



Barred from Opportunity? How Newly-Migrated Youth in the European Union Find Access to Vocational Education and Training, or Not

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Since 2014, more than five million young people (aged 16 to 25) have fled or immigrated to the European Union, or have moved across borders within the EU. The newcomers¹, represent more than a quarter of total EU migration (Eurostat 2022). Most of them plan to work either right away or after obtaining the necessary qualification. For many, technical and vocational education and training (TVET)² offers a practice-oriented gateway to skilled employment (OECD 2019: 42–44; IAB 2019: 8; IAW/ISG/SOKO 2018: 75). In this research, TVET encompasses all formal training programs which provide skills and knowledge for specific occupations – *e.g.*, plumbing, social work or nursing – and which the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2012) classifies at ISCED Level 3 and 4. Not included are Bachelor’s programs, Master’s and other higher education programs at ISCED Level 6, 7 and 8.

In recent years, policy-makers and employers in some EU countries have turned their attention to TVET as a tool for the economic integration of newcomers. Across Europe, unemployment among those who have completed a TVET program is significantly lower than among those who have not (CEDEFOP 2020: 75–76). This is especially true for those economic sectors in which there is high demand for skilled labor, *e.g.*, in the care sector and in technical professions. But it is not only the newcomers themselves who benefit from participating in TVET – so do the economies and social systems of their host societies: educationally disadvantaged adolescents often end up becoming reliant on government transfers as adults and, on average, pay fewer taxes than workers with a TVET credential (Piopiunik and Wößmann 2010).

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¹ In this research study, newly-migrated youth, here also referred to as “young newcomers”, were defined as persons who after 1 January 2014 have crossed national borders to reside in one of the four focal countries and who by the time of observation were between 16 and 25 years old. Primary emphasis was placed on newcomers from non-EU countries, including recognized refugees and asylum seekers.

² Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) is a term used to encompass education and training programs that provide individuals with the knowledge, skills, and competencies required to engage in specific occupations or fields of work. TVET focuses on practical and hands-on learning, preparing learners for employment in various industries and trades. It can include formal education, apprenticeships, on-the-job training, and other forms of learning that are directly relevant to the labor market (UNESCO 2023).

Against this socio-political background, we analyzed the situation in four EU Member States, Austria, Germany, Slovenia, and Spain³, seeking to address the overarching research question: *How accessible is technical and vocational education and training for refugees and other newcomers (aged 16 to 25) in selected European countries?* The following contribution was generated as part of a research project which the two authors conducted for the Expert Council on Integration and Migration (*Sachverständigenrat für Integration und Migration, SVR*) between January 2019 and December 2020⁴.

1. Literature Review and Research Design

There is a sizable body of research on adolescents and young adults accessing TVET systems across Europe, spanning from education-to-work transitions (e.g., Ozer, Perc 2020; Bol *et al.* 2019) to youth unemployment and labor market integration (e.g., Nilsson 2010) to TVET access policies (e.g., Scheuch *et al.* 2021) to questions around skills formation and competency development (e.g., Rosenblad *et al.* 2022), to name a few of the more prominent research strands. However, despite the notable attention paid to youth trajectories in TVET both by academics and policy-makers, fairly little comparative research has been undertaken into the situation of young refugees and other newly-migrated populations, particularly when it comes to their on-the-ground experiences of accessing TVET systems. Migration, *i.e.*, the medium- to long-term movement of persons across national borders (IOM 2023), can severely interrupt individuals' educational biographies. This is especially true if migration is unplanned or even forced in nature. Refugees in particular, often do not readily meet receiving countries' requirements for TVET access. Existing research suggests that many have trouble entering training programs because they are either too old or because current migration laws conflict with their individual right to an education (Seeber *et al.* 2018; Granato and Neises 2017)⁵. Therefore, the goal of this exploratory research endeavor has been to identify pattern and roots of TVET (in)accessibility within the European Union. In this area, empirical knowledge about the experiences of newly-migrated youth remains limited, especially when it comes to comparative studies that look beyond more than one jurisdiction (Seeber *et al.* 2018: 55; Granato, Neises 2017: 6).

Access to education is the result of more than just a set of formal access policies (Stauber and Parreira do Amaral 2015; Barberis and Buchowicz 2015; Hodkinsons and

³ The four countries were chosen based on migration and TVET data sourced from Eurostat and the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP) as well as contextual geographic, political, and socio-demographic data sourced from national statistical offices. The final country selection was made in accordance with the most different systems design (Rohlfing 2009). The field research was conducted in collaboration with research partners at the University of Vienna, the University of Ljubljana, and the Autonomous University of Barcelona (Perger and Vezovnik 2020; Schnelzer *et al.* 2020; Jacovkis *et al.* 2020).

⁴ SVR is formerly known as the Expert Council of German Foundations on Integration and Migration (*Sachverständigenrat deutscher Stiftungen für Integration und Migration*). The research project was funded by the Mercator Foundation. Comprehensive findings from the project are summarized in SVR (2020a).

⁵ Cross-country studies have so far tended to focus more on access to primary and secondary education (e.g., Köhler *et al.* 2018; PPMI 2012).

Sparkes 1997; Hansson 2005). Especially in the case of migrants, written access rules tend to fall short of providing clear yes-or-no-answers given the aforementioned biographical interruptions and the fact that the previous education does not always match the access criteria put forward by receiving country institutions. Whenever a newcomers' previous schooling is different from that of her or his non-migrant peer, receiving country policies tend to imply that access to a certain school or a specific program is to be realized at the local level where education professionals, administrators, and prospective students and their families are compelled to make such pivotal decisions (Stauber and Parreira do Amaral 2015; Baberis and Buchowicz 2015). How these decisions at a local level are being made, or more precisely, how the professionals involved perceive, exercise, and make sense of their own discretion in granting access has yet to be substantiated by more empirical research, especially for the TVET sector. This investigation seeks to contribute to this empirical base.

Conceptually, the practices of street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky 1980; Hupe *et al.* 2015), *i.e.*, teachers, employers, administrators, and other TVET professionals were analyzed via an institutional framework that sees individual and collective action as heavily informed by regulatory and cultural contexts, while also making room for individual agency. Accordingly, when analyzing TVET professionals' reported practices and their reasons behind it, professionals were not assumed to "blindly" follow a taken-for-granted script of rules, norms and deeply-held beliefs, as is often the case with neoinstitutional research designs. Nor were their rationales and actions regarded as completely "unleashed" from such institutions, as is often hypothesized by scholars of institutional entrepreneurship (for a theoretical overview see Powell and Colyvas 2008). Instead, teachers, employers and other TVET professionals were seen as capable of navigating the many written and unwritten rules governing newcomers' access to education, while at the same time being susceptible to these and other institutionalized rules, norms, and beliefs (Powell and Colyvas 2008). These include country-specific access rules just as much as the cross-country differences in the TVET systems in question, *i.e.*, the more work-based TVET system in Germany, the somewhat equally work- and school-based system in Austria, and the more school-based TVET systems of Slovenia and Spain (Eichhorst *et al.* 2015; CEDEFOP 2020). In accordance with previous research, "street-level bureaucrats" do not only encompass public servants, but also non-state groups of professionals who are involved in shaping and granting access to education and training and to other public goods (Darrow 2015; Hupe and Hill 2007).

The empirical research sought to capture this 'balancing act' via three sources of data. First, the analysis focused on the written rules national and sub-national policies relevant to newcomers' access to TVET, including but not limited to school laws, migration laws, and administrative communiqués. Second, the investigation compared the practices, experiences, and rationales of TVET professionals in eight municipalities, based on 82 semi-structured expert interviews (Table 1). Third, to better contour both the institutional environment and the reported practices of TVET professionals, we conducted an additional 40 interviews with young newcomers. Their perspectives and

experiences have helped us gain a more well-rounded picture by addressing potential blind spots and guarding against professional biases.

Interviewees were identified via a mix of gatekeeper sampling and snowball sampling. This allowed the most suitable and knowledgeable interviewees to be found and quickly contacted. Since an over-reliance on expert referrals can potentially result in bias, the approach was supplemented by the purposive sampling of additional interview partners who were identified based on their (assumed) roles in shaping and granting young newcomers' access to TVET (Kruse 2014; Friebertshäuser and Langer 2013). The expert interviews were conducted between July and December 2019 and therefore do not cover the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Since refugees and other newcomers were interviewed in the receiving country language or in English, the sample was limited to newcomers who had already entered the formal education system in their receiving country or at least preparatory courses designed to lead to formal TVET programs.

Table 1, Interviewed newcomers and TVET professionals

Place		TVET professionals	Newcomers
Austria	Innsbruck	7	4
	Vienna	8	3
Germany	Chemnitz	21	8
	Munich	15	8
	Federal level	1	
Slovenia	Koper	3	3
	Ljubljana	5	4
Spain	Barcelona	10	6
	Terrassa	12	4
Total		82	40

Note: TVET professionals include teachers and other professionals who prepare newcomers for TVET programs or who teach these programs themselves, as well as professionals who through their work in civil society organizations and public authorities (e.g., employment agencies) affect the TVET pathways of newcomers in the four countries under study. Source: SVR 2020a

The interviews were partly transcribed and underwent a qualitative content analysis (Mayring 1993). Categories and codes

were initially developed deductively based on the guiding research questions and the research literature. These categories and codes were adjusted and complemented by new inductive categories, codes and, in some cases, sub-codes. Inter-coder reliability checks were conducted and the findings were validated via two expert workshops with academics and TVET practitioners.

Given the qualitative nature of this inquiry, no claims about statistical representativeness or causality are made. Rather, the diversity of the interview sample and our detailed analysis of their responses seeks to increase our understanding of salient TVET access patterns within the otherwise heterogeneous education systems in the European Union. To illustrate our findings and conclusions, the following part features selected quotes from the interviews, which were translated to English. Although their content remains unchanged, light editing has been done for ease of reading.

2. Research Findings

Newcomers to Austria, Germany, Slovenia, and Spain do not only differ in terms of their migration routes and intentions⁶, they also face different national TVET systems with different levels of practice orientation and employment prospects. In Germany, the vast majority of vocational training programs are work-based, meaning that in-company training is alternated with classroom instruction in vocational schools. School-based TVET is more rare than in neighboring Austria, where more than one in two students attend said programs. In Slovenia and Spain, school-based TVET with limited practical components is even more common. Both countries have in recent years expanded options of work-based TVET, but only few companies and trainees have so far taken up this opportunity (CEDEFOP 2020). The employment prospects of TVET graduates are also not uniform across Europe. In Germany, graduates have much better chances of finding work than their peers who do not have a comparable vocational qualification. In Austria and Slovenia, too, TVET graduates have better job prospects whereas in Spain, the added value of a vocational qualification is statistically lower (CEDEFOP 2020: 76).

These systemic differences notwithstanding, our exploratory analysis sought to identify pan-European patterns in TVET accessibility. That is why the following findings place less emphasis on country specifics and cross-country differences, and more on the similarities observed for the barriers that young newcomers face when trying to enter TVET and how access to TVET is realized at the local level.

2.1 Barriers to TVET for Young Newcomers in the EU

Instead of solely comparing TVET access policies across Europe, we chose to triangulate our policy analysis with the reported experiences of newcomers pertaining to both the regulatory and non-regulatory barriers to education. While some barriers are very specific to a certain country context, many were found across all four countries. The following findings place emphasis on the latter. Country specifics are only included to serve as examples for broader European trends.

- Regulatory barriers: In their efforts to design TVET pathways for young newcomers, the legislatures in EU Member States are required to take account of international and EU rules. There are, for example, several international agreements and EU legislative acts which establish a right to *general* secondary school education – regardless of residence status⁷. However, after a newcomer has completed said compulsory schooling, EU Member States are more or less free to grant them access to TVET. Austria, Germany, Slovenia, and Spain have introduced different rules in this regard. Many of these rules boil down to newcomers' residence status which determines their permission to enter TVET. Also, depending on their age they may no longer be eligible to attend.

⁶ Asylum seekers (especially from the Middle East) and EU migrants were more commonly found in Austria and Germany, whereas Slovenia was a destination for young people from other Balkan countries, along with some asylum seekers. In Spain, a high share of newcomers originated from countries in Latin America, North Africa, and the Middle East (Eurostat 2020a, 2020b, 2020c).

⁷ See, e.g., Article 26 of the General Declaration on Human Rights, Article 28 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 22 of the Geneva Convention on Refugees, and Article 14 of Directive 2013/33/EU.

In Austria, Germany, Slovenia, and Spain, newcomers can initially access school-based TVET regardless of their residence status. That is, if they meet a school's entry requirements. Access to work-based TVET is more restricted. It is in all four countries largely dependent on newcomers having a work permit. The reason is that as soon as the training includes a certain share of practical elements which form part of the contract with a training company, trainees need legal permission to be able to work. However, work permits are usually restricted in the case of asylum seekers or those whose deportation has been temporarily suspended⁸. In Austria, official interpretations of the legislation referring to asylum seekers have changed several times in recent years and were still in flux during our research. At the time, given specific preconditions, asylum seekers were usually granted a work permit and were therefore able to begin work-based TVET. By contrast, those whose deportation had temporarily been suspended were generally not permitted to work and were therefore effectively banned from such opportunities. In Germany, both groups could technically gain access, albeit only after prior approval from the foreigners' registration office (*Ausländerbehörde*). In practice, such an approval could take up to nine months to process, a time by which many employer had found other candidates.

The national and sub-national TVET access policies in Austria, Germany, Slovenia, and Spain can only be touched upon tangentially here (for a more detailed analysis see SVR 2020). In practice, the complexity of these rules were found to be further exacerbated by the regulatory obstacles introduced by the sometimes-necessary recognition of foreign educational credentials. Among young newcomers, it was refugees in particular who had problems presenting the necessary documents when trying to enroll in a TVET program. Even if they were able to present educational qualifications and other necessary documents issued in their countries of origin, these were then subject to time-consuming and expensive recognition procedures, as interviewees in all four countries confirmed. In Austria, newcomers and the professionals working with them reported that it was difficult for the migrants to find out who was responsible for their credential recognition. Sometimes getting their qualifications recognized was very expensive, for instance, if translations needed to be certified by a notary or if additional documents had to be obtained from the country of origin. In Slovenia, the state reimbursed these expenses to recognized refugees and other newcomers with a residence permit, but not to asylum seekers. Such lengthy recognition procedures can have negative consequences. According to interviewees in Germany, the long waiting times meant that the TVET position they were previously offered had sometimes been withdrawn in the meantime. Interviewees in Spain reported that a lack of recognition of their qualifications led to competitive disadvantages when schools filled available spaces, especially in TVET programs that were in high demand.

⁸ Asylum seekers usually have a statutory right of residence during their asylum process (referred to as "*Aufenthaltsgestattung*" in Germany). In Germany, Austria and Slovenia, those whose asylum application has been rejected but who stay in the country because of legal or factual (sometimes long-term) obstacles to deportation have their deportation temporarily suspended. Spain has no explicit residence status of that kind.

In sum, TVET access policies across Europe are complicated to begin with, even for local youth. However, when combined with countries' rapidly-changing migration laws and the large post-2014 influx of newcomers, these systems were found to have reached a level of complexity that almost inevitably required newcomers to seek extensive professional counseling and support prior to even applying to a TVET program. The personnel providing such services were often required to take case-by-case decisions about whether or not or how a newcomer could access TVET or receive adequate support while preparing for such programs.

- Non-regulatory barriers: In addition to these regulatory obstacles, interviewees stressed the additional difficulties caused by financial constraints, a lack of knowledge about the receiving country's TVET system, the workload in the language and academic courses required to meet TVET prerequisites, along with psychological, social, and housing pressures, among others. The interviews give reason to assume that it is not only regulations that bar newcomers from entering TVET, but also a plethora of more informal barriers:

I work as a cleaner and it was too much for me [...], my batteries were empty. I kept falling asleep in school, in class [language course in preparation of TVET]. And I still studied at home. (Bulgarian woman, age 23, Chemnitz).

And here in school I have a language class, but it is, I don't like it because it is so fast. All the students are from Bosnia, Serbia and they know a lot and the teacher speaks with them in Slovenian, and I have to learn the language! (Palestinian man, age 16, Ljubljana).

When I arrived [at the school], I was the only one. And I don't think it happens to everyone, but I was bullied in school. They [the other students] picked on me for my [Bolivian] accent [...] I think they [the teachers] helped me a lot, but I didn't know how to take advantage of it. [...] We should improve how we teach people to treat people who come from outside. (Bolivian woman, age 18, Barcelona).

I had problems because of my headscarf. After [secondary] school I applied to several [vocational] schools, but they all said 'no' because of my headscarf. I stopped wearing my headscarf and everything was okay. (Afghan woman, age 22, Chemnitz).

As the third and fourth quotes show, some of the interviewed newcomers noticed different and at times discriminatory behavior towards them coming from fellow students as well as staff in schools, public authorities, and other institutions. While such behavior alone was not cited as a reason to abandon or change educational plans, it was described as particularly problematic in cases in which newcomers faced multiple access barriers at once, e.g., financial pressures plus too much work plus problem with the housing situation. In this instance, which many interviewees described as the norm rather than the exception, newcomers were found to rely on continuous guidance and support to be able to remain persistent and eventually access the TVET system. When asked about who it was that had been most helpful during difficult times like these, many of the interviewed newcomers pointed towards teachers and social workers, but also other professionals were mentioned, such as case workers in public employment services.

While some of these professionals were hailed for their helpfulness others were singled out for being particularly obstructive. Several newcomers reported that they could not always understand how these personnel arrived at different decisions for similar types of TVET applicants, *i.e.*, in terms of their educational backgrounds, residence status etc. In their mind, some simply seemed to receive more help than others. And some saw themselves as the beneficiaries of such differential treatment:

Then I didn't pass the admission to the compulsory school qualification because I wasn't that good at Math and English. But because my German was so good, the teacher said that if I promise to work hard and carry on studying then I have two months to complete it. If I pass the exams by then, I'll be able to carry on. (Afghan man, age 20, Vienna).

[My training company] was found a man for me at the Jobcenter [i.e., employment agency]. One day he came to our school because he wanted to talk to our class about what we want to do. [...] The man explained how difficult it was to become a tailor in Saxony. But he said: 'I'll look for you.' After two months he contacted me and had found a company. (Afghan man, age 20, Chemnitz).

Yeah, around two and a half years ago I had my first interview at the BFA [Federal Office of Immigration and Asylum] [...]. Everything's up in the air because the official keeps contradicting himself. (Afghan man, age 20, Vienna).

[The staff at the employment service] say that I should get a job, any job. When I say to them 'I need training, I'm still young. If I do this training will you help me with funding?' then they say I can forget it [...] 'go cleaning or temping' [...] with my education and my skills. (Somali woman, age 23, Vienna).

The pivotal impact of these discretionary decisions was reiterated by many of the interviewed professionals as well. The following part focuses on the question of how access to education is shaped by TVET professionals in education institutions, public authorities, and civil society organizations.

2.2 How Access to TVET is Shaped at the Local Level

As mentioned above, our research shows that en route to TVET young newcomers almost inevitably come across professionals that help them navigate the oftentimes complex regulatory and non-regulatory barriers to TVET. These TVET professionals were found to have a significant influence on whether the door to TVET would open or remain closed. As 'gatekeepers', they are mostly found in one of three types of institutions:

- **Public authorities:** Staff in public authorities, such as employment agencies, are tasked policy implementation, for example by referring those who seek to enter TVET to a language course or a preparatory course.
- **Education institutions:** Teaching staff in secondary schools, vocational schools, adult education colleges, and private educational establishments such as companies either prepare young newcomers for TVET or teach these programs themselves.

- Intermediary organizations: Staff in social enterprises, charities, chambers of trades and crafts, and other non-governmental organizations (NGOs) support young people in navigating the education system. Volunteers working in intermediary organizations were frequently mentioned by the interviewed newcomers as being particularly important during their integration process.

Overall, the empirical findings confirmed the conceptual notions from the research literature: In all four countries, local professionals possessed a relatively high level of discretion that allowed them to effectively (re)shape access routes to TVET and thereby, the educational biographies of newcomers. Given the aforementioned complexity of regulatory barriers, many professionals found themselves in a position in which their job required them to take case-by-case decisions that would affect access to TVET, for instance with regards to the question of whether they can admit a newcomer to an oversubscribed preparatory course (Barberis, Buchowicz 2015).

While some interviewees reported to be rather restrictive and tended to stick close to their job description and the access rules in place, others shared how they and their colleagues went beyond what was formally required of them, usually by providing very close one-to-one support to newcomers, cooperating with other institutions or by outright developing new support services or raising additional funds to pay for needed support. These types of discretionary decisions varied across the three groups of gatekeepers. Professionals in public authorities tended to be rather cautious while social workers and other staff members in NGOs showed an exceptionally high level of commitment. Teachers and other educators could be found somewhere in the middle:

- Professionals in public authorities: by and large moved within the bounds of their job remits. While some professionals conveyed a more restrictive interpretation of TVET access rules (first quote below), others confirmed that they tried to use their discretion to maneuver between different sets of rules in order to achieve a result that they deemed more desirable, albeit always within their job remits and salient regulations, as the second quote illustrates:

[My decision to grant access or not] is a question of standards and order – not bureaucratic barriers, but bureaucratic facts. (Male staff member, employment agency, Ljubljana).

We cooperate well with the foreigners' registration office, which uses its degree of discretion whenever it can, within the bounds of what is legally possible. They cannot go beyond that. They can't ignore it, of course. But at least they say: 'We have some degree of discretion and use it whenever we can, as best we can.' (Female staff member, social benefits authority, Munich).

- Professionals in education institutions: Teachers and educators in (vocational) schools, training companies, and other public and private education institutions differed significantly in the ways they chose to exercise their discretion. On the one hand, numerous teachers reported to offer additional language and preparatory courses for newcomers, in some cases to an extent that went well beyond

the remits of their regular job. On the other hand, teaching staff were also described as passive or outright opposed to helping newcomers (first quote below). In companies that offered work-based training, some training staff were found to refuse admission to applicants without a residence permit, thus using their discretion in rather restrictive ways, while others employed expressly generous admission practices (second quote below).

I think that we – the schools – are absolutely insufficiently involved. We hear something [about migration] on television [...]. I am being hindered by the lack of motivation of others [i.e., other teachers] to do anything. (Male staff member, school, Ljubljana).

The impression I get is that our company is highly accepting of migration. We're very proud of that, that we have this great diversity. [...] Of course, at the start some had reservations, that's something where I think that everything that's new, the unknown, of course people are skeptical at first. But then you realize that the more contact you have, the more the barriers are broken down. (Male employee, training company, Innsbruck).

- Professionals in intermediary organizations: In the four countries, the interviewed staff members and volunteers in non-profit organizations, social enterprises, charities and other intermediary organizations showed a clear pattern: All interviewees reported to use their resources in a way that would support as many young newcomers as possible. Many reported to assist the migrants outside of their regular work hours. This commitment was echoed by the interviewed newcomers as well:

What we do is hold them [newcomers] so they don't fall, so they don't fall, because the system is very complex and their parents are not in a position to do it, because they are not here or because they don't have the knowledge [about the system]. (Female staff member, intermediary organization, Barcelona).

At the beginning, it was really hard [after turning 18], although our advisers had prepared us really well. [...] But the most difficult thing were the applications we had to fill in, the laws, the deadlines. [...] Afterwards we went back into the shared accommodation [for unaccompanied minors] and asked for help there. They were really nice, although we'd already moved out. (Afghan man, age 20, Chemnitz).

These patterns may not come as a surprise. The work and professional norms of bureaucrats tend to be more rule-bound than that of NGO professionals, hence their different willingness and ability to exercise discretion and affect TVET accessibility. However, given the large migration flows of the late 2010s – and the complex interplay of migration and education legislation – our findings illustrate that almost all the interviewed TVET professionals had become acutely aware of their role in shaping access to TVET on the ground. Their awareness and their actions underpin the notion that access to TVET is also a result of local negotiation processes among gatekeepers in public authorities, education institutions, intermediary organizations, and the newcomers themselves (cp. Stauber and Parreira do Amaral 2015). This begs the questions: What is behind the interviewed professionals' reported actions?

The extent to which TVET professionals feel responsible for and motivated to (not) grant access to young newcomers is, of course, specific to each individual person. While assessing their personal motivation would go beyond the scope of this research, the institutional research design and therein, the documented interactions between TVET professionals and their institutional environments provide some preliminary insights into the kinds of circumstances that have influenced their discretionary decisions. Beyond the aforementioned professional norms, TVET professionals were found to be affected by

- Perceived legal uncertainty: Our findings show that whenever access rules and structures were perceived as complex and when there was a general uncertainty as to how to 'correctly' apply them, then the interviewees in public authorities used their margin of discretion strictly in line with the remits of their position. The situation was different in intermediary organizations and many education institutions in which the 'legislative jungle' was reported to encourage numerous professionals to go above and beyond in order to guide newcomers on their path to education and training.
- Scarce resources: Many of the interviewed staff members – especially in intermediary organizations and education institutions – reported to feel that their institutions' material and staff resources were insufficient and restricting. Many felt limited in what they could offer and repeatedly emphasized that this meant that were unable to meet many newcomers' needs.
- Sensitivity to newcomers' lived realities and needs: Our findings offer an empirical bridge to other policy implementation studies which show that professionals in public authorities, education institutions, and intermediary organizations were frequently influenced by their deeply-held beliefs about whether an individual newcomer is deserving of a given opportunity or not (Barberis and Buchowicz 2015; Will 2018). In the research at hand, professionals who had frequent contact with newcomers were found to be more willing to provide newcomers with more equitable education opportunities than those who met them only on rare occasions.

3. Implications for Future Research, Policy, and Practice

This research sought to shed empirical light onto the question of TVET (in)accessibility for young newcomers in the European Union. The empirical findings show that for many newcomers, the path to education often resembles an obstacle course. Despite the available access routes, newcomers can be excluded on account of their age, residence status, and other complicated regulations. In addition, many newcomers found the 'maze' of language courses, preparatory programs, and support measures confusing and, depending on where they lived, these were also often in short supply. Given the complexity of these (interrelated) obstacles, bureaucrats, education professionals, and other local gatekeepers played a pivotal role in shaping access to TVET as their actions were found to either improve or impede the educational opportunities of young newcomers.

The findings provide ample room for discussion and further research. As mentioned above, this paper sought to explore and put primary emphasis on pan-European patterns. Cross-country differences, although aplenty, were only touched upon tangentially, and should be subject of further (institutional) research which takes into account how different institutional norms of work-based and school-based TVET systems impact accessibility. Furthermore, due to the lack of longitudinal data, this research has been limited in its ability to observe the very processes through which gatekeepers and prospective students (re)negotiate educational access and opportunities. This line of research promises to be a compelling area for future investigations, particularly for comparative studies with an ethnographic design.

For policy makers and practitioners, the empirical results of this study serve as a reminder that the very existence of access routes and support services is a necessary, yet insufficient prerequisite for achieving equitable opportunities for young newcomers. In order to make TVET more accessible for these and other vulnerable groups, existing structures and services should be interlinked more in order to provide “one-stop” training preparation and a clear path to TVET. Not only should future (EU) initiatives invest in the professional development of gatekeepers (*e.g.*, diversity-sensitive service provision) and the resources at their disposal, but they should also strengthen and expand existing multi-professional education networks which link the oftentimes still disparate and disconnected stakeholders in many municipalities across Europe.

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