The selection of trainees in small and medium-sized enterprises
Integration and exclusion of immigrant youth at the transitional stage between school and vocational training in Switzerland

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Abstract

Successful admission into small and medium-sized enterprises (SME) as part of the Swiss vocational training system is essential for both work integration and reducing youth unemployment. It is assumed that taking over the companies’ perspective allows for better understanding why particular immigrant students (as from Yugoslavian backgrounds) are excluded from vocational training at a progressive rate. Referring to 65 semi-structured interviews with organizational gatekeepers selection processes in SME are investigated based on argumentation analysis. The results show the complexity of trainee selection processes: Both characteristics of SME and student candidates respectively are used to justify the exclusion of immigrant youth from vocational training. To legitimize their dominant preference for Swiss apprentices, firms benefit from the public discourse accusing immigrant students of suffering from linguistic and school achievement deficits. Promising inclusive policies depend on adequate sociological insights allowing for the prevalent emotional dimension of trainee selection in SME. Not to prematurely accuse enterprises and its gatekeepers of being racist but rather to discuss their operational and personal anxieties seems to be a promising strategy to increase vocational chances of immigrant youth.

VET System and youth unemployment in Switzerland

After nine years of compulsory education, adolescents in Switzerland pass over to the upper secondary level split up into general education and vocational education (see Figure 1). General education students are students from Matura schools (leading to university) and Specialised middle schools. The vocational education and training (VET) can be enhanced in private or public enterprises with tuition in vocational schools (called the dual or ‘German’ system) or in a full time academic institute alternatively, such as training workshops or full-time vocational school. Around two thirds of school leavers enter the basic vocational education and training which runs between two and four years and imparts the skills and knowledge necessary to practice a specific trade as a doorway to approximately 300 teaching professions. The apprenticeship in the training company where skills applicable to the profession are taught is the predominant form of both vocational training and professional certification in German-speaking Switzerland. Thereby apprentices get predominantly trained in small and medium-sized enterprises (SME) that are said to be the backbone of Swiss national economy.

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1 This paper represents work in progress from an ongoing research project on the selection of trainees in small and medium-sized enterprises in Switzerland. The project (contract no. 405140-69088) gets subsidized by the Swiss National Science Foundation within the National Research Programme ‘Social Integration and Social Exclusion’ (http://www.nfp51.ch).
'Vocationalized' professional education is associated with divers advantages for both firms and youth. While it is more in line with labour market needs and therefore promising best professional integration it also nurtures hopes to enhance the integration of disadvantaged school leavers in a country's VET system, thus lowering the danger of youth unemployment (see Arrighi & Brochier 2005 and Secretary of State for Education and Skills 2005 for the French and British hopes in vocationalizing their VET systems). In particular apprenticeships are supposed to allow for better chances of immigrant youth to get professionally qualified. This certainly comes true in a labour market being highly regulated by professional credentials. In Switzerland, three-quarters of the Swiss labour force hold credentials that certify their qualifications. These qualifications act as reference points throughout the Swiss working life. They constitute a precise code used both by employers to define their staffing needs and by individuals to describe the certified skills that they can provide (OECD 1999). As the Swiss labour market is largely organised on the basis of such qualifications (comparable to Germany) access to apprenticeships seems crucial with respect to the allocation of professional qualifications thus protecting from unemployment. As a matter of fact Seibert and Solga (2005) showed for the German case that the certificates assigned by the dual vocational system assure for equal opportunities on the labour market for both local and immigrant youth even though some group (Turkish young adults in particular) still face poorer

2 According to an official illustration from The Swiss Education Server http://www.educa.ch ('intermediate solutions’ supplemented). See Appendix 1 (page 14) for a more detailed scheme.
job opportunities comparable credentials assumed. Similar irregularities have been detected by the Swiss study of Fibbi, Kaya and Piguet (2003): Given the same vocational qualification and compared to Swiss candidates, they show that Turks and especially Kosovo-Albanians get rarely invited to job interviews by the firms. In their study, the values of discrimination in Switzerland are the highest in comparison with other European countries. Thus Fibbi et al. have shown that the name of candidates referring to a certain national background has an independent influence on hiring processes. Such discriminatory effects in mind it can still be asserted that the dual system is a very powerful tool of social and professional integration in the context of German-spoken countries. Vocational training certificates are presumed to guarantee access to work, especially to qualified occupational positions for both local and immigrant youth.

However the first step into the Swiss labour market does not happen at the end of vocational training but at the end of compulsory school, when school leavers are called on to apply for apprenticeship places. In a dual system, no school leaver can start an apprenticeship without being accepted by a training company and up to now there are no binding regulations in Switzerland how firms and its gatekeepers respectively have to behave in their selection procedures. The jobs offered by companies are the basic parameter of job supply. The firm’s motivation to do so is dependent on its inherent interest in offering young people training in jobs with worthwhile prospects both for the apprentices and the firms. At the same time the availability of apprenticeships is a reflection of the long-term needs of the labour market. Structural changes in the industrial and service sector as well as economic fluctuations have a definite effect on the apprenticeship market. A further factor is the number of young people of a certain age class searching for an apprenticeship at any one time. Structured by such mechanisms, the Swiss apprenticeship market can be characterized by a demand of training places exceeding the firms’ supply since the early nineties, when it began to be more difficult for young people to find apprenticeships (OECD 1999). This development is affecting the occurrence of youth unemployment, which historically is a relatively new phenomena in Switzerland.

In 2004, the State Secretariat for Economic Affairs’ unemployment statistics reported an overall unemployment rate of 4.4%. The unemployment rate of the 15-19 age-group went up to 3.3%, the one of the 20-24 age group to 5.2%. In contrast the Federal Statistical Office referring on the Swiss Labour Force Survey reported an overall youth unemployment rate of 7.7% for 2004. The Swiss Federal Population Census finally accounted for 5.2% for the 15-19 age-group and 5.8% for the 20-24 age-group in 2000 (Hügli 2005, 31-35). These statistical figures show that youth unemployment rates in Switzerland highly depend on the statistical procedures and the definition of the unemployment concept. Still statistics show that immigrant youth is particularly affected by youth unemployment: In 1998 the unemployment rate for the 15-24 age-group was just 1.8% for Swiss youths but 6.3% for young foreigners. 49% of unemployed young people in Switzerland were of foreign origin, whereas they represent less than a quarter of the population (OECD 1999, 46). A similar pattern can be observed when it comes to participation at vocational education and training: While three-quarter of Swiss youth (age 16 – 20) participate, only half of immigrant youth did so in the nineties. Especially low was the participation of immigrant youth

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3 In addition, gatekeepers in SME are often laymen with regard to their task of personnel recruitment and selection - particularly if the enterprise doesn’t dispose of an intermediate management level. Thus they are not skilled how to select apprentices professionally. This makes the object under study a scientific challenge as most research on personal selection has focused on professionalized contexts (e.g. industrial psychology).
from former Yugoslavia, from Turkey and from Portugal. The proportion of youth without any vocational certificates among immigrants was three times higher compared to locals in 1998 (23% vs. 8%). The Census 2000 again shows unequal unemployment rates for locals and immigrants. The AMOSA Survey (monitoring unemployment in 10 cantons of eastern Switzerland: AG, AI, AR, GL, GR, SH, SG, TG, ZG, ZH) reported youth unemployment rates of 8% for immigrant youth from Serbia and Montenegro, Turkey and Sri Lanka in 2000, when the rate for Swiss youth only amounted to 1%. From 2000 to 2003 the youth unemployment rates were rising up to 5.0% and 7.0% respectively for 15-19 and 20-24 Swiss age-groups, but to 17.8% and 16.6% respectively for immigrant youth. Especially the situation of immigrant youth has significantly become worse, first of all the one of students from Serbia and Montenegro, Turkey, Sri Lanka and Macedonia (Zimmermann, Oegerli & Weyermann 2004), that is those of the latest immigration waves.

Imdorf (2005) has reported that compared to locals foreign youth less often got access to apprenticeship trainings but they made more often use of so called ‘intermediate solutions’ (Zwischenlösungen). ‘Intermediate solutions’ (also known as ‘bridging offers’, Brückenangebote) emerged as a new institutional phenomena during the nineties, bridging the transition from the lower to the upper secondary level, particularly from the compulsory school to vocational education and training, for those students who where hindered to pass over directly. Meyer (2003) suggests three functions of these institutions that have grown unscheduled, that is without being led by any policy: (1) The claim to compensate for deficits of linguistic proficiency and school achievement; (2) the claim to give students better orientation and decision guidance with regard to their vocational choices; and (3) to have a systematic buffering effect in order to ease difficulties resulting from the imbalance of demand and supply on the apprenticeship market thus acting as ‘organised waiting

Figure 2: Representation over time by nationality in vocational training, middle schools and intermediate solutions (own calculation referring on data from the Swiss Federal Statistical Office)
rooms’ for applicants. If the third function comes true, the representation of youth in such ‘intermediate solutions’ can be seen as an indicator of structural problems to enter the vocational market. Figure 2 shows that since the early nineties ‘intermediate solutions’ have become an increasingly used institutional offer for youth of foreign nationality to manage the transition from school to vocational education and training. In contrast Swiss youth has not been comparably reliant on this institutional support. As the rise of foreign youth in ‘intermediate solutions’ does not correspond with the altering size of their population (see Hügli 2005, 56), and as the trend can neither be explained with dropping linguistic proficiency nor with growing problems with regard to vocational orientation, it seems legitimate to interpret the above curves as rising institutional regulation and exclusion of immigrant youth from the vocational market. Whatever the causes of the increasing immigrant youth unemployment rate are, it has only recently been identified as a problem being put on the political agenda in Switzerland.

Preparing the Research Question

Although the highlighted statistical effects show that immigrant youth are far more at risk of encountering problems in the school-to-work transition than are Swiss students, not much research has yet been done on the mechanisms behind these effects. The interpretation of the transition problems is still highly influenced by a powerful and individualistic public discourse on foreign youth and its ascribed linguistic, school and cultural ‘deficits and distances’. The discourse is present on all levels of different institutional players at the transitional stage: both the public and vocational schools as well as the cantonal authorities and the Federal Office for Professional Education and Technology make use of it, so do the professional associations, and last but not least it serves as the main argument to justify the above ‘intermediate solutions’ (Imdorf 2005, 79-80). Even social scientists back it when they argue that foreign students usually are the offspring of families from poor social background, suffering from problems of social and linguistic integration. However today’s public discourse in Switzerland refers to a very special group of immigrant youth, namely to

“young foreigners who have come to Switzerland relatively recently (who) have a number of major handicaps, since migration interrupted their schooling, in addition to the problems caused by conflicts in their country of origin (most of the immigrants in recent years came from regions of the former Yugoslavia). Most of the time, they do not speak the language of instruction, or very little” (OECD 1999, 34).

It’s remarkable how such descriptions of ‘Yugoslavian youth’ (students from Serbia and Montenegro, Macedonia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia and from Albania / Kosovo) having immigrated to Switzerland as a consequence of the Balkan Wars in the nineties still get assigned to immigrant youth ten years later. The public discourse

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4 Switzerland is one of several European states with post-war labour recruitment having experienced significant immigration inflows at various times in its history, yet its development as a nation state was not based on migration. Migration occurred both before and after World War II, but in particular during the 1960s and 1970s, when large numbers of workers to compensate for a shortage in labour where actively recruited. First, the government expected these workers to be temporary residents (‘guest workers’), yet many of the temporary workers permanently settled in the host country (OECD 2006, 19). In 2000, Switzerland had a foreign-born population of 22.4% (foreign nationality: 20.5%) and 19.7% of immigrant students.
serves to interpret their lack of success both in public schools and at the doorway to the vocational market. By contrast the average age of first-generation 9th-grade students in 2003 (not to mention the big majority of second- or third-generation foreign students) amounted to 5.3 years at the time of immigration. Thus on an average they have attended their school career entirely in Switzerland (OECD 2006, 23).

The worse school attainment of immigrant compared to local youth on the primary and lower secondary school level is not to put into question, but the question is to what extent the school system produces such statistically testable ethничal difference itself by forms of institutionalised discrimination (see Gomolla & Radtke 2002). A recent comparative study of school performance in PISA 2003 shows on the one hand that differences in Mathematische performance between local and immigrant students are largest in continental Europe and smaller in settlement countries (e.g. Canada), even if the economic, social and cultural status (ESCS) is controlled (OECD 2006, 32). On the other hand, the international report attracts attention with Switzerland having the highest performance variation between immigrant and local students due to students’ immigrant background, both within and between schools (OECD 2006, 73). Such correlations between immigrant status and lack of school success are crucial with regard to vocational chances based on school qualifications especially in the case of foreign students (Imdorf 2005). But school and language performances are not exclusive arguments to explain the low vocational chances of some immigrant youth as two recent Swiss studies have shown (Hupka, Sacchi & Stalder 2006; Imdorf 2005): Recent research provides evidence for pronounced inequalities between local and immigrant students at the transitional stage between school and VET even if school qualifications, language skills and socio-economic status are statistically controlled. How to explain such inequalities once the powerful arguments of school attainment and language skills cannot be hold up anymore? Why are young people unable to find jobs under such conditions?

It’s time to focus on the organizational structures of the apprenticeship market relevant to youth participation that is on the role of training firms with regard to the production of youth transition problems. So far it has hardly been investigated to what extent these problems are caused by the companies’ selection practices. Approaching the selection criteria and procedures of training firms one has to keep in mind that, according to their own logic of achievement, firms claim other performance requirements than do vocational schools: Whereas schools rely on students who fulfil the conditions of a suited learner, it is assumed that firms search for apprentices promising most productivity and least operational problems during their practical training. How do such organisational needs matter with respect to the vocational integration of immigrant youth?

In an ongoing research project the selection of trainees in small and medium-sized enterprises is currently investigated. The project tries to increase the understanding of the selection of young people for job training after basic primary and secondary school. Up to now, the discourse in research and in the general public has focused on the individual and it was mainly based on the example of very large organizations. As an important complement, the present study takes the opposite, organization-centred perspective and uncovers the realities of the selection process in small and medium-sized businesses. The Swiss statistics about youth unemployment and over-representation in ‘intermediate solutions’ in mind, the questions came up if and for what reasons training firms refuse applications of immigrant students more than those of locals.
Method
In order to derive the norms used in the process of trainee selection, the exploratory project is analysing the argumentations used in companies' sense-making. Of special interest are organization-based arguments used by firms to legitimate the exclusion of immigrant youth from vocational training. The selection processes in SME are being analysed using a combination of company and trainee candidate data. The investigation focuses on selected vocational branches (and careers respectively): dental and medical surgeries (training dental and medical assistants), garages (mechanics and varnishers), joiner's workshops (carpenters), and offices in SME (clerks). The combined company-candidate dataset required laborious sampling strategies: First hundreds of school leavers having unsuccessfully applied for an apprenticeship place within the above branches in German-speaking Switzerland were recruited. Than the involved firms were asked for an interview. Firms who agreed to participate in the research project finally enabled to get in touch with those candidates, who have applied successfully. Whereas the firm's gatekeepers have been interviewed face-to-face, interviews with applicants where conducted by phone. The final dataset consists of 89 students who have applied at 68 training companies. Transliterated semi-structured interviews with the gatekeepers form the empirical basis of the succeeding argumentation analysis. The analysis has been carried out with reference to the work of Gomolla & Radtke (2002, analysing institutional discrimination at school within a theoretical framework of organisational theory) making use of the argumentation theory developed by Toulmin (1958). The argumentation analysis aims to reconstruct resources of (common-sense) meaning on which organisational gatekeepers base an assertion thus legitimatising the effects of selection practices. In short and as shown in Figure 3, the pattern of an argument starts with an observation or data (D), the ground one produces to support the original assertion. The latter is according to the claim or conclusion (C) of the argument. Argumentation analysis now works out the explicit or implicit (tacit) knowledge one needs to appropriately step from the data to the claim. This knowledge consists of different kind of propositions as rules or general principles acting as an authorizing bridge between data and claim. Propositions of that ilk Toulmin calls them warrants (W). Whereas data are appealed to explicitly, warrants often remain implicit. Figure 3 exemplarily shows the most often used argument to legitimate the exclusion of immigrant youth from vocational training, linguistic

![Figure 3: The structure of an argument with reference to Toulmin (1958)](image)
proficiency: The claim (C) that foreigners fail in vocational training because they speak bad German (data D) is implicitly based on the assumption, that sufficient linguistic proficiency is indispensable to succeed in vocational training. 65 firms could be analysed with regard to the arguments they use to legitimate both ex- and inclusion of foreign youth as apprentices. The reconstruction of arguments was guided by categories derived from scientific literature and from pre-analysis of 20 exploratory interviews with 7 representatives of professional organisations and 13 gatekeepers within the branches under investigation.

Results
The results show the complexity of logics structuring trainee selection processes in a highly vocationalized VET system: Beside arguments related to the candidates and their background, characteristics of the firm and its gatekeepers respectively are used to justify both ex- and inclusion of specific immigrant youth (‘foreigners’) from vocational training. Table 1 shows the frequency of those arguments in general: Whereas 5 out of 65 firms didn’t use foreigner-specific arguments at all (based on foreigner-specific data), 60 firms used a total of 198 such arguments: 156 times to legitimate the exclusion of specific immigrant youth, 28 times to vote for their inclusion, and 14 arguments could not be classified as either excluding or including. The majority of arguments turning up in 50 firms were student-related. In 32 firms explicitly firm-related arguments were used to legitimate the selections and 25 firms used family- or culture related arguments. Firms often used numerous arguments out of these three categories.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Firms (using the argument)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total of Firms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no foreigner-specific arguments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>foreigner-specific arguments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>thereof student-related</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>firm-related</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>family/culture-related</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 gives an overview of the specific arguments gatekeepers in training firms use to vote for or against specific immigrant youth. Student- and firm-related arguments are highlighted in cursive and bold letters respectively. Only arguments having been mentioned in at least three firms are documented.

Student related achievement arguments. Not surprising given the dominant public discourse on foreign youth the claimed lack of both German proficiency and school achievement figure under the most frequently used arguments to legitimate the exclusion of immigrant youth from vocational training. Linguistic proficiency thereby proves to be the absolute top argument used in a majority of 35 firms. Two more arguments refer to language performance of students: Scoring in 10 firms foreign language proficiency is the most frequently used argument to vote in favour of
migrant apprentices. However foreign language in most of the cases means Italian or Spanish, against what Slavic, Albanian or Turkish proficiency does not count as a ‘linguistic capital’ in the selection processes. Another language-specific argument is the one of ‘bothering’ pronunciation (in emotional terms), mainly related to the accent as a consequence of multilingual background. Whereas achievement motivation and interest is an argument put forward both to value or to devalue applications of foreign youth, four gatekeepers claimed a decrease of achievement motivation during training specific to immigrants. Indeed such decrease would not be possible to diagnose during the selection processes, but it had to be assumed for specific immigrant groups in advance. Four gatekeepers claimed a lack of self-development amongst immigrants.

Table 2: Arguments justifying the ex- or inclusion of immigrant youth in training SME

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Argument</th>
<th>Valuation*</th>
<th>Firms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lack of linguistic proficiency (German)</td>
<td>excluding</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preference of locals (nobody from former Yugoslavia)</td>
<td>excluding</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of school achievement</td>
<td>excluding</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign language proficiency (mainly Italian)</td>
<td>including</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team fit</td>
<td>excluding</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Late (Swiss) school entry</td>
<td>excluding</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Achievement motivation and interest</td>
<td>ambivalent</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoiding disagreeable clientele</td>
<td>excluding</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social commitment of the firm</td>
<td>including</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bothering pronunciation (accent)</td>
<td>excluding</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distant place of student’s domicile</td>
<td>excluding</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patriarchy (within family)</td>
<td>excluding</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Lack of) family support</td>
<td>ambivalent</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of self-development</td>
<td>excluding</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decrease of achievement motivation (during vocational training)</td>
<td>excluding</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National team-diversity</td>
<td>excluding</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict between employee from former Yugoslavia</td>
<td>excluding</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customer preference</td>
<td>excluding</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alien mentality</td>
<td>excluding</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improper faith</td>
<td>excluding</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macho behaviour (proudness, violence)</td>
<td>excluding</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Familial circumstances</td>
<td>excluding</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anticipated ethnic gathering</td>
<td>excluding</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anticipated workplace bullying</td>
<td>excluding</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Company-related arguments. Such arguments refer to specific practical constraints of training SME, their organisational preferences, beliefs, anxieties and experiences. Conceptually, these arguments relate to the organisational context of firms in the investigated branches. The most common of these arguments (used in 17 firms) is the preference of locals, with ‘locals’ being equivalent to Swiss ‘or the like’ (it can also mean Italians or Germans) but always excluding immigrant youth from former Yugoslavia or Turkey. Gatekeepers often support this argument emotionally or they claim the privilege of locals to be ‘natural’, or they refer on the Swiss (family) tradition of the firm. A range of arguments focuses on the composition and mixture of the
working team. Rather a candidate has to fit to an existing team (from a team’s perspective: 8 cases) than has a candidate to adapt to the team (candidate’s perspective: only one case). Other issues are the provision for a nationally diverse team (with excluding effect on those nationalities most frequently found among the applicants: those from former Yugoslavia), an anticipated conflict between employee from former Yugoslavia (accordingly to the principles of cleavages during the last Balkan Wars: religion and nationalities), an anticipated process of ethnic gathering (resulting in organisational disturbance, amongst others because people would communicate in their own language) or anticipated workplace bullying (foreign co-workers would be molested by locals, without the gatekeeper being xenophobic). With regard to the firms customers the strongest argument is surprisingly not customer’s ethnic preference of employee (the latter inhering a trait of commodities), but avoiding some disagreeable clientele (6 cases): For example a dentist who doesn’t want to attract Albanian patients by hiring an Albanian trainee (saying Albanians would suffer from ‘unacceptable oral hygiene’) or a motor mechanic who fears Yugoslavian clients as they are said not to be as pleased with a service than are Swiss clients (the latter not knowing too much details about their own car). An argument being used in favour of immigrant apprentices is the social commitment of the firm (6 cases). As training firms have a strong need to hire apprentices with local domiciles (amongst others to avoid them showing up too late at work because of delayed traffic) the exclusion of immigrant youth was legitimated in five cases with their geographical domiciles.

Family- and culture related arguments. Gatekeeper in training firms not only consider achievement and performance aspects of the candidates, but also the context of their families or the cultural context students are seen to be affected by (often culturalistic assumptions about the ethnic milieu they are risen in). On the one hand, gender-culture related assumptions are used to justify the exclusion of immigrant youth: Their families are asserted to build on patriarchal structures hindering in particular the professional flexibility of young females. Culturally determined macho-like behaviour (proudness, violence) on the other hand is ascribed to young male immigrants and valued as problematic with regard to female supervisors or co-workers. A lack of wrong family support is seen as problematic with regard to a successful completion of vocational training, and there are other familial circumstances gatekeepers claim to have a negative impact if hiring immigrant youth. Finally, some immigrant backgrounds (first of all the one of Muslims) are equated with an alien mentality or improper faith not being compatible with the firm’s own culture.

Interpretation and conclusion
While in some countries immigrant youth fail to gain access to more academic VET systems because of insufficient school qualifications, they struggle in other countries to enter more vocationalized VET systems because firms prefer local apprentices – regardless of one’s school qualification. Thus, the violability of a vocationalized VET system to integrate immigrant youth rather seems to concern its own accessibility than its exit towards the labour market.

Within the framework of organisational theory and the concept of institutional discrimination as outlined by Gomolla and Radtke (2002) the exclusion of immigrant youth from vocational training (thereby heightening their danger of youth

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5 This last argument is suggested to be immigrant-specific, as immigrant students more often have to apply at distant firms than locals, because they get more often rejected by local firms.
unemployment) can be interpreted as a consequence of organisational needs and practical constraints. In such a conception gatekeepers do not simply act as individuals but as organisational members of training firms the latter having hired them once according to their own organisational logic. The identified company-related arguments refer to such varied organisational needs. Some of them (as the preference for local apprentices) are hard to legitimate in today’s Swiss society as the firms behaviour is highly at risk to be disapproved both by public authorities and interest groups targeting an open, inclusive society towards immigrants and their descendants. Therefore the exclusion of immigrant groups based on xenophobia⁶ has to be legitimatised with alternative arguments. Assertions in terms of language and school deficits are best qualified to do so, as they are in line both with scientific research and the powerful ideology of merit and achievement, especially in the field of education and work. Alternatively, culturalistic arguments touching a candidate’s cultural background are other offers to hide illegitimate interests behind a selection decision. But these arguments often miss the support of serious scientific verification.

The above results are not to be much good to question language- and achievement differences between local and immigrant youth. But they demonstrate that such differences seem to be rather exaggerated when people talk about the capacities of immigrant youth. The concept of institutional discrimination argues that gatekeepers only use such ascribing arguments in the case of organisational exigence to make sense of their own past activities. If such sense making is not required, for example if the national heterogeneity of the workforce doesn’t matter in any sense, gatekeepers do not use the resource of culturalistic arguments to legitimate their selections. An illustrative example is the case of gatekeepers with own immigrant background working in Swiss firms. Analyses show that such gatekeeper hardly use foreign-specific arguments, and if they do so, they use them for inclusive purpose. This behaviour of immigrant gatekeeper can be conceptualized as fully operational, as it was the firm itself who once assigned both membership and influential gatekeeper-ship to a immigrant worker.

The accomplished argumentation analysis with reference to Toulmin (1958) allows reconstructing different mechanisms behind vocational selections. It has been shown that, to legitimate their actions, gatekeepers need to judge an observation by transferring them to a firm-relevant conclusion. On the occasion of a scientific interview a gatekeeper is forced to reveal the assumption underlying his/her judgement. The way research can challenge the observed legitimising strategies is twofold. First the truth of asserted foreign-specific observations (the data) can be put into question (as shown with regard to the argument of low school attainment immigrant youth is believed to be hit by). Second the appropriateness of the assumption underlying the argument (of the warrant) for a firm’s benefit can be challenged. If a gatekeeper persists on the privilege of Swiss locals one could counter that hiring immigrant youth would be a good strategy to enhance the cost-benefit ratio⁷ of an apprenticeship. Whereas incorrect observations are related to

⁶ Recent research by Cattacin, Gerber, Sardi and Wegener (2006) reveals a serious occurrence of xenophobia among a majority of Swiss residents at the beginning of the 21st century. Islamophobia relates to approximately a third of the population. With regard to xenophobia, people in management positions in the private sector are above-average (ibid., 62). Among the interrogated people who have experienced discrimination themselves (14%), the most frequent factor of discrimination was nationality and the most important area of discrimination was the workplace (ibid., 24-25).

⁷ See Wolter, St.C., Mühlemann, S. & Schweri, J. (2003). Their study investigating the cost-benefit ratio of apprenticeship training for Swiss companies has shown that most apprentices offset the cost of their training during their apprenticeship on the basis of the productive contribution of the work they perform. Given this outcome, the authors investigate why some firms choose not to train apprentices.
biased cognitive knowledge, inappropriate assumptions can be the result of lacking experience.

When it comes to formulate appropriate social policies and intervention strategies to increase companies’ awareness for inclusive measures, two sets of measures seem adequate to answer the above theoretical insights: Efficient enlightenment can weaken the power of false statements about immigrant youth and thereby undermine the persuasiveness of excluding arguments. But if the warrant between observation and claim is questionable one has to analyse how gatekeeper support the underlying assumption (that is how they try to prove it). It can be shown, that they support it either emotionally or by (often not self-made) experience. Cattacin et al. (2006, 27) show that Swiss residents predominantly associate fear with the word ‘foreigner’. Indeed anxieties, insecurity, prejudices and ethnocentrism are all elements underlying certain anti-human attitudes (ibid., 6).

The emotional support of gatekeepers’ arguments particularly challenges a sociological approach to trainee selection in SME. If emotions play a crucial role in organisational decision making one has to integrate them in an adequate theoretical framework. This goes beyond a purely rational conception of organisations and has to consider a sociology of emotion. With regard to inclusive measures, the emotional aspect of decision-making processes has to be considered seriously. Referring to the gatekeeper’s statements in discomfort it seems that emotionally caused exclusion of immigrant youth from vocational training is caused by a lack of sufficient experience with immigrant apprentices. In that case not to prematurely accuse enterprises and its gatekeepers of being racist but rather to challenge their operational and personal anxieties by facilitating positive experience seems to be a promising strategy to enhance vocational integration of immigrant youth.

References

They show, that (1) non-training firms would incur higher net cost during the apprenticeship period if they would switch to a training policy and that (2) this less favourable cost-benefit ratio is determined less by cost than by absence of benefit. It seems questionable and thus worthwhile to examine, if these mechanisms would apply to firms’ non-training of immigrant youth.


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Appendix 1
Simplified Diagram of the Swiss Education System