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## Article

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# Supporting Young Immigrants in Their Transition From School to Work? A Staff Perspective on Challenges of Vocational Integration Classes

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## Abstract

**Context:** The implementation of successful measures to support immigrants' integration in cultural, social, and economic life can be considered as one of today's greatest challenges for many societies. This is especially true for adolescent immigrants who have not yet been able to finish education or gain qualifications relevant to joining the labour market. That is why many receiving countries have developed and implemented special programmes that aim at supporting immigrants' integration by facilitating their employability. Unfortunately, not much is known about the process of implementing these programmes or about how education systems, schools, and teachers are dealing with the new situation and target group. In this contribution, the implementation, development, and challenges of German Vocational Integration Classes (VIC), as an example of comparable programmes in the EU, are investigated to address this research gap. The paper considers the following exploratory research questions: (a) What challenges have been experienced by teachers and social workers in the implementation of VIC as well as in the integration of immigrants into the labour market in recent years? (b) How can these challenges be met in the long run and how should VIC be developed to better achieve its aims?

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**Methods:** To answer these questions, a sequential qualitative study containing questionnaire and interview elements was conducted. First, teachers and social workers involved in VIC filled in a questionnaire about their experiences and experienced challenges in implementing VIC (N = 46). Then, supplementing interviews were conducted with participants from the first sample in order to generate further insights and to contextualise the findings from the first study part (N = 14).

**Findings:** From the respondents' answers, it appears that the VIC programme is well implemented. The results show, however, that central challenges continue to exist. This concerns, for example, legal regulations or the development of adequate curricula, but also the scope and quality of language education. In addition, problems have also been identified with regard to students' culture-specific education and their individual attitudes. These prevailing problems seem to affect schooling and educational processes. In addition, respondents report feeling left alone to deal with problems and that their experiences from their daily work in VIC and with immigrants are not sufficiently taken into account in policy and school-related decisions.

**Conclusions:** Although VIC seems well implemented, key challenges remain in the view of the participants. It was found that teachers cannot solve many of the identified problems themselves, as they require action at the level of policy or school organisation. For staff, this can be accompanied by increased stress and demotivation. For the young immigrants, the existing challenges can have a long-term impact on school success and transition to vocational education and training. The study thus highlights the importance of targeted and holistic strategies to support immigrant integration through education.

**Keywords:** Immigration, Vocational Education and Training, VET, Educational Policy, Employability, Transitions From Education and Training to Employment

## 1 Introduction

Due to increased migration in recent years, the integration of immigrants<sup>1</sup> has become an emerging issue for many European countries. The implementation of successful measures to support immigrants' integration in cultural, social, and economic life can therefore be considered as one of today's greatest challenges for many societies. A particularly important issue in this context is to enable newly migrated adolescents and young adults to participate in educational schemes and local labour markets to support individual integration processes

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<sup>1</sup> The term immigrant can be used to subsume a variety of reasons and circumstances for migration, an indefinite period of residence in the receiving country, and different legal statuses of residence (Braun & Lex, 2016; Crawley & Skleparis, 2018; IOM, 2020). In the following article, we refer to the group of newly arrived immigrants and thus explicitly include asylum seekers and refugees.

(Martín et al., 2016). Especially for this group of relatively young immigrants, preparation for the labour market is particularly important, as they lack relevant knowledge to navigate the host society's education system and labour market (Beicht & Walden, 2019; OECD, 2015). The transition from school to work can therefore be considered as a highly relevant developmental task for these individuals as they have to adapt simultaneously to new requirements defined by the receiving society's education system and its labour market (Hirschi, 2009; Obschonka et al., 2018). Thus, support and guidance are needed for young immigrants in the transition from school to work.

However, the education systems of many countries were not prepared to offer such assistance when immigration streams began to come in. Due to a lack of adequate and sufficient programmes, new educational schemes had to be developed and implemented from scratch. Different countries have been implementing different strategies in this regard. While in some countries immigrant students directly enter the general education system, in others they are initially educated separately (OECD, 2015). Many of these integration measures take place outside of formalised educational contexts and schools and often end without officially recognised qualifications. In fact, obtaining a broader education, formal qualifications and certificates, and informed vocational exploration has often not been an explicit goal of short-term educational courses. This is also indicated by the rather short duration of the educational courses, which often last only a few months (see in detail EMN, 2020; Martín et al., 2016). This can be considered as too short if goals like general education, literacy in the host language, cultural familiarisation, and employability are pursued. This applies for example to the Italian job intermediation programme or the Bulgarian refugee employment and training programme. In contrast, one example of a more comprehensive scheme that is firmly anchored in the national educational system and aims at supporting immigrant integration by facilitating sustainable career choices and employment is the German Vocational Integration Classes programme (VIC). It has been one of the first programmes for newly arrived young immigrants in the transition from school to work in the EU and is one of the largest programmes within Germany (Braun & Lex, 2016; Riedl & Simml, 2019).

Unfortunately, not much is known about how educational schemes like VIC have been implemented in practice or about how schools, teachers, and other stakeholders (like employers) have dealt with and experienced the new situation with the commonly unknown target group. Insights into these questions are, however, highly relevant as they might inform political and educational actors on how or how not to implement such programmes in their respective countries in the future. This contribution addresses this research gap by investigating teachers' and social workers' perception of the development and existing challenges of VIC over the last years. By investigating the perception of these stakeholders this contribution tries to identify both focal points and potential pitfalls in the process of implementation of education programmes for immigrants using VIC as an example. Another aim

lies in generating insights on how VIC or similar programmes might be improved in the future. Teachers' and social workers' perceptions are used as a starting point here as school development research identified these stakeholders working on the operational level as particularly important for the success of change processes in education (Fullan, 1996; Rogers, 2003; Townsend, 2014).

The first part of this contribution focuses on challenges connected to school development in the context of migration (Section 2) as well as both individual and structural challenges concerning the integration of immigrants in general (Section 3). It follows a short discussion of challenges that educational programmes like VIC faced in the past and still face (Section 4). The second part then describes the study conducted to shed further light on the implementation of VIC over the years. For this purpose, the methodological choices behind the study are described (Section 5) before the findings are presented (Section 6). A discussion of the findings (Section 7) and a conclusion deriving policy implications follow (Section 8).

## **2 Challenges in School Development in the Context of Migration**

Research on school development and improvement has shown that change processes in the education sector are complex and long-term in nature (Hall & Hord, 2011; Rogers, 2003). This is mainly due to the fact that educational actors like schools cannot simply adopt new concepts without adapting them to the prevailing structures and conditions (Holtappels, 2014). In fact, local aspects like school staff's idiosyncrasies (demographics, competences, beliefs etc.) or the concrete features of the school itself as well as its geographical and socio-economic location have long been emphasised as highly relevant factors affecting change processes in the education sector (e.g., Fullan, 1996). Thus, change processes must not simply be understood as top-down processes, but have to be mediated locally and against the backdrop of existing external conditions (Fullan, 2009; Holtappels, 2014). Particular attention must be paid to the staff involved and their motivation to participate in change processes (Förster, 2015; Townsend, 2014) as it can be stated that change is adopted by organisations but implemented by individuals (Hall & Hord, 2011). In the past, however, the assessments and needs of actors at the operational level, such as teachers or social workers, have often not been considered enough, which can have negative motivational effects on participation in change processes (Förster, 2015).

Besides such operational and organisational structures of local schools including professional stakeholders in their wider networks (e.g., administration, companies that offer internships), the students as the target group and their characteristics also must be taken into account when implementing change. Thomson (2010) suggests that students should be more systematically involved in change processes and that development efforts should be closely aligned with their necessities. Consequently, for the successful implementation of

new programmes for immigrants this means that learning requirements as well as individual needs of this special kind of students on the one hand (Reinke et al., in press), and structural barriers to integration and participation in social and economic life on the other hand have to be considered (OECD, 2006; Phillimore, 2020).

Special challenges for staff at schools working with newly arrived immigrants are, for instance, dealing with heterogeneity in the classroom, assisting students with legal issues, supporting them to cope with trauma, as well as helping learners to overcome knowledge and language deficits or inaccurate conceptions concerning the receiving country (Friedrichs, 2016; Maué et al., 2021; OECD, 2006, 2015). To support young immigrants in their integration, education systems play an important role as socialisation institutions (OECD, 2015; Wicht, 2016). For schools, this situation means an immense challenge as they have to deal with vast cultural, linguistic, prior knowledge, and performance-related diversity. This diversity implies that a considerable part of the learners has special needs. For school staff this means that they require both, additional time resources and special support strategies to take this diversity into account (Leithwood et al., 2006). At the same time, the special needs of learners as well as their migration-related experiences and foreign socialisation backgrounds can be considered as an obstacle concerning success in school and the transition to vocational training due to psychological issues, learning absence, lack of knowledge for educational pathways, as well as a loss of linguistic, social and cultural capital (see Section 3). Hence, migration-related barriers must be taken into account when developing educational programmes in order to successfully implement change. Therefore, findings from migration research should be considered more strongly when designing interventions and programmes to promote the integration of immigrants. This will be highlighted in the following section.

### **3 Individual and Structural Challenges in Immigrant Integration**

The previous chapter dealt with the challenges of implementing change processes in the education sector at the administrative level. In addition to steering issues and the importance of the participation of stakeholders at the operational level, the importance of the target group orientation was also emphasised. The following paragraphs explore the challenges immigrants face during integration and the associated difficulties that also need to be addressed in schools.

Integration can be understood as a two-way process of mutual recognition of rights and obligations of immigrants and their receiving society (Entzinger & Biezeveld, 2003). Whereas the host society has to provide structures and support that enable immigrants to participate in the first place, Chen (2008) emphasises that immigrants simultaneously need to adjust on a personal level (e.g., adapt vocational goals, personal and social lives). However, opportunities for such individual adjustments also have to be provided for immigrants—e.g., through

educational schemes that support integration. Structural support is highly necessary since migration processes are often accompanied by a loss of immigrants' individual resources like social, economic, cultural, and symbolic capital that would otherwise allow them to manage adjustments on their own (Reinke et al., in press; Sinnerbrink et al., 1997; Wicht, 2016). Completing educational qualifications that facilitate access to the labour market and finding a vocation as well as gaining and keeping employment are relevant facilitators of long-term integration (Martín et al., 2016). Education and employment help to build social bridges in the host society and enable individuals' economic independence (Ager & Strang, 2008; Cantle, 2005).

The prerequisite for this is often the successful completion of a school education and the ability to present officially recognised qualifications. Securing employment opportunities is particularly hard for individuals that migrated in their adolescence (Anderson et al., 2019). Quite often those immigrants were neither able to complete education in their home country nor to gain necessary formal qualifications (Beicht & Walden, 2019; Brücker et al., 2017). Thus, it is not unusual that young immigrants lack basic literacy or numeracy skills. Furthermore, besides the necessary orientation in the institutional structures of the receiving society, young immigrants often miss sufficient personal agency and (career) adaptability, which are important to take advantage of the opportunities offered by the receiving society and to deal with uncertainty (Obschonka et al., 2018). In juxtaposition, a relevant share of immigrants was able to spend a considerable time in their home country's education system before migration. However, due to incompatibilities between education systems, the corresponding school qualifications are often not recognised by their receiving societies, which can lead to dissatisfaction and motivational dropout (Matthes et al., 2018; Verwiebe et al., 2019) as well as to disadvantageous acculturation strategies, such as separation or marginalisation (Berry et al., 2006; Skrobanek, 2009).

Despite their literacy skills in their native language, many immigrants experience substantial shortcomings in using the language of their host society. This is an important issue since linguistic competence in the target language is perceived as one of the most relevant facilitators of integration (Beicht & Walden, 2019; Dumont et al., 2016; Esser, 2006; OECD, 2015). Moreover, participation in work contexts requires immigrants to be able to not only use colloquial but also professional language on an elaborated level (Terrasi-Haufe et al., 2018). As strong language skills are indeed a necessary condition for finding work after migration, they should be targeted and developed in educational schemes.

Another important requirement for integration, including entrance into local labour markets, is cultural familiarity (Ager & Strang, 2008). A lack of knowledge about cultural practices and socially appropriate behaviour makes it difficult for immigrants to navigate the education system and the labour market. This includes unrealistic aspirations regarding their desired educational goals, including the occupations in which they wish to work (Salikutluk,

2013; Wicht, 2016), or a lack of employability (OECD, 2006). Employability describes both more generic capabilities and attitudes like adaptability and flexibility, willingness to learn, or the ability to work in a team, as well as the competences to gain relevant skills and to react to changes in skill requirements in order to be able to find and keep employment in specific contexts (Inkson et al., 2015; Rothwell, 2015).

Following Chen (2008), cultural adaptation becomes particularly challenging for immigrants from non-Western cultures. The higher the individually perceived cultural differences between home and the host society, the more strenuous integration appears to those individuals and the more coping strategies, agency and career adaptability are required to deal with the challenges of integration (Obschonka et al., 2018).

In summary, there are many issues at the individual level that can pose barriers to participation in social and professional life after migration. At the organisational level, therefore, the main challenge is to support immigrants to develop those individual prerequisites that are required for participation in the host society. To be more concrete, any kind of measure needs to compensate for immigrant's lack of competences and language skills as well as cultural familiarity. Consequently, compensatory measures such as target group-specific educational programmes that address the special educational needs need to be implemented.

## **4 Educational Programmes for Immigrants**

As a reaction to increasing migration in recent years, many EU member states tried to recognise the special demands of minors and young immigrants by introducing changes in their asylum systems. These changes encompass granting young migrants' access to their education system including secondary education to facilitate integration. This task, however, was challenging for many countries due to a lack of existing programmes that were specifically tailored towards supporting vulnerable groups like adolescent immigrants (Heinrichs et al., 2016; OECD, 2015). In consequence, new educational schemes had to be developed that ranged from isolated language and integration courses to more comprehensive school-based measures within their respective educational systems that specifically focussed upon young immigrants on the transition from school to work (EMN, 2020).

Although numerous measures have been implemented to promote the integration of young immigrants (EMN, 2020), there are hardly any educational schemes for adolescents and young adults in transition to vocational training that are firmly anchored in the countries' education system and that lead to recognised qualifications (see Martín et al., 2016). In fact, most of the existing programmes are aimed at placing immigrants in the labour market as quickly as possible, which is why the measures often only take a few months (EMN, 2020; Martín et al., 2016). Internships and separate integration and language courses are often offered for this purpose. Obtaining formal qualifications as well as linguistic and cultural



capital, employability, and vocational exploration, which are particularly important for this group, have been given little attention. Examples of such short measures include the Italian job intermediation programmes, Bulgarian refugee employment and training programme, the Austrian nationwide apprenticeship placement, and the Danish integration education programme. While these programmes are ambitious, they include little formal education or vocational preparation. School-based training programs that lead to formal qualifications, such as lower secondary school leaving certificates, are rarely offered to young adults. The programmes are also often regionally limited and only have low capacities (e.g., the Swiss vocational introduction program). Of those mentioned, only the Danish programme concludes with a formal qualification. Despite broad measures and offers for rapid entry into the labour market, a large share of immigrants remain without employment even years after entering the country (Dumont et al., 2016; Martín et al., 2016). This is often due to segregation and a lack of language skills, formal qualifications, and cultural proficiency. Basic school qualification programmes that conclude with formal qualifications can therefore be of great importance for long-term integration.

In this respect, the German VIC is different from other programmes as it is firmly anchored in the school education system and concludes with a lower secondary school leaving certificate, which entitles graduates to transfer to secondary schools or VET. VIC is integrated in vocational school centres in order to provide more proximity to the vocational training system and to facilitate the transition of the students into vocational training. Unlike other programmes in Germany, VIC has been implemented comprehensively and has a high capacity. High capacities were also necessary because VIC covers a large educational and training-relevant target group of people aged 16 to 25, which further distinguishes the programme from other existing programmes. VIC's implementation was scientifically monitored as part of a pilot project (see Riedl & Simml, 2019). Other programmes, however, have not been evaluated.

Table 1: Specifications of VIC According to the Curriculum (see for ISB, 2020)

Characteristic	Description
Duration	2 years (school years can be repeated)
Age of target group	16 – 21 year old, in exceptional cases up to max. 25 years
Main objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Preparation for vocational training and successful integration</li> <li>▪ Preparation of a career choice</li> <li>▪ Promotion of personal development</li> <li>▪ Acquisition of competences for self-organisation and social behaviour</li> <li>▪ Acquisition of everyday skills that enable them to organise their lives in a self-responsible, planned, and structured manner</li> </ul>
Main study areas according to the curriculum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ German language acquisition</li> <li>▪ Knowledge about the education system and professional world</li> <li>▪ Mathematics</li> <li>▪ Ethical behaviour and communication</li> <li>▪ Politics and society</li> </ul>
Teaching methods	Competence-based and action-oriented teaching
Educational degrees	(Qualified) lower secondary school leaving certificate (in case of taking of additional final examinations)

The aim of VIC as a two-year programme is supporting young immigrants at developing competences which are necessary to successfully complete VET, and to promote successful integration into the receiving society (see Table 1 for the specification of VIC according to the official curriculum). Therefore, the completion of VIC comes with a lower secondary school leaving certificate for students, which is intended to facilitate their transition to further courses in the regular education system. VIC is part of German VET and aims to support participants in developing language skills and basic vocational knowledge to make sustainable career decisions. The programme was developed by the federal state of Bavaria and implemented for the first time in 2010 (as the first programme for young immigrants in Germany in general). From 2015 onward, the programme had been restructured and expanded significantly. Since its start it has been steadily developed in terms of its didactic design as well as personnel and financial resources. The number of classes in the VIC programme has risen from 6 in 2010 to 1'150 in 2016 (about 20'000 students) and then slightly decreased after immigration numbers started to drop (Riedl & Simml, 2019).

First evaluations of VIC indicate that the programme has been well established in the educational landscape (Riedl & Simml, 2019). The early problems indicated by teachers declined over time due to a stronger institutionalisation of the programme, the availability of curricula

and teaching materials. However, these changes were also accompanied by a reduction in the scope of action of the schools and teachers at the local level. At the same time, certain challenges, like cultural conflicts and violence among students, associated with the implementation of VIC and its further development persist or increase. Furthermore, many teachers repeatedly expressed scepticism as to whether VIC really meets its educational goals as only between 10% and 30% of VIC leavers in their respective years succeeded to find a VET apprenticeship or even find a way directly into employment (Heinrichs et al., 2018; Riedl & Simml, 2019). In fact, it has been reported that many VIC graduates lack the necessary basic skills, for example in colloquial and professional language, but also the necessary soft skills and cultural competencies, such as learning aptitude, discipline, or social behaviour required to successfully find and maintain employment (Riedl & Simml, 2019).

This raises further questions regarding the implementation of the programme from a school development and improvement perspective. In fact, not much is known about how VIC was implemented and has been developed over time. Even less is known about how teachers and other school staff, being directly responsible for educating immigrants in VIC, have been experiencing the introduction and maturation of VIC. The same is true for teachers' and school staff's perspectives on how VIC can be further developed and where room for improvements exist.

This staff perspective is highly relevant as teachers and social workers are in close touch with their students and therefore directly experience any issues connected to the schooling of immigrants. At the same time, it is the staff that needs to implement any specification defined on the organisational level (e.g., curricula). In other words, VIC staff at the operational level needs to negotiate between the pedagogical needs of students and any requirements that are defined on an organisational level. The challenge here is that the needs of students and the externally defined specifications of VIC might not fully overlap.

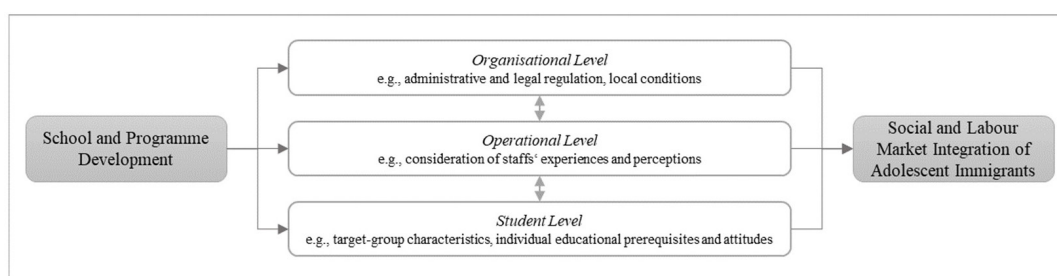


Figure 1: Theoretical Framework

In the context of school development processes, it is quite important to consider the interdependencies between the organisational, operational, and student level (see Figure 1; see also Sections 2 and 3). It follows that top-down strategies to implement new educational programmes like VIC that do not take the existing conditions on the operational level (e.g., dealing with diversity in the classroom) as well as the highly specific requirements of young immigrants (e.g., catching up on education, language acquisition, overcoming traumata) into account might not be effective. If the main goal is to help young immigrants to develop competences that allow them to participate in the host society's social, political, and economic life, then designated programmes need to be designed and developed in such a way that these goals can really be met. For this purpose, facilitators as well as barriers of migration-related educational processes on all three of the described levels (organisational, operational, and student) need to be identified and reflected. Unfortunately, at this moment no empirical insights exist about how VIC developed in this regard. To further bridge these research gaps and to identify opportunities for improvements, this study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What challenges have been experienced by teachers and social workers in the implementation of VIC as well as the integration of immigrants into the labour market over the last years?
2. How can these challenges be met in the long run and how should VIC be developed to better achieve its aims?

By answering these research questions, this study will add to the literature threefold: First, the insights gained through this study will derive implications for the further development of VIC as well as other comparable programmes that are already implemented. Second, the findings will shed light on challenges connected with young immigrants' transition into VET and the labour market on all three levels (organisational, operational and student). Third, insights will be generated that might help authorities to newly implement programmes that focus on young immigrants and their transition into employment.

## **5 Method**

### **5.1 Study Design and Sample**

To answer the research questions, an explanatory sequential research design was chosen. For this purpose, two different data sources were used sequentially (and based on each other). In a first step, a questionnaire study was conducted that was, in a second step, complemented by

a subsequential interview study. The questionnaire included mostly standardised open questions on the development of VIC, including perceived challenges and approaches to overcome them. The interviews were structured around the main findings based on the answers to those questions. In fact, the interviews were aimed at complementing and contextualising the results of the questionnaire study. On the one hand, this procedure allows the creation of narratives that explain, supplement, and deepen the questionnaire data. On the other hand, interdependencies between various aspects of the questionnaire data could be further explored.

The study was conducted with teachers and social workers from vocational schools in Northern Bavaria (Germany) in 2019. All participants volunteered to take part in the study after having been invited to participate by the school authority. The original invitation initially referred to the questionnaire study only. At the end of the questionnaire, the participants were asked whether they would like to participate in a follow-up interview. Thus, the interview partners were selected from the participants in the questionnaire study. Due to the sampling process all data of this study is based on a convenience sample and cannot be assumed to be representative of the underlying population. However, the reported sample characteristics do not speak in favour of any systematic sample bias.

In total, 46 participants took part in the questionnaire study (31 females). On average, they were 46.3 years old ( $SD = 14.0$ ; Range: 26-75<sup>2</sup>) and have been working in their professions for 12.6 years ( $SD = 12.0$ ). Most of the participants worked as teachers ( $n = 38$ ) or as social workers ( $n = 5$ ). However, two respondents indicated they work as school principals and one person did not give any information about their job title. Of these participants, 14 (6 females) could be recruited for the interview study. On average, participants of this subsample were 29.1 years old ( $SD = 16.5$ ) and have been working in VIC for 3.9 years ( $SD = 1.0$ ). Of these, eleven worked as teachers in VIC, two as social workers, and one as school principal at the time of the interviews.

The reason to investigate VIC from the perspective of the staff involved can be explained twofold. First, these actors work on the operative level of schooling young immigrants and thereby deal with most of the practical issues of VIC. Second, in the context of VIC, teachers and social workers have been key drivers for the implementation and development of the programme. When VIC was first implemented only a rough organisational framework as well as unspecific curricula existed. Teachers and social workers therefore designed curricula and teaching materials largely on their own initiative. Due to their strong involvement in the operational development of VIC as well as their hands-on experience with adolescent immigrants, teachers and social workers presumably have a strong understanding of the covered research topic.

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<sup>2</sup> The high age of some participants is due to the fact that some of the VIC staff works on the basis of contracts after their retirement from their prior teaching career.

## 5.2 Instruments and Analyses

The questionnaire was created based on the theoretical framework sketched out in Section 2 to 4. To gain insights into how VIC developed over time, the questionnaires used short open questions to ask the participants what positive and negative advancements they experienced during their professional activity as VIC staff. This section was then followed by explicit questions regarding challenges linked to VIC schooling and the chances of young immigrants transitioning into the labour market. The questions addressed the preliminary defined levels not explicitly in order to avoid biased responses. The aim was to identify those barriers concerning young immigrants' participation in education and successful completion of VIC as well as their transition into the labour market that are experienced by staff to be subject to school and programme development activities. The selection and formulation of the questions also drew on preliminary work of Heinrichs et al. (2016, 2018). The respondents were asked to reply in an open format and as detailed as possible. This approach allowed us to generate a wide range of rich answers concerning the development of VIC over time and related challenges without restricting the participants to predetermined categories. The questionnaire also included a set of socio-demographic questions.

Based on the findings of the questionnaire study a semi-structured interview guideline was developed. First, the interview questions focussed on the individual learning requirements of VIC students (student level). Individual and cultural influences such as motivation and socialisation were considered. Furthermore, questions on legal structures and their effects on the learning and working behaviour of the students (organisational level) as well as the professional actions of staff were also specifically asked (operational level). The participants were invited to answer those questions in as much detail as possible and give illustrating examples. The interviews lasted from 35 to 103 minutes, depending on the willingness to talk and the available time of the interviewees. All interviews were recorded and later transcribed.

The data of the questionnaire and the interviews were analysed with qualitative content analyses based on Creswell (2014) and Kuckartz (2014) using a deductive-inductive category system. To reflect the change process and the implementation of the VIC, *inductive* categories were formed based on the changes experienced by the participants (improvements or challenges). Here, inductive categories were used to reflect the subjectivity and context-specificity of the statements that might not be covered yet by the theoretical ideas discussed above. In fact, inductive coding was used to remain as open as possible for new ideas concerning the development and challenges of VIC. However, *deductive* categories on perceived challenges regarding the implementation of the VIC, including its effectiveness in helping young immigrants to integrate socially and economically, were formed based on the considerations discussed in Section 3, and partly supplemented by inductive subcategories. The categories on perceived challenges regarding the implementation of VIC capture both external factors influencing schools and the development of the programme, and also the particular challenges

of working with newly arrived immigrants. Hence, categories include issues concerning the legal framework (based on Da Lomba, 2010; OECD, 2006; Phillimore, 2011), individual learning prerequisites and learning backgrounds, which mainly include individual educational attainment and ability to learn, cultural adoption and familiarity (Cantle, 2005; Chen, 2008; OECD, 2006), language proficiency (Chen, 2008; Esser, 2006), as well as employability and labour market orientation (OECD, 2006; 2015; Wicht, 2016).

The analysis of the interviews was based on the findings of the questionnaire study. It focused on challenges regarding the legal framework, language acquisition, individual educational prerequisites, and attitudes of the students as these have emerged as key aspects for implementing the programme and managing change processes. In addition, the analysis aimed to extract interview passages that were concerned with ideas of improvement or articulated needs for support. This addressed the second research question.

As a measure for the stability and reproducibility of the coding process, intercoder reliability was calculated. For this, Lombard et al. (2002) and O'Connor and Joffe (2020) recommend to double code between 10% and 25% of the data. In line with this recommendation, 13 (28%) questionnaires and 2 (14%) interviews were coded independently by a second person. Acceptable to good reliabilities could be obtained ( $\kappa_{\text{Questionnaire}} = .87$ ,  $\kappa_{\text{Interviews}} = .74$ ). The data analysis and the calculation of the  $\kappa$  values were carried out with the support of MaxQDA 2020. Once the interview data was categorised, the categories were further explored to identify central themes across interviewees (Kuckartz, 2014). These are illustrated in the presentation of results (Section 6).

## 6 Results

### 6.1 Questionnaire Study

#### 6.1.1 Changes and Developments of VIC During Time

In order to outline how VIC developed over time, teachers and social workers were asked about how they experienced changes in the programme during their service as well as how they assess these changes in terms of advancements or continuing or upcoming challenges. Improvements were perceived at three distinct levels: (a) *Organisational*, (b) *operational*, and (c) *students*. On the *organisational level* it was emphasised that both teaching material and comprehensive curricula were not available in the beginning because the VIC programme itself had to be developed quite quickly. However, the introduction of newly developed teaching material, being available to all VIC staff up from 2017, made lesson preparation

much easier. Moreover, coordination processes between different actors (e.g., teachers and social workers, as well as with administrative personnel) improved over time.

Concerning the staff themselves on the *operational level*, the growing experience with newly arrived immigrants largely improved their daily work. In the first years, working in VIC was perceived as especially challenging since none of the involved professional actors had any experience in working with immigrants. Missing experience was not only an issue affecting teachers or social workers but also the administrative personnel.

*"The schooling process runs more and more smoothly due to the increasing experience of the involved teachers, social workers, and the staff of governmental and non-governmental institutions."*

(Q6)

On the *student level* it was emphasised that German literacy of students enrolled in VIC improved over the years, because students nowadays have already been staying in Germany for a longer time before entering VIC than in the early years. This positively affects classroom management and teaching due to improved language skills of students.

Challenges were both perceived on the organisational and the student but not the operational level. On the *organisational level*, curricula are criticised for being "out of touch with reality" (Q4). In some cases, content suggestions in the existing VIC curricula were too childish and thus not prepared in an age-appropriate manner, in others the learning goals were set far too high—e.g., in listening comprehension. In addition, the VIC staff described the number of classes in German as a second language as not sufficient. It was emphasised that VIC should focus more on language and communication skills. In this context, it was particularly criticised that VIC only lasts two years as this is seen as far too short to prepare students for further education or VET in many cases.

In relation to the issues on the *organisational level*, educational requirements and working attitudes of the *students* were mentioned. It was described that over time "the performance and motivation of students decrease[d]" (Q8). This phenomenon was accompanied by changes in their behaviour including decreasing gratitude and punctuality. One interpretation could be that students lack important knowledge about culturally and socially desirable behaviour. Thus, further support measures and curricular adaptations might be necessary.

To obtain a more differentiated picture, further analyses were carried out on currently perceived challenges in the schooling of students in VIC. These particularly take the requirements of the target groups based on the previously illustrated barriers to immigrant integration into account. The aspects of legal regulations as well as the individual starting positions of learners seemed to be of particular importance for the participants.



### 6.1.2 Challenges due to Legislation

About half of the participants describe the current asylum legislation as the main challenge for VIC schooling. It was emphasised that an unclear legal status of students and the omnipresent threat of deportation have an impact on their social, learning, and working behaviour. After all, students with an uncertain status lack a perspective, because they are not granted a work or training permit outside of VIC and constantly fear of being deported.

*"Students with poor prospects of staying (e.g., from Afghanistan) are less motivated in the 2nd year of schooling when they realise that their chances of obtaining a residence permit are low." (Q24)*

This also causes problems at class level as these students feel demotivated to engage themselves in VIC schooling. This results in absenteeism, refusal to participate in classroom activities or even active classroom disruptions challenging staff and other students. It is the "struggle to stay" (Q32) that threatens continuity in schooling for many of the affected students.

### 6.1.3 Challenges due to Students' Individual Dispositions

Apart from legal aspects, the respondents also mentioned challenges connected to particular features of the migrant learners themselves. In fact, most statements were concerned with personal characteristics and attitudes of learners that were indicated to be highly relevant for the success of schooling as well as integration processes. Within the questionnaires individual learning prerequisites (previous education, learning aptitude, available learning strategies), language training (literacy in spoken and written language), and knowledge about the host country were described as challenging facets.

Respondents seem to perceive students in VIC to often lack a general motivation or willingness to make the required efforts to learn in school and to learn about cultural norms in order to integrate themselves into the host society. However, it was also acknowledged that they are often not equipped with sufficient learning strategies to engage in the efforts required.

*"Not all students show willingness to learn. They do not do homework, participate in class, or obtain learning material for months. This also leads to massive disruptions during lessons." (Q16)*

*"Not all refugees have learned how learning/studying works in their home country." (Q12)*

In this context, it has been suggested that individual students attach only little value to the educational opportunities offered by VIC. This is explained by considerable problems understanding the German education and employment system.

*"The discrepancy is that refugees want to work and do not understand why a school-leaving qualification is important. They do not understand why education is important and why one simply cannot earn money without learning or being able to speak German." (Q1)*

This assumed lack of understanding is, based on the perceptions of the respondents, reflected in learners' behaviour. More than 25% of respondents criticise a missing willingness to adapt and integrate among students, which manifests itself in dysfunctional behaviour.

*"For the most part, the students have great difficulty to comply with Central European customs: E.g., punctuality, reliability in the completion of tasks, constant obligatory attendance." (Q45)*

Thus, despite that VIC has been well established over the last years, the respondents perceive that there is still need for further development at the curricular and content level, for example, regarding language support (including professional language), vocational exploration, and the facilitation of social and cultural skills. These aspects are strongly connected with external factors that affect the perceived success of the implementation and school effectiveness, such as legal regulations that would contradict the pedagogical goal of VIC and prevent young immigrants from taking up vocational training or employment. In the next section, these aspects will be taken up in more detail based on the answers given in the interviews.

## 6.2 Interview Study

### 6.2.1 Legal Regulations

All interviewees agree that regulations that define the legal status as well as the prospects of immigrants directly impact their educational and integration efforts. It was particularly emphasised that an uncertain residence status can negatively affect both motivational and behavioural aspects in students. The organisational and student level appear to be strongly interrelated and therefore seem to affect the operational level as follows.

Legal regulations do not only affect students that fear deportation. Some interviewees described "contagion" or "spill-over" effects on the whole class when one particular student received notifications about their prospective deportation. Furthermore, it was also made clear that teachers and social workers are similarly affected by motivational spill-over effects. Through their pedagogical work, they build up a relationship with students and invest a lot of work and passion in their education. Thus, VIC staff sometimes regard it as a lack of appreciation of their work if the students are not granted a residence or work permit, or are deported. Apart from this, the interviewees draw attention to economic aspects related to legal issues.

*"I have students, who have completed their two VIC years, [...] and are theoretically [ready] to start training and then they are [...] deported. So, apart from the fact that this is really cruel and emotional for both fellow students and the teachers [...], it is also a waste of resources from an economic point of view. We have invested 3-4 years in some of the students, [...] so that they could actually give something back, [...] and then the students are deported." (I14)*

Besides these behavioural and emotional aspects, it was also indicated that legal regulations as well as decisions made by responsible authorities severely impede certain integration efforts like participation in internships.

*"Meanwhile, the approval of the foreigners' authority must also be obtained if you want to do an internship; it is not possible without it. As a rule, internships are not allowed during school holidays." (I3)*

Statements about legislation as well as authorities are repeatedly accompanied by the hope for as well as the plea for practices that hinder education and integration efforts to change. The interviewees would like to see a clear commitment by the authorities and a new course of action that supports the goals of VIC. In addition, they would like to be involved in decisions affecting their students. However, the interviewees acknowledge that their own scope of action concerning these issues is rather limited. A feeling of resignation is reported.

*"I said to the foreigners' authority, 'Just ask us how the student behaves at school, what kind of prediction can be made!' So if someone is in class every day, you get to know these people during the school year [...]. The foreigners' authority answered, 'We did not want to burden the teachers additionally.' Such nonsense, I have been teaching for 30 years now, nobody has ever cared if I work a lot or a little." (I11)*

## 6.2.2 Language and Language Education

Although it was stated in the questionnaire responses that literacy skills of students enrolled in VIC appeared to have risen, the level of colloquial and professional language is still considered as being too low to enable students to successfully transit into VET or employment. In respect to language formation, the interviews were able to explain the ambivalent findings in the questionnaire data.

The interviewees explained that, over time, many VIC teachers have reduced the language requirements of their classes in favour of the target group and in order to meet other learning goals. It follows that students often do not manage to get beyond rather low-level language skills and that VIC classes do not contribute much to language development. In many cases, students are not able to sufficiently communicate with others in German. Hence, poor language skills would directly prevent transitions into employment. This not only makes the

long-term transition into vocational training or employment more difficult but also often leads to tensions and problems when students interact with others as soon as they leave the safe space of the school. In severe cases, this could lead to a loss of motivation that quickly results in students dropping out of employment or VET opportunities. Language barriers thus represent a lasting obstacle to professional orientation, career transitions, and training success.

*"This is [...] simply too hard for them language-wise, because the companies treat them like secondary school students who speak the language perfectly [...] and they [the young immigrants] become demotivated and are really afraid to go there again, because there is no pedagogically trained staff there." (I12)*

The interviewees expressed repeatedly that two years of VIC are by no means adequate to develop German language skills that are sufficient to take part in VET or to find employment. More time and resources for dedicated language courses are required in the eyes of the interviewees. Some of the interviewed teachers pleaded for an extension of the VIC to three years and others suggested for the first VIC year to consist almost exclusively of language training. Besides this, it was also brought forward that companies offering internships should offer more support that helps students to overcome their language deficits. This is thought to reduce loss of motivation and dropouts.

### 6.2.3 Knowledge and Attitudes

Within the interviews, similar to the questionnaire statements, it was often stressed that students either do not know much about Germany's culture, including its education and employment system, or they show attitudes and behaviours that are detrimental to successful social or vocational integration. For instance, a lack of adaptability and comparatively lax working attitudes both in school and during internships were frequently addressed:

*"In one class (...) we had to, I will say colloquially, work hard to make sure that they arrived on time. Teach them the German virtues and tell them that if they are looking for a job and they are not on time, then this job is gone. That is very important in Germany." (I2)*

Within the interviews, different perspectives on these issues as well as approaches about how VIC staff can deal with them emerged. Some respondents showed more understanding for the situation of the students than others:

*"They are simply children, young adults, [...] but they have to do as they are told from the beginning, that is really tough. So, from that point of view, they would simply need more time to devote to all the customs; the German customs." (I4)*

*"It's like we discussed before. There's a need for clearer structures and discipline [so that students can answer the questions for themselves] 'what am I supposed to do here?', what do I have to do here and if I don't do it, what happens then? [...] I would say a certain strictness would be good overall." (I10)*

A common theme in this context is that behaviour which is based upon some kind of cultural misfit and a lack of knowledge is seen as an educational challenge that can be addressed, especially with more time at hand. In addition, the interviewees brought up an important aspect regarding students' lack of orientation in the labour market which was not yet mentioned. It was pointed out that many young immigrants rely on occupational concepts that they have acquired in their home countries (e.g., what a certain profession is about). Unfortunately, sometimes those concepts are incompatible with the structure of the German labour market. In addition to this, students often do not seem to be sufficiently informed about the occupations they would like to work in, nor do they show much initiative to explore the occupational landscape. It is therefore not uncommon that students either lack an overview of occupational profiles, their requirements, and access requirements or that they have an unrealistic picture about these facets of the labour market.

*"We had students who went into geriatric care [for an internship]. They came back after three days and said, 'I had to touch naked people there'. [...] Well, one would have thought that the students do in fact inform themselves about the professions in advance, like the job description, but no." (I14)*

It furthermore seems paradoxical that students strongly value employment and any kind of professional activity but seem to not understand the educational pathways leading to a job. This includes difficulties to grasp the importance of pre-vocational education and vocational training in Germany.

*"The (value of) vocational training (is) seen differently. They see the profession and the work itself in the same way. I think [the dual system] just doesn't seem reasonable to them, that you simply have to go to vocational school or that you might have to finish your compulsory education before you can go to work." (I9)*

According to the interviewees, this problem cannot be solved by simply offering more explanations but rather by practical experience that are built into VIC. At school, work experiences should systematically be reflected to allow students to acquire insights into the world of work and education of their host society. The arrangement of internships in a way that is conducive to learning (duration, curricular integration, reflection) should be implemented, on the one hand, on the organisational level in schools and, on the other hand, on the part of the training companies. The latter requires working conditions that support learning in order to enable experience and reflections to grow. At the same time, however, it has been

stressed that students themselves are responsible for their learning pathways and should be encouraged as well as demanded to use the learning opportunities offered to them.

*"One would probably have to force students to deal with it during the preparation of the internship and somehow make them present something that proves that they have dealt with it." (I14)*

## 7 Discussion

The analysis indicates that the structures created within the VIC framework appear to be very promising in terms of successful integration of young immigrants. From the perspective of the participants, it was emphasised that organisational barriers seem to have been reduced and long-term structures have been established—e.g., the development of curricula and learning materials, multi-professional teams in schools or local cooperation networks with regard to the implementation and supervision of internships. These results are in line with findings of prior studies (e.g., Heinrichs et al., 2018; Riedl & Simml, 2019).

In contrast, however, the data of this study also indicates that some challenges and problems continue to exist, and new ones take shape. According to both the questionnaire and the interview data, these challenges and problems are rooted in the overarching legal framework that VIC is embedded in, the concrete curricular and content design of the VIC, as well as particular idiosyncrasies of the students themselves.

From the perspective of school development at an *organisational* level the findings of this study indicate that top-down strategies are not suited for implementing change in education contexts (see Section 2 and Förster, 2015; Townsend, 2014). The needs of local schools and stakeholders as well as the target group are too rarely taken into account, potentially leading to detrimental effects on well-being and motivation of both students and staff. This can be seen, for example, in the respondents' assessment of curricula, as they are considered as partly inadequate in terms of immigrants' knowledge, competencies, or developmental progress. During curriculum development, the experiences of the staff at the operational level were apparently not really taken into consideration. At least two important aspects are mentioned by the study participants in this regard. First, VIC does not sufficiently focus on *students'* technical and intellectual skills (e.g., learning strategies, literacy) as well as their basic attitudes (e.g., punctuality) that have yet to be developed for a successful transition into VET or the labour market. Second, VIC does not seem to include room for *staff* to work with immigrants' idiosyncratic issues like trauma, uncertainty of legal status, or individual attitudes towards learning and employment. Taking care of students with motivational and emotional problems represents a challenge for staff, for which they are not adequately prepared and for which too little time is made available overall. In addition, it has been indicated that more time should be given to practical work experience and its reflection. This also raises the ques-

tion of whether the training period of two years is sufficient. These issues were raised by the participants both in the questionnaire and in the interview.

Concerning the already mentioned curricula, there is also a need for extended language education including the promotion of social and cultural competences, and vocational exploration. Here, it also becomes clear that challenges at the *student* and *organisational* level are strongly interrelated. For example, since it is difficult for students who do not speak sufficient German to find a job, VIC staff suggests that (a) the programme should focus more on language education and (b) the VIC should focus more on measures that help students to orient themselves in society, the education system, and the labour market. These findings are consistent with results from a nationwide survey conducted in Germany, according to which nearly 50 % of immigrant graduates called for further support, particularly regarding language skills (Matthes et al., 2018).

Legal regulations were discussed as a relevant issue that has the potential to endanger VIC's educational goals on an *organisational* level and are also related to challenges originating on the student level. Participants emphasised that due to strict regulations immigrants are prevented from taking up training or employment outside the tight VIC structures. In addition, a constant threat of deportation is seen as one reason why students are not motivated and willing to actively take part in the educational opportunities offered to them. Moreover, an ambivalent picture is painted. On the one hand, further integration and familiarising themselves with both language and culture of the host countries is demanded of the immigrant students. On the other hand, access to opportunities to do so outside of VIC are often legally denied. This is especially stressful for *staff*, as they have to explain these regulations to students, even if they themselves do not approve of them and they are not involved in the decision-making process.

At the level of the *students*, it has been emphasised that learners often lack sufficient readiness to learn and/or the required motivation to engage in learning affordances provided by the VIC teaching staff. In addition, many students seem to struggle to orient themselves in the German education and employment system. According to the staff that participated in this study, support measures should not only focus on fostering employability but also promote students' exploration of vocational fields. This is necessary, since students often lack an understanding of host society's occupational profiles because they might differ from the ones in their home countries (see also Martín et al., 2016). Vocational exploration should include reflection about students' own abilities and interests as well as how these fit with existing vocations and vocational pathways in the host country (see also Blustein, 1992; Nauta, 2007).

All interpretations made based on the data of this study should be handled with care, due to the study design and the selection of respondents. First, the study is based on two rather small convenience samples. It is therefore not possible to generalise the findings to the underlying population of staff working in VIC. Second, the sample was selected on a

voluntary basis which may have led to selection effects and response bias. How the data is affected by such effects, however, remains unclear. Third, the sample has to be characterised as heterogeneous in terms of age, how much time staff spent with VIC schooling, and in what role the study participants worked in (class leadership vs. teacher with individual lessons). Due to the low sample sizes, it was not possible to control for this heterogeneity. Fourth, the results reflect the implementation of the VIC and can therefore not be easily transferred to other programmes outside Germany. Fifth, the study only refers to subjective statements of actors at the operational level. For a more holistic view of VIC's development and changes over the years, other actors' perspectives have to be taken into account. Future studies should therefore examine how actors on governance or administrative levels, as well as other external stakeholders who are not directly located within the educational sector, such as training companies, foreigners' authorities, and caregivers in residential facilities, perceive the role of VIC in supporting young immigrants' transition from school to work.

## **8 Conclusion**

Although the VIC programme appears to be well implemented, challenges and problems still prevail. Further development of the programme with more space for language education, culture-related learning, and career exploration seems necessary—e.g., in the field of internships. Alignment of these aspects does not only seem necessary to support the integration of immigrants, but also to support teaching staff and social workers in their daily work. Thus, the study presented shows the importance of the perceived coherence of measures and systemic conditions which might directly affect the efficacy of school development efforts (Fullan, 1996; Rogers, 2003; Townsend, 2014). If such coherence is lacking, it can have negative effects on students (school dropout, lack of competence acquisition) but also for staff (negative effects on motivation and health) (Förster, 2015). Latter is supported by a study on teacher health in VIC (Simml, 2019), which shows that 42% of the teachers exhibited health risk patterns that are traced back to a high (above-average) willingness to work hard or a concrete risk of burnout. In addition, this study further corroborated prior findings that top-down implementation strategies are often not perceived as suitable for meeting the challenges of sustainable programme development.

Building on the study's findings, the following central aspects for supporting the integration of young immigrants through school-based measures can be derived:

1. Programmes like VIC must strongly be tailored towards their target group. Both psychological and cultural characteristics including the educational biographies of immigrant students need to be taken into consideration. More flexibility for schools and individual teachers as well as more opportunities to implement educational measures that fit the



needs of the concrete students at a local level would be desirable. This also includes industry partners that offer internships for vocational exploration or VET.

2. More attention must be paid to the promotion of vocational transitions and transition-related skills. Target group-specific opportunities for vocational orientation and sustainable qualification that secure students' employability seem to be particularly important here in order to integrate young immigrants into the labour market in the long term (see also Braun & Lex, 2016). In this context, students' own responsibility and agency to learn must be demanded more strongly, but also supported.
3. In order to support all the above-mentioned aspects in a meaningful way and not to lead the efforts of all those involved astray, a transparent legal framework and firm commitments to immigrants who are making efforts to integrate are needed.

Therefore, all stakeholders that are part of immigrant education must be committed, especially regarding the promotion of career transitions (e.g., through additional language support, general culturally sensitive education in schools including sensitivity for language and cultural differences of industry partners that offer internships, provision of career-related real-life experiences through internships that are conducive to learning and exploration). In addition, immigrant education programmes should strongly be tailored towards the individuals' needs and prerequisites of participating immigrants. Unfortunately, however, pedagogical criteria for implementing such programmes and for designing learning environments that fit the demands of young migrants are still not sufficiently developed and evaluated (Reinke et al., in press). It follows that future studies should aim at the identification and the development of such criteria that help students' successful transition from school to VET as well as labour market integration. A special focus should be laid upon both the staff involved in educational programmes for immigrants as well as their target group. This might help to further identify structural and individual barriers for integration and young immigrants' successful participation in social life and the labour market (Maué et al., 2021).

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