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Editorial: Migration and successful inclusion – The role of vocational education and training

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Introduction

The integration and inclusion of migrants have become a significant priority for European countries, especially as migration has become central in policy, media, and public discourse, even though in some countries it is a highly debated and politicised issue. Many countries aim to integrate migrants in the society and economy by facilitating their access to vocational education training (VET) and employment. However, despite these efforts, challenges remain. A study on the Nordic countries, for instance, highlighted persistent difficulties in integrating migrants into labour markets (Calmfors & Sánchez Gassen, 2019). Whereas a study in Switzerland (Stalder et al., 2024) argue that pre-apprenticeship is needed for supporting integration in the economy. Contributions in this special issue present research that, in different ways and contexts, addresses the role of VET in the successful integration of migrants.

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Reinforcing the interest in inclusion at the macro level, the countries involved in the special issue have as a reference, to various degrees, the European Commission's *Action plan on integration and inclusion 2021–2027*, which underscores the importance of inclusive education and training, language learning, and the recognition of qualifications to promote employment opportunities. It emphasises labour market integration, particularly for women, and aims to foster skills recognition across Europe (European Commission, 2020). Despite such initiatives, the academic and political debate continues to address the barriers migrants face in the labour market, such as discrimination, lack of social capital, language proficiency, and undervalued qualifications or work experience from their home country (Heath & Cheung, 2007; Laczik & Lasonen, 2010). These barriers place migrants at a disadvantage in Western societies, often leading to their economic marginalisation (Laczik, 2014).

The role of vocational education and training

VET has been identified as a key mechanism to bridge these gaps, offering pathways for migrants to acquire relevant skills that would lead to their integration into the labour market. VET provisions, including pre-apprenticeships and language development programmes, can serve as enabling ecosystems where stakeholders such as VET schools, enterprises, and local communities work collaboratively to support migrants (Aerne & Bonoli, 2023; Spours & Grainger, 2018). Such ecosystems create opportunities for skill development, facilitate social integration, and enable migrants to navigate their careers successfully (Stalder et al., 2024).

An essential factor for the success of VET programmes is the recognition of prior learning and qualifications, which are often undervalued or misunderstood in the host countries (Laczik, 2014). This mismatch can result in migrants being relegated to lower-level VET and low-skill jobs despite possessing higher-level qualifications or experience. Where effective recognition of prior learning system is in place, which couples with targeted skill development programmes, this can help bridge this gap. This allows migrants to contribute meaningfully to their new communities while achieving personal and professional growth.

Challenges and opportunities across Europe

The historical and structural context of VET systems plays a crucial role in understanding challenges and opportunities. For example, Switzerland's dual VET system combines employer-based apprenticeships with vocational schooling, Sweden's state-regulated model integrates VET with broader educational frameworks, and Poland's statist VET regime relies heavily on public sector involvement (Broberg, 2016). These systems have evolved in response to

economic and technological changes, as well as shifting migration patterns. The war in Ukraine and the subsequent migration crisis further highlight the need for adaptive and supportive VET strategies across Europe.

Germany and Sweden, with their long histories of immigration, have developed robust frameworks for integrating migrants into their VET systems. The dual systems in Germany and Switzerland, for example, provide a structured pathway for migrants to gain both theoretical knowledge and practical skills, facilitating smoother transitions into the workforce (Brücker et al., 2021; Stalder et al., 2024). Sweden's emphasis on inclusive education and centralised regulation aims to create a level playing field, though challenges remain in addressing systemic discrimination and unequal access (Rosvall et al., 2018). In contrast, Poland's transition from an emigrant-sending to an immigrant-receiving country has prompted significant reforms in its VET system to accommodate the influx of migrants, particularly from Ukraine and Belarus. These reforms include targeted apprenticeship programmes and aligning qualifications frameworks with European standards. Switzerland offers another interesting case with its pre-apprenticeship programmes designed specifically for fostering migrant integration. These programmes provide foundational skills and language training, preparing participants to enter regular apprenticeships (Stalder et al., 2024). Such initiatives highlight the importance of tailored interventions that address the unique needs and challenges of migrant populations.

Success stories and facilitating factors for inclusion

While much of the discourse around migration focuses on barriers and challenges, it is equally important to examine success stories and the factors contributing to positive outcomes. Migrants who successfully integrate into their host countries often share common characteristics, such as resilience, adaptability, and access to supportive networks, resources and opportunity structures on societal level (Eliasson, et al., 2022). Educational pathways are critical in these success stories, providing the skills and credentials necessary to navigate competitive labour markets (Laczik, 2014).

For instance, Norway's initiatives to facilitate professional licensing for migrants, such as driver's licenses, have effectively opened up new career opportunities. Similarly, Sweden's targeted support for underrepresented groups in VET have helped bridge gaps in access and equity. These programmes emphasise the importance of language acquisition, mentorship, and employer engagement, creating a comprehensive support system for migrants.

The concept of enabling ecosystems

The concept of enabling ecosystems is particularly relevant in understanding how individuals, networks, and institutions work together to enhance migrant integration. These ecosystems involve collaboration among various stakeholders, including educational institutions, employers, community organizations, and local and national government agencies (Spours & Grainger, 2018). By fostering communication and cooperation, enabling ecosystems create environments where migrants can thrive socially and economically.

For example, Austria and England have implemented social ecosystem models integrating VET with community support services. These models address skill development and broader aspects of social integration, such as housing, healthcare, and cultural adaptation. Such holistic approaches recognise that successful integration extends beyond employment, encompassing all facets of a migrant's life.

Future directions and policy implications

The findings presented in this special issue have significant implications for policy and practice. First, there is a need for more research on the intersection of VET and migration, particularly in non-Anglophone contexts (McPherson et al., 2024). Comparative studies can illuminate best practices and innovative approaches, providing valuable insights for policymakers and practitioners. Second, targeted investments in VET infrastructure and support services are crucial for addressing systemic barriers and promoting equity. Such investments include funding for language courses, targeted VET programmes, mentoring, and employer partnerships.

Finally, the role of European education policy tools, such as qualifications frameworks and lifelong learning initiatives, cannot be overstated. These tools provide a foundation for harmonising standards across countries, facilitating the recognition of migrant qualifications, and promoting mobility within the European labour market. By leveraging these tools, European countries can create more inclusive and dynamic VET systems that meet the needs of migrants and employers.

Concluding remarks

The integration of migrants into education and work is both a challenge and an opportunity for European societies. By addressing barriers and leveraging the potential of VET systems, stakeholders can create pathways to success for migrants, fostering social and economic inclusion. Articles in this special issue aim to be a platform for sharing knowledge and experiences from different

contexts, contributing to a deeper understanding of what works and why. Ultimately, the goal is to build more inclusive societies where everyone has the opportunity to thrive.

The articles in this special issue bring together research examining these challenges, focusing on Germany, UK, Norway, Poland, Sweden, and Switzerland, and explore how education and work can foster successful migrant inclusion.

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