with vocational schools in this canton.

CHALLENGES AND RATIONALES FOR ADAPTATIONS

Structural challenges, inter-institutional collaboration and communication with companies

The choice of institutional attachment raises challenges in both cantons and often requires inter-institutional negotiations of varying effectiveness. The separation from the VET sector in canton A requires additional efforts to ensure the connections with trades. There is a lack of dialogue with vocational schools and trade organizations to define and adapt curricula for PAI classes.

However, plans have been drawn up for in-company training with the involvement of vocational advisers and efforts to include trade organizations. The individualized support for PAI apprentices by these mentors ensures a regular exchange between stakeholders and a flow of information between the apprentices, the school and the company. Nonetheless, difficulties persist regarding school subjects, where to date there have been no significant exchanges with vocational schools, let alone coordination on teaching content. This lack of a formal link also poses a challenge when it comes to recruiting companies to engage PAI apprentices. Here, too, a considerable effort is made by the advisers each year to find new companies and retain those already engaged in PAI. This mainly involves paying particular attention to the selection of PAI apprentices, as well as regular exchanges between all involved stakeholders, to guide and support the trainers and employers in their roles throughout the year. For canton B, which implemented the program since its beginnings in vocational schools, a major challenge is the acceptance of the program as a valid option to prepare for initial VET. Another challenge was to find teachers who know how to adapt to the specific needs of refugee apprentices, *e.g.*, with skills in teaching French as a foreign language and in basic teaching of vocational subjects. However, in this canton, the PAI program is now better known, and some allophone candidates for VET are redirected to a PAI by teachers at vocational schools if they evaluate the candidates' language skills as being too low for a VET program.

Learning processes and skills development in PAI schools

A major challenge in the PAI program is the wide range of academic skill levels among apprentices. Interviews with PAI experts also show that learning the French language is a big issue when preparing PAI apprentices for VET. Several factors contribute to this, including past schooling (regularity, school system in the country where they grew up, how they "learned to learn") and traumatic experiences before and during displacement. Additionally, their current living situation (living in a home, administrative problems, worries about relatives) plays a pivotal role in their ability to learn a new language. Since the introduction of PAI, recommendations have been made in both cantons regarding the selection of candidates according to their level of language skills and their "overall readiness" to embark on a learning process for VET. The cantons also noticed a variation in the results of the language tests, which did not always reliably reflect the level of oral and written comprehension. This has led to greater attention being paid to the language level requirements for PAI.

Several interviews testify that it requires a huge effort for

PAI apprentices to meet the expectations to enter VET. This is due to the language level, on the one hand, and their lack of knowledge about the Swiss education and VET systems and the mechanisms of the labor market, on the other. This shows that learning is not just a question of language or school matters but encompasses broader issues, including knowledge and comprehension of the educational system, social skills (how to interact in the workplace) and individual learning skills (how to organize learning at home). The challenge of acquiring all of this in the course of one PAI year is huge. Aiming to address the lack of links of the PAI program with vocational schools, one of the PAI schools in canton A specifically developed cross-curricular skills and training to enable citizen participation by organizing regular workshops and group work in these subjects.

Given the heterogeneity of the PAI apprentices, each school entity has seen a change in the criteria for allocating apprentices to classes. In the beginning, all the schools wanted to distinguish classes by trade or occupational field to bring participants as close as possible to the vocabulary and knowledge of the trade and the specific areas of work. This classification was abandoned since it was not conclusive: Teaching was complicated by the overly wide range of levels in the classes and the ever-increasing heterogeneity of the trades, which made grouping by trade difficult. However, canton B has maintained a certain orientation towards vocational sectors by allocating classes to vocational schools that partly represent vocational sectors (construction, technical or service trades). All the schools began by introducing level classes, generally based on the level of language proficiency (in one case, the level of oral expression, in another, the level of written proficiency). In one school in canton A, the decision was taken to divide classes according to mathematical skill level, as experience had shown that learners' mathematical skills were indicative of their general learning abilities.

CONCLUSION

The challenges met by the two cantons in developing and adapting the PAI program reflect the broader stake of integrating refugees into VET (Phillimore, 2021). The political and institutional contexts at both the national and regional levels constitute a basis presenting opportunities and obstacles to the development of an effective guidance practice (Hynie, 2018). One important challenge for the PAI program is being accepted as a full part of the VET system by the VET institutions. Concerning guidance practices, the contradiction between the time needed for the skills development of people with a refugee background and the political objective to rapidly integrate refugees into the labor market is one important aspect (Otmami, 2024). In these preparatory VET classes, a key question is whether to prioritize cross-disciplinary skills and general agency or

focus on trade-specific vocabulary and theoretical skills. These concerns have led to ongoing adjustments, as neither an education that lacks specific links with the trade nor one that is overly focused on the profession fulfils the expectation of insuring the PAI apprentices are "up to standard" in the short span of a year. Thus, each canton has made changes to improve teaching and guide PAI apprentices successfully through to the end of their apprenticeship.

DECLARATIONS

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Author contributions

Felder A: Conceptualization, Data curation, Methodology, Validation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing—Original draft, Writing—Review and Editing, Visualization, Supervision, Project administration, and Funding acquisition. Fedrigo L: Methodology, Validation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing—Review and Editing. Caprani I: Conceptualization, Data curation, Methodology, Validation, Writing—Review and Editing, Project administration, and Funding acquisition. Kammermann M: Methodology, Validation, Writing—Review and Editing. All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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Ethical approval

The study protocol was approved by Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF).

Informed consent

The participants were informed that the interview data were only used for research purposes, and their information would be anonymized when presenting the research result. Moreover, they are also allowed to stop the recording at any moment during the interview, and they can refuse to respond to any question asked during the review.

Conflict of interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

Use of large language models, AI and machine learning tools

None.

Data availability statement

Data used to support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon request.

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