



A matter of luck? Newcomers and their access to vocational education and training in Germany

Summary

More than one million adolescents and young adults aged between 16 and 25 have come to Germany as refugees or EU migrants since 2014. Many of them already have school, vocational or academic qualifications. Others, though, have no such qualifications or have missed out on several years of schooling, usually on account of fleeing their home countries. How they manage to gain access to education, and to vocational education in particular, here in Germany has a huge influence on their path to integration.

Whether and when young refugees and EU nationals gain access to vocational colleges, language courses or internships is, however, often dependent on factors which they are hardly able to influence, such as their age or residence status, or which German federal state they are currently living in. **The SVR Research Unit looked into how young refugees and EU migrants living in Saxony and Bavaria, specifically in Chemnitz and Munich, find their way into vocational education, the obstacles blocking their path, and who or what they feel can be of help to them.** This explorative analysis was based on both a detailed evaluation of the relevant regulations governing access to vocational education and on field interviews with 16 young newcomers who migrated to Germany since 2014. The sample includes young men and women from seven countries of origin, and it gives an insight into their experiences – sometimes similar, sometimes different – as they seek their place within Germany’s vocational education and training system.

One factor which is relevant in respect of that access is age: the older someone is, the more difficult it is for them to find a place at a vocational college. Another decisive factor is residence status, because newcomers do not have equal access to education until they have been issued with a resident permit. Long asylum procedures thus constitute a structural obstacle. While someone’s asylum claim is being processed – which can sometimes take well over a year – they only have limited access to the wide range of language and specialist courses which prepare them for vocational education and training. Young people from Ghana, Kosovo and six other countries of origin currently designated as “safe” under German asylum legislation are disqualified outright.

Many newcomers to Germany, especially refugees, often feel very insecure about issues around education and training, not least because of the complicated access rules. The men and women



interviewed in Chemnitz and Munich affirmed this. They do not understand, or understand very little about, which pathways are open to them and which are not – and why. At the same time, many of them feel they are under intense pressure to find a training place as quickly as possible. That in particular applies to those who do not yet know their residence status. By starting a course of education or training they hope to be able to “earn” their long-term residence permit, preferably before they are required to return home. **This scramble to find a place before a decision on their asylum claim is taken can, in some cases, lead to newcomers not enrolling in relevant language and specialist preparatory courses or to them taking on apprenticeships which are above their skills level.** As a result, even those who are highly motivated are unable to find a traineeship or they drop out at an early stage because they do not (yet) fulfil the practical and, in particular, educational requirements. These barriers to access based on residence status are not an issue for EU migrants of the same age.

Depending on their housing situation, many newcomers suffer from a lack of sleep and have nowhere quiet to prepare for vocational college exams or for their next day during an internship. This especially goes for those who (have to) live in accommodation centres. Some also feel discriminated against and mention the disdainful looks they get when they are out shopping, as well as overt hostility in and outside of training facilities. Such experiences are not only detrimental to their sense of well-being, they can also make it more difficult for newcomers to access vocational education.

When asked what they felt was helpful on their path to vocational education and training, the interviewees in particular cited civil-society and voluntary advice and support available in refugee centres, vocational colleges and other facilities. Most of them were, from the beginning, helped by staff working there to understand Germany’s complex training landscape and to contact the right offices in training centres, companies and authorities once they have decided on their educational goal. Ultimately, those staff members help open doors into education and training. The fact that these decisions are not taken based on a set of standardised rules, even across Chemnitz and Munich, is hardly surprising, given that rules on access for certain groups of immigrants are highly complex, as this Policy Brief shows. This also increases margins of discretion, which in the end leads to rules being applied differently.

The explorative analysis carried out in Chemnitz and Munich suggests that amending applicable legislation will not be enough to ensure the right of new immigrants to education and training is realised uniformly across Germany. In addition to the hard work and commitment of potential trainees, it is discretionary decisions taken by schools, companies and authorities which have a great influence on their access to vocational education. A Europe-wide comparative study by the SVR Research Unit to be published in 2020 examines decision-making by these “gatekeepers” in Germany and three other EU Member States and the conditions which will, in future, be conducive to fostering successful educational integration.