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Article

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Many refugees have work experience but a smaller share possess formal vocational qualifications

By Elisabeth Liebau and Zerrin Salikutluk

Academic and vocational qualifications play a crucial role when it comes to successfully integrating refugees and other migrants into society. What qualifications did migrants already acquire in their country of origin and which did they obtain in Germany? And to what extent are qualifications gained abroad recognized in Germany? The IAB-SOEP Migration Sample shows that the majority of the migrant groups studied in the present report completed their schooling abroad and already gained professional experience there. However, only a smaller share possess formal vocational qualifications. One-third of refugees and other migrants applied for foreign qualifications to be recognized in Germany. However, the recognition rate is low for refugees.

For migrants to find work in Germany, it is crucial that the qualifications they bring with them are in demand on the German labor market. On the one hand, it is important that they learn German and invest in further training programs, and on the other, they should seek recognition of their academic and vocational certificates in Germany.

Age and planned or permitted duration of stay are key factors when making educational decisions. Unlike other migrants, asylum-seekers may be less motivated to invest in further qualifications in Germany because their prospects of staying there and the duration of their stay is uncertain until their status is clarified.

There are currently no empirically reliable data that enable us to make comprehensive statements about individuals who came to Germany during the recent wave of refugee migration.¹ In the public discourse on the qualification levels of refugees, predictions have ranged from very pessimistic² to extremely optimistic,³ with some experts forecasting that refugees will help to counter the shortage of skilled workers in some sectors. Studying migrants who have been living in Germany for a longer period offers insights into the opportunities for and obstacles to successful integration of refugees and other migrants. Based on the findings, social policy can be tailored to address these challenges.

The present report considers in more detail the qualification levels of refugees and other migrants who have lived in Germany for an average of 18 and 16 years, respectively, based on the joint migration sample from the Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP) study and the Institute for Employment Research (IAB) (see box). The IAB-SOEP Migration Sample examines both qualifications that migrants had *prior* to their arrival in Germany and qualifications acquired *after* migrating to Germany. Finally, the data provide detailed information on the extent to which applications have been submitted to have foreign qualifications recognized and to what extent these applications have been successful.

¹ For an exception, see the German Federal Employment Agency, "Ge-flüchtete Menschen in den Arbeitsmarktstatistiken - Erste Ergebnisse," *Statistik/Arbeitsmarktberichterstattung* (Nuremberg: 2016).

² See, for example, "Zwei Drittel können kaum lesen und schreiben," *Die Zeit*, December 3, 2015, <http://www.zeit.de/2015/47/integration-fluechtlinge-schule-bildung-herausforderung>.

³ See for example, "DGB sieht Flüchtlinge als „große Chance“ für den Osten," *Die Welt*, December 28, 2015, <http://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article150371564/DGB-sieht-Fluechtlinge-als-grosse-Chance-fuer-den-Osten.html>.

Box

Data basis

The data basis for the analyses is the IAB-SOEP Migration Sample. It was conducted in 2013 as a joint project between the Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP) study and the Institute for Employment Research (IAB).¹ It is one of the many subsamples of the SOEP, a longitudinal survey of households in Germany conducted annually since 1984.²

The in-depth survey of educational biographies in the Migration Sample enables differentiated analyses of school and vocational qualifications acquired abroad and in Germany. It also makes it possible to study whether respondents have applied to have foreign qualifications recognized in Germany, what the recognition

rates are, and what reasons respondents give for not seeking recognition of foreign qualifications.

According to information about entry status, there were 446 refugees in this sample who had already lived in Germany for an average of 18 years when they were surveyed. This longer period of stay enables us to take a more in-depth look both at qualifications earned abroad and at those earned in Germany. Due to the small sample sizes in many analyses of refugees, however, the findings should be treated with caution.

Furthermore, it must be emphasized that the educational trajectories of refugees who have lived in Germany for many years may differ, in some cases significantly, from those of refugees who have come to Germany very recently. These latter individuals may have very different prospects of being able to stay, which affects their efforts to attain educational qualifications in Germany or apply for recognition of foreign qualifications. Some recent refugees may also want to return to their countries of origin as soon as possible after conflicts end or security conditions improve.

1 For details, see H. Brücker, M. Kroh, et al., "The New IAB-SOEP Migration Sample: An Introduction into the Methodology and the Contents," *SOEP Survey Papers* (2014): 216 and M. Kroh, S. Kühne, et al., "The 2013 IAB-SOEP Migration Sample (M1): Sampling Design and Weighting Adjustment," *SOEP Survey Papers* (2015): 271.

2 See also the term "Sozio-oekonomisches Panel (SOEP)" in DIW Berlin's glossary: http://diw.de/de/diw_01.c.412809.de/presse/diw_glossar/sozio_oekonomisches_panel_soep.html (in German only).

Majority of migrants completed their school education abroad

Most refugees and other migrants completed their schooling abroad before coming to Germany⁴ (see Table 1). One-fifth of adult refugees and one-quarter of other migrants living in Germany in 2013 reported having attended school most recently in Germany. In both groups, only two percent of respondents were attending school at the time of the survey.

What qualifications did migrants acquire abroad?

To be able to use qualifications obtained abroad, migrants need to acquire further skills, including proficiency in German and an understanding of the German labor market.⁵ If, however, they are still in school after arriving in Germany, they can learn German and get to

4 For the majority of respondents, abroad refers to their native country. However, it cannot be ruled out that some individuals had already migrated to third countries prior to their arrival in Germany and acquired academic and vocational qualifications there.

5 Cf. Frank Kalter, "Ethnische Ungleichheit auf dem Arbeitsmarkt," in *Arbeitsmarktsoziologie*, eds. M. Abraham and T. Hinz (Wiesbaden: 2005), 303–332.

Table 1

Country in which Respondent Last Attended School

Share in percent

	Total		At least 16 at immigration		Younger than 16 at immigration	
	Refugees	Other migrants	Refugees	Other migrants	Refugees	Other migrants
Currently attending school	2	2	1*	0	6	6
Outside Germany	78*	73	94	93	1	5
In Germany	20*	25	5	7	93	89
N	418	3 177	332	2 501	86	676

Case numbers below 30 are in italics. T-test comparison between refugees and other migrants, *p < 0.05.

Source: IAB-SOEP Migration Sample (2013) of SOEP. v31, weighted; estimations by DIW Berlin.

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The large majority of refugees and other migrants attended school abroad.

know how the the German education system and labor market work as part of their education.

Table 2

Duration and level of schooling abroad

	Total		Refugees		Other migrants	
	Refugees	Other migrants	Men	Women	Men	Women
Average duration in years	9.9	10.0	9.8	10.1	10.0	10.0
N	300	2,318	186	114	1,000	1,318
Share in percent						
Dropped out of school	20*	10	18	24	9*	11
Completed compulsory schooling	32*	40	36*	24	44*	37
Completed upper secondary schooling	48	50	46	52	47*	52
N	310	2,350	194	116	1,013	1,337

Case numbers below 30 are in italics. T-test comparison between refugees and other migrants, *p < 0.05.

Source: IAB-SOEP Migration Sample (2013) of SOEP.v31, weighted; estimations by DIW Berlin.

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Around half of all refugees and other migrants completed formal education beyond compulsory schooling.

Table 3

Vocational qualifications obtained abroad

In percent

	24 years or older at immigration					
	Total		Refugees		Other migrants	
	Refugees	Other migrants	Men	Women	Men	Women
No qualification	55*	41	55	55	40	42
Other qualification	7	2	2	0	3	7
Apprenticeship	15	15	18	11	17*	13
Attended vocational school	9*	17	8	10	17	16
Attended university	20*	25	17	24	23*	28
N	261	1,821	151	110	804	1,017

Case numbers below 30 are in italics. T-test comparison between refugees and other migrants, *p < 0.05.

Source: IAB-SOEP Migration Sample (2013) of SOEP.v31, weighted; estimations by DIW Berlin.

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The majority of refugees did not possess formal vocational qualifications.

Non-refugee migrants have higher levels of schooling attained abroad

Refugees and other migrants living in Germany attended an average of ten years of general schooling abroad before coming to Germany (see Table 2).⁶ When differentiating by level of educational qualification, other migrants tended to be more qualified than refugees: 40 percent of the former group completed compulsory educa-

⁶ The median in both migrant groups was also ten years.

tion and 50 percent went on to complete higher levels of education. The share of refugees was slightly lower, with 32 percent completing compulsory education and 48 percent graduating from upper secondary school.⁷ Conversely, the proportion with no educational qualifications was higher among refugees (20 percent) than other migrants (10 percent). In both groups, a larger share of women than men graduated from upper secondary school (52 to 46 and 47 percent, respectively).

Only a minority of refugees attained formal vocational qualifications in their country of origin

The model of dual vocational education and training (VET) that links learning professions in companies and vocational schools is not widespread outside of Central Europe. This may be one reason why the share of those with no formal vocational certificate is relatively high in both groups (see Table 3). If we look at migrants who were aged 24 years or older when they arrived and therefore able to complete their vocational training before migrating to Germany, 55 percent of refugees and 41 percent of other migrants had no formal vocational qualification at all. One fifth of refugees and one fourth of other migrants earned a university degree abroad. As a result, other migrants were more likely than refugees to have higher vocational qualifications from their country of origin. In both groups, more women had university degrees than men.

Majority of migrants gained work experience abroad

Besides formal academic and vocational qualifications, which play a significant role on the German labor market, migrants also bring vocational qualifications, often acquired through on-the-job training in their countries of origin.

Overall, 86 percent of refugees and 89 percent of other migrants in the sample aged 24 years or older on arrival attained vocational experience abroad (see Table 4). In both groups, women had less work experience than men, but the gender difference was greater among refugees than among other migrants.⁸

⁷ In both groups of migrants, the median of the duration of relevant school attendance for those who successfully completed compulsory education was nine years, and 12 years for those with a further education qualification to which we refer to as upper secondary education.

⁸ See A. K. Rich, "Asylerstantragsteller in Deutschland im Jahr 2015: Sozialstruktur, Qualifikationsniveau und Berufstätigkeit," *BAMF-Kurzanalysen*, no. 3 (2016). The reported shares of those with employment experience from abroad, particularly among women, are considerably higher than in the *BAMF-Kurzanalyse* by Rich. In addition to considering very different migration years and age groups, the different pictures can be explained by Rich's report asking about

The average work experience was around 14 years in both groups.⁹ Men were employed abroad longer than women. Again, the gender difference was greater among refugees than in the group of other migrants.

What qualifications did migrants earn in Germany?

One-fifth of refugees and one-quarter of other migrants attended school in Germany (see Table 1). This is especially the case for those who were of school age upon arrival. Those who were older tended more to go into vocational training. Here, migrants can earn the qualifications they are missing or build on qualifications already attained (abroad) with further qualifications.¹⁰

Refugees achieved higher academic qualifications in Germany than other migrants

Compared to other migrants, refugees are more likely to graduate from upper secondary school (36 percent versus 26 percent). Women were more likely to graduate from upper secondary school (*Abitur*) than men and less likely to graduate from lower secondary school (*Hauptschulabschluss*) or to leave school without graduating.

Young migrants in particular earned vocational qualifications

In 2013, almost one-sixth of refugees and one-third of other migrants acquired vocational qualifications in Germany or were still in training (see Table 6), whereby no gender difference were apparent. Migrants who did not obtain vocational training in their country of origin could increase their chances of getting a more highly qualified jobs by completing vocational education and training in Germany: This was true for 18 percent of refugees and 38 percent of other migrants. However, age appears to be a much more decisive factor in the completion of vocational education and training than making up for a lack of qualifications.

When focusing on those aged 24 or younger¹¹ on immigration to Germany, the share that had completed vocational education in Germany or were still in training in

their latest employment status as opposed to the present report which analyzes whether migrants have gained any employment experience abroad at all.

9 The average age at migration of those in the subpopulation who were aged 24 years and older on arrival in Germany is 35 years.

10 A detailed description of access to training at educational facilities for refugees can be found in Robert Bosch Stiftung (pub.), "Chancen erkennen – Perspektiven schaffen – Integration ermöglichen," *Bericht der Robert Bosch Expertenkommission zur Neuaufrichtung der Flüchtlingspolitik* (Stuttgart: Robert Bosch Stiftung GmbH, 2016): 129ff.

11 The average age at migration in both groups of migrants in this subpopulation was 16 years.

Table 4

Work experience abroad

	Total		Refugees		Other migrants	
	Refugees	Other migrants	Men	Women	Men	Women
24 or older at immigration						
Percentage with work experience abroad	86	89	94*	75	94*	84
N	256	1,804	149	107	795	1,009
24 or older at immigration and at least 1 year work experience abroad						
Average work duration in years	14.2	13.9	15.1*	12.4	14.5*	13.4
N	210	1,568	140	70	739	829

T-test comparison between refugees and other migrants and between men and women within migrant groups, **p* < 0.05.

Source: IAB-SOEP Migration Sample (2013) of SOEP v31, weighted; estimations by DIW Berlin.

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Most refugees and other migrants gained work experience before migrating to Germany abroad.

Table 5

School attendance in Germany by refugees and other migrants

In percent

	Total		Refugees		Other migrants	
	Refugees	Other migrants	Men	Women	Men	Women
Dropped out of school	5	4	9	2	5	3
Other educational certificate	2	2	1	2	2	2
Lower secondary school	35	39	37	33	44*	34
Intermediate secondary school	22	29	14	30	25	32
Technical secondary school	16	10	24*	8	10	11
Upper secondary school	20	16	15	25	14	18
N	90	695	43	47	346	349

Case numbers below 30 are in italics. *T*-test comparison between refugees and other migrants and between men and women within migrant groups, **p* < 0.05.

Source: IAB-SOEP Migration Sample (2013) of SOEP.v31, weighted; estimations by DIW Berlin.

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Refugees graduated from technical or upper secondary school more often than other migrants.

the survey year was 26 percent for refugees and 47 percent for other migrants. Among those under the age of 24 in 2013, 45 percent of refugees and 60 percent of other migrants had completed or were still attending vocational education and training. In the age group of 24 to 34 year olds, it was 46 and 51 percent, respectively. Participation rates declined substantially among those aged 34 or older. Here, 20 percent of other migrants had com-

Table 6

Participation in vocational training in Germany among refugees and other migrants

In percent

	Total		Refugees		Other migrants		No vocational qualification from abroad		Already attended school in Germany	
	Refugees	Other migrants	Men	Women	Men	Women	Refugees	Other migrants	Refugees	Other migrants
No participation in vocational training in Germany to date	85*	70	84	87	69	71	82*	62	45*	34
Currently in vocational training	5	7	5	5	6*	8	7	9	24*	13
Completed vocational training in Germany	10*	23	11	8	25*	21	11*	29	31*	53
N	446	3,199	254	192	1,421	1,778	308	1,800	92	718
By age groups	Under 24 years old at immigration		under 24 years		24 to 34 years		34 years or older			
	Refugees	Other migrants	Refugees	Other migrants	Refugees	Other migrants	Refugees	Other migrants		
No participation in vocational training in Germany to date	74*	53	55*	40	56	49	93*	80		
Currently in vocational training	11	11	37	46	18	12	0*	2		
Completed vocational training in Germany	15*	36	8	14	26*	39	7*	18		
N	201	1,504	44	318	65	746	337	2,135		

Case numbers below 30 are in italics. T-test comparison between refugees and other migrants, *p < 0.05.

Source: IAB-SOEP Migration Sample (2013) of SOEP.v31, weighted; estimations by DIW Berlin.

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Other migrants completed more frequently vocational training than refugees.

pleted or were attending vocational education, while this was the case for only 7 percent of refugees.

Refugees and other migrants were especially likely to complete vocational education and training in Germany if they had attended school in Germany. In this group, the share with vocational qualifications or those in train-

ing at the time of the survey rose to around 55 percent among refugees and 66 percent among other migrants.

If refugees had completed their vocational training in Germany, they were more likely than other migrants to complete an apprenticeship, but less likely to attain a university degree (see Table 7).

Refugees' qualification levels vary by region of origin

Qualification levels can also be considered using the internationally comparable CASMIN classification, which combines the highest educational and vocational qualifications.¹² Using this classification reveals some key differences between refugees and other migrants. The share of individuals with no academic or vocational qualification at all was 15 percent among refugees, almost twice as high as among other migrants (eight percent, see Table 8). Refugees were more likely to have attended school but have no further vocational qualifications. Finally, other migrants are better qualified than refugees overall—not least due to the higher share of university graduates in this group.

Table 7

Percentage of vocational training completed in Germany

In percent

	Refugees	Other migrants
Other degree	5	3
Apprenticeship	55	51
Vocational school	29*	17
University	11*	29
N	52	640

Case numbers below 30 are in italics. T-test comparison between refugees and other migrants, *p < 0.05.

Source: IAB-SOEP Migration Sample (2013) of SOEP.v31, weighted; estimations by DIW Berlin.

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Refugees completed apprenticeships or vocational school at a higher rate than other migrant groups.

¹² See W. Müller, P. Lüttinger, W. König, and W. Karle, "Class and Education in Industrial Nations," *International Journal of Sociology*, no. 19 (1989): 3–39.

Table 8

Highest level of academic or vocational qualification¹

In percent

	Total		Refugees			Other migrants		
	Refugees	Other migrants	South-east Europe	Post-Soviet States	Arab/Muslim countries	South-east Europe	Post-Soviet States	Arab/Muslim countries
No degree/diploma	15*	8	12	0*	21*	14	5*	13
Lower secondary diploma without vocational training	22	20						
Lower secondary diploma with vocational training	12*	17						
Intermediate secondary diploma without vocational training	16*	12						
Intermediate secondary diploma with vocational training	13*	17	82	45*	68*	79	75	56*
Advanced technical / upper secondary diploma without vocational training	5*	2						
Advanced technical / upper secondary diploma with vocational training	7	3						
Technical college degree	7	1						
University degree	15*	20	6	55*	11	7	20*	31*
N	402	3,057	165	83	120	565	1,122	116

¹ Categories according to CASMIN educational classification.

Case numbers below 30 are in italics. T-test comparison between refugees and other migrants and between men and women within migrant groups, * $p < 0.05$.

Source: IAB-SOEP Migration Sample (2013) of SOEP.v31, weighted; estimations by DIW Berlin.

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On average, other groups of migrants show higher levels of qualification than refugees.

Separating migrants by region of origin reveals further distinctions. For example, qualification levels are higher among refugees from the territory of the former Soviet Union than among other migrants from this region. Given the recent wave of refugee migration, it is particularly interesting to look at the average qualification levels of earlier refugees from Arab and Muslim countries. When refugees from these countries are compared with those from Southeastern Europe, the share of people from Arab or Muslim countries with no qualifications at all is higher, but so is the share of those who had already attained a university degree. This considerable difference by country of origin can also be expected for migrants from the most recent refugee migration. While a relatively large share of asylum-seekers from Syria and Iran have completed higher education, this applies to a lower share of refugees from Serbia and Macedonia.¹³

These findings refer to the self-reported highest level of education, without distinguishing by the country in which it was obtained. Consequently, it should be taken into account that an individual with high qualifications from abroad may not benefit from them fully in Germany, for example, if the qualification is not recognized.

Refugees and other migrants equally unlikely to apply to have their foreign qualifications recognized

Recognition processes have two primary functions. First, if the outcome is successful, they ensure that migrants meet the formal requirements for certain occupations. Second, they allow employers to assess the vocational skills and experience of potential employees with qualifications acquired abroad.

In 2013, the vast majority of respondents (87 percent of refugees and 89 percent of other migrants with a foreign vocational qualification) had a certificate they could submit for official recognition (see Table 9). However, only one-third of both refugees and other migrants had attempted to obtain recognition of a formal qualification. While refugees stated that administrative barriers were the reason they had not yet attempted to have their qualifications recognized (33 percent), this played a comparatively minor role for other migrants, at 17 percent. In particular, refugees reported that a lack of information about where and how to apply for recognition and missing documents held them back from submitting an application (not shown in the table).

¹³ A. K. Rich, "Asylerantragsteller in Deutschland im Jahr 2015: Sozialstruktur, Qualifikationsniveau und Berufstätigkeit," *BAMF-Kurzanalysen*, no. 3 (2016).

Table 9

Recognition procedure
In percent

	Refugees	Other migrants
Of those with foreign vocational qualifications		
Percentage with certificate	87	89
N	137	1,397
Of those with certificate		
Percentage that applied for recognition	32	34
N	116	1,263
Of those that did not apply for recognition		
Not important for me	20*	38
Administrative hurdles	33*	17
No prospect of recognition	12	17
Other reasons	35	28
N	68	840
Of those that did apply for recognition		
Percent rejected	35	16
N	48	431

Case numbers below 30 are in italics. T-test comparison between refugees and other migrants and between men and women within migrant groups, *p < 0.05.

Source: IAB-SOEP Migration Sample (2013) of SOEP.v31, weighted; estimations by DIW Berlin.

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Refugees' applications for recognition of foreign vocational qualifications were rejected more frequently than those of other migrants.

Refugees' applications for recognition of qualifications much more likely to be rejected than those of other migrants

German authorities were much more likely to reject applications by refugees to have their qualifications recognized (35 percent) than those by other migrants (16 percent). It can therefore be assumed that, as a result, refugees took jobs that were below their skill level.

It is important to note, however, that none of the migrants in this report were able to make use of the Federal Recognition Act (*Anerkennungsgesetz*), adopted in 2012 to revise the recognition process. The introduction of this law increased access to information about the prospects of and opportunities for having foreign qualifications recognized—which has since resulted in a considerable increase in applications. The number of recognized equivalent qualifications from abroad has risen while, at the same time, rejection rates have fallen.¹⁴ Since the recognition of foreign qualifications improves migrants' employment prospects, allowing them to achieve their po-

¹⁴ German Federal Cabinet, *Bericht zum Anerkennungsgesetz* (2016).

tential, the developments of recent years can be seen as positive in this respect.¹⁵

Conclusion

Compared to other migrants, refugees bring a lower level of qualifications from abroad and they also attain lower qualifications in Germany. However, refugees who attend school in Germany are at an advantage. Here they complete upper secondary schools at a higher rate than other migrants. This applies to the refugees and other migrants studied in this report, who came to Germany before the recent wave of refugee migration. However, since more young refugees are likely to have migrated in the recent wave of migration, and given the early indications that a relatively large share of asylum-seekers attended secondary school or university in their country of origin,¹⁶ the differences could be smaller in the future.

A considerable share of migrants considered in the present report had no formal vocational qualifications from abroad. This was particularly true for refugees. Recent efforts to establish whether migrants have informal qualifications (see Projekt ValiKom)¹⁷ should therefore be welcomed and expanded. Positive developments in recognition rates since the introduction of the Federal Recognition Act of 2012 suggest that migrants who have not attempted to have their qualifications recognized to date, or have had them rejected and since acquired further qualifications or relevant work experience should (re)submit an application. Academic and vocational training is crucial, both for migrants and for those without a migration background. Furthermore, training provides crucial opportunities on the German labor market that can improve migrants' long-term social inclusion and life chances. The Integration Act has also created more legal certainty for asylum-seekers and those with leave to remain (*Duldung*) who are commencing vocational training in Germany. Since the prospects of these individuals staying in Germany are dependent on the duration of the training course and subsequent employment, asylum-seekers may be even more motivated to take up an vocational training.

In particular, a lack of knowledge about the recognition process in the past seems to have prevented refugees from applying to have their qualifications recognized. Despite the more comprehensive information now pro-

¹⁵ I. Kogan, "Potenziale nutzen! Determinanten und Konsequenzen der Anerkennung von Bildungsabschlüssen bei MigrantInnen aus der ehemaligen Sowjetunion in Deutschland," *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie*, no. 64(1) (2012): 67-89.

¹⁶ A. K. Rich, "Asylerstantragsteller in Deutschland im Jahr 2015: Sozialstruktur, Qualifikationsniveau und Berufstätigkeit," *BAMF-Kurzanalysen*, no. 3 (2016).

¹⁷ German Federal Cabinet, *Bericht zum Anerkennungsgesetz*: 65ff.

vided, refugees who have migrated recently are probably not sufficiently aware that they need to have certain qualifications recognized to practice their professions in Germany.¹⁸ Consequently, expanding access to the rele-

vant sources of information is necessary for those who want to work in regulated professions (as medical or legal professionals or teachers in public schools).¹⁹

18 Brücker et al., "Geflüchtete Menschen in Deutschland. Warum sie kommen, was sie mitbringen und welche Erfahrungen sie machen," *IAB-Kurzbericht*, no. 15 (2016).

19 For an overview of all regulated professions in the individual EU countries, see the European Commission's regulated professions database, <http://ec.europa.eu/growth/tools-databases/regprof/> (2016).

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