

Designing and delivering pre-apprenticeships

Integration pre-apprenticeship
Switzerland



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Case study summary

The integration pre-apprenticeship¹ is a new national pilot initiative in Switzerland which was launched in 2018. The pre-apprenticeship targets young refugees and temporarily admitted persons to provide them with work experience and support to achieve their potential. This helps to facilitate their entry into the regular VET system in sectors where skills shortages have been identified.

The aim of the integration pre-apprenticeship is to provide participants with the necessary skills to progress to basic vocational training in a specific sector. The programme builds upon participants' previous experience and knowledge through sector specific training in competencies including language skills, basic literacy and numeracy, cultural values, and transversal skills.

This case study is an example of a high-quality preparatory programme targeted at refugees. It provides valuable insights into how VET systems can adapt to better integrate migrants into their countries, to achieve improved outcomes for both migrants and for economies. The lessons learned include how to address barriers facing migrant and refugee young people and make pre-apprenticeships more inclusive and flexible for diverse populations with different characteristics and needs.

¹ <https://www.sem.admin.ch/sem/de/home/themen/integration/ppnb/integrvorlehre-sprachfoerd.html>



Country context

The Swiss system of vocational education and training (VET) is geared to address labour market needs and integrated into the mainstream system. The ambition is that young people develop a broad range of skills that can be taken to any company, used for entry to Higher Education or to work towards a higher professional qualification. In Switzerland, the youth unemployment rate is low, averaging 3.5% from 2000-2019.

The Swiss education system is decentralised to 26 cantons that make decisions about what is taught within a basic overall framework. Lower Secondary Education, for children aged 11/12 (following primary school) lasts for three years. There is no national exam or school leaving certificate, although some cantons do set an exam. Following Lower Secondary Education, children move to Upper Secondary which is split into vocational and general education. The preparation for this starts at age 14, when students receive career counselling.

There are three types of Upper Secondary education: Vocational Education and Training (VET), Baccalaureate schools and Specialised Schools. One third of young people go to a Baccalaureate school. This provides a general education in preparation for university and lasts for three to six years depending on the canton (most usually four years). Admission is based on Lower Secondary school grades, teacher recommendation or an exam. Five per cent of young people go to Specialised Schools. These are school-based and provide a general education and preparation for professional education and training (PET) in specific occupations including healthcare, social work and education. The admission criteria to

these schools varies. Most students (up to two-thirds) enrol in Vocational Education and Training (VET), within which there are over 240 registered apprenticeships to choose from. These cover a wide range of sectors, across the economy including service, manufacturing, energy, software, agriculture, building and civil engineering.

Apprenticeships take between two and four years to complete. Most are 'dual track', combining classes at vocational school with on the job training with a host company, that employs them. The majority of the time is spent in the workplace (three to four days a week) and apprentices are paid for this time. Graduates leave (aged 18-20) with a federal certificate after two years, or a federal diploma after three to four years that is recognised by employers. In 2019 the vocational education and training statistics recorded 215,500 apprenticeships. The majority of these (around 95%) were vocational training with the federal VET diploma. Vocational training with the federal VET certificate accounted for a little more than 5%.

Apprenticeships in Switzerland offer flexibility with regard to future career options. At the end of the apprenticeship there is an exam for a VET Diploma which can be used to apply for jobs or entry to Higher Education (HE). The HE route includes technical and managerial positions. During the three to four-year VET programmes, students have the option of attending general education courses to prepare for the Federal Vocational Baccalaureate Examination. The government department responsible is the State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation (SERI). SERI works closely with the cantons (states) and professional organisations to coordinate VET. SERI is responsible for training regulations, development

of VET programmes and regulations for the Federal Vocational Baccalaureate.



Integration pre-apprenticeship for refugees in Switzerland

Evidence suggests that poor labour market outcomes for refugees are common, with individuals trapped outside of the labour market or in low-skilled employment. The employment rates of refugees are often lower than both the native population and other categories of migrants.

Whilst Switzerland already had a shorter and less demanding VET programme (2-years) that facilitates the entry of lower level learners, including refugees, into mainstream VET, it took an additional step by launching targeted pre-apprenticeship programmes for young refugees

and temporarily admitted persons. This integration pre-apprenticeship is a new national pilot initiative which was launched in 2018. It is an organised, national initiative, which directly targets young refugees and temporarily admitted persons who need work experience and support in order to achieve their potential and to facilitate their entry into the regular VET system in sectors where skills shortages have been identified.

Part of the government's national integration agenda, the programme is a partnership between cantons, professional organisations and vocational education and training institutions. It is designed to fast track the integration of recognised refugees and temporary admitted persons into the labour market.

Eighteen out of 26 Swiss cantons took part in the pilot, offering training to 750 refugees and asylum seekers. The aim was to help facilitate their integration into Switzerland by preparing participants to enter an apprenticeship.

Out of the 750 young people who began the pilot scheme, 610 completed the first year of pre-apprenticeship training. Of these, three-quarters progressed to a professional apprenticeship linked to a federal qualification.

In May 2019, the Swiss State Secretariat for Migration (SEM) decided to extend the pilot for two years (until 2024) and to extend the offer to non-asylum-seeking adolescents and young adults. Going forward, the integration pre-apprenticeship will support up to 1,500 people per year. The programme aims to foster the potential of participants, to support them into an apprenticeship, and reduce dependency on social welfare assistance.

The pre-apprenticeship is managed and delivered by Vocational Education and Training (VET) offices in the 18 participating cantons. Professional organisations act as project partners and vocational schools act as operational partners. The State Secretariat for Migration (SEM) establish frameworks for the pre-apprenticeship and provided support and guidance to cantons where needed. The SEM also fund the pre-apprenticeship, at a total cost of 13'000 Swiss Francs per participant. The remaining cost for the pre-apprenticeship is covered by the respective canton.

Aims and target group

The aim of the integration pre-apprenticeship is to provide refugees and temporarily admitted participants with the necessary basic skills to progress to basic vocational training in a specific sector. The aim is to build on participants' previous experience and knowledge through sector specific training in the following competencies.

- Language skills
- Basic skills of literacy and numeracy
- Standards and values (cultural competencies)
- Transversal skills (e.g. social and personal skills related to the occupational field)
- Technical skills knowledge related to the sector
- Work experience in a company in a desired sector

The programme aims to support participants to prepare for basic vocational education (2-, 3- or 4-year apprenticeship) and access to higher vocational education and training. The main target group is recognised refugees and provisionally admitted persons between the ages of 16 and approximately 35 who have some prior work experience and/or vocational training from their country of origin. To be accepted onto the programme applicants must meet the individual eligibility requirements for the pre-apprenticeship at the canton and be assessed as ready to engage with the full-time intensive programme. The SEM also welcomes other suitable target groups to the pre-apprenticeship; however, these places must be financed by the cantons themselves.

Prior to the integration pre-apprenticeship programme, all potential participants undergo an initial assessment in the local Cantons to determine their level of language, education and prior work experience. Then, they undertake a skills and sector experience assessment to determine their professional interest and potential and create an action plan to achieve it.

Those who meet the requirements (usually education or work experience in the country of origin and sufficient language skills) and are interested will be admitted to the integration pre-apprenticeship programme.

Figure 1

Continuous occupation related language development

1. Working in Switzerland, standards and values.
2. Personal, social and technical skills, contextualised to sector, delivered in classroom and work-based learning.
3. Work placement (at least 8 weeks).
4. Application training.



Model of delivery

The integration pre-apprenticeship is a one-year training programme in which participants attend full-time, Monday to Friday. Participants attend two days of classroom-based learning, and three days of work-based learning per week in a participating business or company.

The programme is made up of four key stages with ongoing intensive support to advance language and communication skills alongside other learning. **Figure 1** illustrates the core elements of the integration pre-apprenticeship. The programme can be designed to match any occupational field or sector in which training and employment companies have the need and interest to recruit participants for basic vocational training in the future, which in turn, increases the supply and demand for apprenticeships.

1. Working in Switzerland, standards and values

In the first stage of the programme, refugees participate in a module which provides them with an introduction to working life in Switzerland, including key occupation-related norms and values. Each canton works in close partnership with the integration agencies to develop the content of this module to ensure it is fit for purpose. The theoretical content of this module is contextualised to real-life examples of how they are applied in professional practice and learning around standards and values is continuously reinforced throughout the remainder of the programme. This is a key area of learning which is frequently reflected on in discussions between participants and tutors.

2. Development of personal, social, transversal and technical skills

Once participants have completed their introductory module on working in Switzerland, they progress to stage two which is focused on providing participants with key transversal, social and personal skills to support their progression to an apprenticeship. Participants are supported to develop these skills in a way that is contextualised to their sector of interest (i.e. the apprenticeship they would like to progress to) and participate in classroom based and work-based training.

The SEM provides a theoretical framework which outlines the key basic, transversal and sector specific competencies to be included in the pre-apprenticeship. This framework provides guidance on the training objectives and content of the modules, scope and duration, and the participating learning locations. Local cantons then flex and adapt the specific content of this to ensure it is a good match for their local vocational training and employment needs.

3. Work placement

Refugees are matched with an employer to undertake a work placement which provides them with their first labour market experience in Switzerland in their chosen sector and is an opportunity to consolidate their learning of key transversal and technical competencies in the work environment.

Participants enter the work placement once they have developed the key transversal, language, and technical skills including work-related norms and values. They are supported to develop

these skills in a practical and contextualised way throughout the programme.

Work placements last for at least eight weeks, however longer periods of work experience are possible and are preferred to provide refugees with optimum experience of the workplace. The work placement can also be delivered in a 'dual' model, given that participants spend two or three days per week in a company throughout the programme.

Refugees are paid during their work placement; however, the amount differs per placement and is dependent on individual canton's discretion and the length of the work placement.

Language lessons in the regional language (German, French, Italian)

Language development for refugees is central to the integration pre-apprenticeship and is delivered alongside the other pre-apprenticeship modules. Refugees are supported to develop their language skills throughout the programme. This is an intensive part of the programme whereby particular attention is paid to the typical vocabulary and expression used in their chosen sector. This helps to ensure participants can effectively and confidently communicate with colleagues and others in the workplace.

Towards the end or after completion of the integration pre-apprenticeship, participants register for a certificate of language qualification. Language learning is essential for increasing the resilience of refugees and providing them with opportunities for education, social engagement and access to wider services.

Confirmation of participation

At the end of the year, participants are awarded with a certificate of participation, which is supported by the national or cantonal qualification board, and ideally begin an apprenticeship programme. The confirmation of participation outlines the acquired skills and competencies and provides information about performance and behaviour during the work placement. This certificate is key to facilitating progression to the apprenticeship. Participants also attend an application training course to facilitate the entry into a regular VET after the 1-year pre-VET.

Partnership working and employer engagement

The integration pre-apprenticeship is delivered through a collaboration between cantons, professional organisations and vocational education and training institutions. Each partner has a fundamental role to play in the design and delivery of the programme to ensure it meets the needs of both employers and participants.

At the beginning, each local canton carried out extensive background work to find enough placements in companies for the on-the-job training element of the pre-apprenticeship. This work included an information campaign and promotional material which was disseminated by government, local cantons and professional organisations.

Cantons' Vocational Education and Training (VET) offices have overall responsibility for co-ordinating

and implementing the pre-apprenticeship. They play a key role in supporting refugees to advance their basic, transversal and technical skills prior to starting an apprenticeship. The cantons act as the point of contact for participants and employers, and regularly review the supply and demand of apprenticeships and adapt the content of the pre-apprenticeship accordingly. This is a key part of the success of this programme – ensuring it continues to meet the needs of the local labour market.

The main benefit to cantons is that the effective and sustainable integration of refugees in the area has led to a reduction in long term welfare costs and resulted in additional financial support from the government.² The SEM undertook both an impact and economic evaluation of the pilot programme which has enabled them to evidence the outcomes it has achieved, and the economic impact to local cantons.

Professional organisations and other trade associations play a key role in the design of the integration pre-apprenticeship.



² <https://www.sem.admin.ch/sem/de/home/themen/integration/ppnb/integrvorlehre-sprachfoerd.html>

They undertake extensive preparatory work to develop the basics of the programme and have overall responsibility for setting up partnerships between cantons, professional organisations (trade associations/ branch organisations), and employers. Professional organisations provide sector expertise to develop pre-apprenticeships for specific occupational fields, disseminate information to participating companies, and in some cases, contribute to the delivery of modules focused on basic practical skills and knowledge in a particular sector.

Professional organisations involvement ensures that pre-apprenticeship programmes are tailored to the needs of the sector, and therefore help sectors to meet future demand for skills.

Employers are central to the pre-apprenticeship and offer participants in-company training throughout the programme. Ideally, employers will also offer participants a permanent position in the company at the end of their pre-apprenticeship. Participating in the integration pre-apprenticeship has many benefits for employers. Participants of the pre-apprenticeship are likely to become employees with a high level of motivation and loyalty to the company. Furthermore, participants often bring experience acquired in another cultural environment which means they offer different points of view and approaches, bringing diversity and innovation to the workplace.

Progression and outcomes for refugees

The integration pre-apprenticeship is an example of a high-quality preparatory programme targeted at refugees. The clear targeting of the programme contributes to good outcomes. It enables participants to build basic skills and train in the host-country language, allowing them to develop social networks and familiarity with the Swiss education system and labour market.

The pilot programme achieved very high progression rates. Out of the 750 who began the pilot scheme, 610 completed the first year of pre-apprenticeship training in June 2019. Of these, three-quarters found a professional apprenticeship linked to a national qualification. A further 5% of participants found a job.

The programme is a good example of an effective way of accelerating the learning process for young refugees through proven approaches, such as combining language and vocational training.

The integration pre-apprenticeship has a multitude of wider socio-economic benefits for participants. Not only does this programme prepare refugees for working life in Switzerland, it gives them a chance to develop a sense of belonging and to integrate into local society and culture, breaking the cycle of isolation that many refugees face.

The opportunity to enter the labour market and be financially independent promotes resilience, builds self-confidence and has a beneficial effect on well-being which is invaluable to refugees.

This programme provides valuable insights into how VET systems can adapt to better integrate migrants into their countries, to achieve improved outcomes for both migrants and for economies. The lessons learned include how to address barriers facing migrant and refugee young people and make pre-apprenticeships more inclusive and flexible for diverse populations with different characteristics and needs.

Effective practice

- **Employer involvement in both design and delivery** ensures the programme meets local labour market needs, and that participants have access to work placements and apprenticeships.
- The **strong focus on social integration** helps to prepare refugees for working life in Switzerland, gives them a chance to develop a sense of belonging and to integrate into local society and culture.
- **Language and other basic skills delivered alongside vocational training** helps to contextualise and consolidate learning and skills development amongst participants.
- **Co-ordination between national and regional government** (the Swiss State Secretariat for Migration and Local Cantons) to flex the model to suit the regional labour market and vocational context.