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Do migrants prefer academic to vocational education? The role of rational factors vs. social status considerations in the formation of attitudes toward a particular type of education in Switzerland¹

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Abstract

Using a unique and original dataset measuring attitudes toward vocational and academic education in Switzerland, we explored differences between Swiss natives and immigrants with regard to individual preferences for these different types of education, and their perceived labor market value and social status. More particularly, we tested the hypothesis that migrants exhibit stronger preferences for academic education and attribute a higher labor market value and social status to this form of education compared to Swiss natives as a result of rational calculations and cultural expectations. As our results indicate, first-generation immigrants do exhibit stronger preferences for academic education and assign a higher labor market value to it, but not necessarily a higher social status, although important differences across distinct groups of migrants can be observed. In general, the rational aspects of distinct types of education as measured by their perceived labor market value appear more relevant for the understanding of the formation of attitudes toward vocational vs. academic education, although the variation across groups of migrants indicates that cultural aspects also matter to a certain extent.

Keywords: migrants, preferences, educational system, vocational education, academic education, rational action theory, cultural heritage

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Introduction

In current times, questions related to the integration of migrants into the welfare state and labor market institutions of advanced post-industrial democracies are asked with new urgency. A prominent issue in academic and political debates is the role of education in promoting the labor market integration of migrants. Thus far, most of the existing research is concerned with analyzing the impact of migration status on educational attainment and labor market success (e.g., see Cain, 1986, as an early survey article, and Dustmann and Glitz, 2015, as a recent survey article on the issues of migration, education, and labor market discrimination). In this paper, however, we are interested in determining the association between migration status and individual *attitudes* and *preferences* toward the education system. This is an important and interesting research question because attitudes most likely also influence actual decisions and choices. However, individuals might also adapt their attitudes toward the educational system depending on their past choices. As Busemeyer et al. (2011) have shown for native adult respondents in Switzerland, preferences for vocational vs. academic education are mostly driven by individual educational experience. Whether this is also the case for migrants remains to be observed, as cultural factors and the exposure to a different educational system than the one in the country of origin (for first-generation migrants) are likely to further shape attitudes.

More specifically, we are interested in answering the question whether and why migrant citizens might prefer academic over vocational education. In countries with a well-developed vocational education and training (VET) system, such as Switzerland, vocational education remains an important route for young people with lower academic qualifications to well-paid and relatively stable employment. According to the rational action theory in educational decisions, choosing a particular type of education depends mostly on the assessment of the future costs and benefits associated with the different options available (Breen and Goldthorpe, 1997). As Stocké (2007) demonstrated, however, both the parents' motive to maintain their social status and their expectations toward their children's future chances of success are better predictors of the educational decisions made at critical junctures of the educational career than objective factors such as estimated costs and benefits. Subjective preferences, and in particular cultural aspects linked to social status and migration background, might therefore play an

important role in these decisions. Accordingly, we investigated individual variation in the preferences for vocational vs. academic education, paying attention to the impact of socioeconomic and cultural factors on preference formation.

For this purpose, we analyzed data from a survey of public opinion, conducted in 2012, in the country of Switzerland. This survey was specifically designed to tease out differences between Swiss natives and migrants by oversampling residents with a foreign citizenship. Switzerland is, in a sense, a most-likely case to test the association between migration status and educational attitudes. This is because this country has a well-established and well-functioning VET system that reliably provides good employment opportunities for persons from higher to lower academic qualifications. We then further teased out differences between cultural and economic factors by studying two additional dependent variables in addition to general preferences for academic or vocational education: the perceived labor market value of these two types of education on the one hand and the perceived social status on the other. By doing this, we could assess the consistency of preferences for vocational vs. academic education and whether they correlated with labor market value and social status of each type of education as perceived by respondents.

The next section provides a short introduction to the literature and explains in greater detail how the paper contributes to advancing scholarship. Next, we develop a short theoretical framework with a set of testable hypotheses, which is then followed by the empirical analyses. In the concluding section, we reflect on the implications of our findings for the integration of migrants in education systems and labor markets in Western European countries.

Literature review and theory

This paper responds to two major gaps in the existing scholarly literature: First, there is a growing literature in the field of educational sociology that studies educational attainment and decisions of migrants (Cebolla-Boado, 2011; Diehl et al., 2009; Hillmert, 2013; Jackson et al., 2012; Jonsson and Rudolphi, 2011; Kristen and Granato, 2007; Laganà et al., 2013). This literature provides important insights into the differences between natives' and migrants' educational careers, but by definition, it is concerned with educational decisions, not *individual attitudes and preferences* toward different types of education. The distinction between actual choices and abstract preferences is crucial, in particular in the case of migrants. This is because migrants might be more constrained in their educational choices than natives and therefore might prefer to pursue other educational careers if they had the choice. Furthermore, the analysis of educational decisions obviously focuses on those subgroups of the population who are directly (students, pupils) or indirectly (parents) affected. In contrast, the study of public opinion on education concerns the whole population. Thus, at the aggregate level, individual preferences over different educational alternatives accumulate to demands and expectations vis-à-vis the state and policy makers. Therefore, the second set of literature that this paper addresses is scholarly work on the dynamics of public opinion on education (Ansell, 2010; Busemeyer et al., 2009; Busemeyer et al., 2011; Busemeyer, 2012, 2015; Cattaneo and Wolter, 2009, 2013). Compared to the former, this literature is still small though growing. The study of differences in public opinion between natives and migrants, however, has not yet been analyzed from that perspective.

The existing scholarship on the determinants of attitudes toward the welfare state and education—the second strand of literature identified above—provides theoretical guidance on how to explain the formation of attitudes of adult migrants toward the educational system. As mentioned above, the more specific literature on public opinion toward education is still small in size. However, it builds on and draws from a large amount of literature in comparative welfare state research, which analyzes individual attitudes and preferences for different kinds of social policy as well as preferences for redistribution in general (for a recent overview, see Svallfors, 2012). Education as one policy field in encompassing welfare state regimes had long been neglected in this literature, which is usually confined to studying public attitudes on the core sectors of

the welfare state, such as healthcare, unemployment, or pension policies. Furthermore, even within the large amount of literature on welfare state attitudes, there has been very little attention paid to the analysis of migrants' preferences with regard to the welfare state as most of the literature here is concerned with studying the association between migration attitudes of *native* citizens and their welfare state support (Brady and Finnigan, 2014; Eger, 2010; Emmenegger and Klemmensen, 2013a; Emmenegger and Klemmensen, 2013b; Garand et al., 2015; Schmidt-Catran and Spies, 2016; Senik et al., 2009). Thus, the issue of migration is usually discussed in the context of ethnical fractionalization of societies, which is believed by some to be an important factor delimiting public support for redistribution (Alesina et al., 2001).

One of the core findings in the existing literature thus far is that there is indeed a strong connection between individual educational experiences and public support for different types of education (Busemeyer et al., 2011). For example, individuals with a vocational educational background are more likely to support continued public investment on this type of education rather than on higher education and vice versa. This is an important insight, because it could also have been the case that individuals with a vocational background would demand more investments in higher education so that their children would have a higher likelihood of attending universities. Conversely, individuals with a university background might actually support more spending on VET to restrict access to higher education and divert low-ability students to vocational tracks (Hillmert and Jacob 2003). The finding that individuals do in fact support that kind of education, which fits their own educational experiences, is a good example of "positive feedback effects" (Pierson 1993), i.e., a close match between existing educational institutions and commensurate patterns of public opinion.

However, as we argue in the following, the situation could be different when studying differences in attitudes between migrants and natives. In this paper, we concentrate on attitudes toward different types of post-secondary education, i.e., vocational education on the one hand and general academic education at the upper secondary and tertiary level on the other. These sectors of the education system are closest to the labor market and therefore significantly affect individual life chances. The core hypothesis that we tested is whether there are systematic differences in attitudes between these two

subgroups of the population that remain robust even after controlling for other factors such as income, age, gender, or educational background, which might also affect individual attitudes. There are several reasons to expect these differences to emerge.

A *first mechanism* that could account for differences between natives and migrants are different rational expectations on the relative value of different types of education. The Breen-Goldthorpe model of rational educational choices and its extensions (Becker and Hecken, 2009; Breen and Goldthorpe, 1997; Hillmert and Jacob, 2003) assumes that individuals base their educational decisions on a rational assessment of the relative costs and benefits of different educational pathways. Applying this model to our research question, it could be argued that migrants might have different rational expectations with regard to the costs and benefits associated with different educational pathways, based on their educational experiences in their home countries. In Switzerland, VET is a well-established and credible alternative to academic higher education. However, it is plausible to expect that in virtually all other countries, the status of VET relative to academic education and the labor market value of a vocational degree are lower. Therefore, migrants who have fewer experiences with the Swiss education system (and therefore less information about it) are likely to attribute a lower labor market value to VET than Swiss natives. Hence, our argument slightly differs from a purely rational-choice model by acknowledging bounded rationality, i.e., breaking with the assumption of perfect information. Furthermore, migrants might have reasonable expectations for themselves or their children to return to their country of origin at some point in their future life. Being aware of the lower labor market value of VET in their home country, they might be more reluctant to pursue this type of education in Switzerland.

The *second mechanism* is less based on rational expectations, but more related to cultural aspects. It is therefore complementary to the first one. Nevertheless, it can be argued that besides or in addition to rational expectations on the relative costs and benefits of different types of education, educational institutions also shape normative expectations of individuals, e.g., with regard to the question of how social status is linked to different types of education. This in turn is likely to influence their perception of the educational system of their current country of residence. Many studies indeed point at

the importance of cultural heritage and awareness of being a minority for the formation of parents' expectations toward their children's education, especially in the case of Chinese immigrant families in the U.S. (Li, 2001; 2004). Hence, it can be argued that migrants' cultural predispositions are associated with concerns about the social status of different educational pathways.

In sum, the clear hypothesis that emerges from this discussion is that there will be significant differences in attitudes toward different kinds of education between migrant and native citizens. These differences are related to rational expectations or cultural dispositions based on migrants' experiences with the educational institutions in their home countries as well as potential plans to return to their country of origin at some point in the future. Because academic education enjoys a superior social status and usually better labor market returns almost everywhere than vocational education, the Swiss case is a good test case to ascertain whether migrants or foreign residents will move away from the common perception of the superiority of academic education in a context, where VET has a much better standing and reputation as an alternative to academic education.

Our core hypothesis for the empirical analysis is that migrants/foreign residents are expected to express a stronger preference for academic rather than vocational education. This can be further elaborated in three related hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1a: Migrant citizens are more likely to prefer academic rather than vocational education for their children than Swiss natives.

Hypothesis 1b: Migrant citizens attribute a higher labor market value to academic relative to vocational education than Swiss natives.

Hypothesis 1c: The expected social prestige of academic relative to vocational education is likely to be higher among migrant citizens than among Swiss natives.

A second issue related to the previous one is whether there are differences in expectations between different groups of migrants as is suggested in the literature (Hao and Bonstead-Bruns, 1998). It is reasonable to expect that attitudinal differences related to Hypothesis 1a-c are more or less pronounced, depending on the country of origin of

migrants. These differences could be related to the relative status of VET in the country of origin. Even though VET is particularly well-established in Switzerland, it remains a viable and credible alternative to academic education in many other European countries as well. Furthermore, it could be assumed that cross-border communication between European countries, which promotes the diffusion of ideas about the appropriateness of different types of education, is more developed than in the rest of the world. The associated hypothesis therefore is:

Hypothesis 2: Attitudinal differences between migrant and native citizens are more pronounced when the country of origin is non-European.

Data and methods

To study the hypotheses presented in the previous section, we² commissioned the professional survey institute "Gesellschaft für praktische Sozialforschung" (GfS)³ to collect data from a representative sample of Swiss residents.⁴ The sample contains information on a total of 2,055 Swiss citizens and 768 foreign residents over the age of 18. The data were collected between May and September 2012 using Computer-Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI). The interviews were held in German, French, Italian, English, or Portuguese. Apart from individual socioeconomic and family characteristics, respondents were asked to express their opinion on a series of questions concerning different aspects of education policy.

As the main goal of this study was to analyze the potential different attitudes toward vocational education between Swiss natives and immigrants, the first thing to do is to

² The survey was commissioned by the Swiss Leading House for the Economics of Education, a research initiative at the Universities of Bern and Zurich. The authors gratefully acknowledge the financial support of the Swiss State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation to the Leading House.

³ The GfS institute is one of the leading institutes in Switzerland carrying out opinion polls. It has a long tradition in political analyses and representative polls for elections and votes and is therefore well known in the Swiss population.

⁴ The sample was selected from a random sample of Swiss residents provided by the Swiss Federal Statistics Office (SFSO) and taken from the register of all inhabitants. To reach the desired sample size and defined quotas, the SFSO provided contact details of 20,000 Swiss citizens, and of 20,000 foreigners. Because the number of desired interviews could not be reached despite the oversampling, the rest of the sample was selected randomly using the telephone book. Under this second sampling method, the respondents were also chosen randomly within each household by asking for the person who had his/her birthday last during the calendar year. In addition to the oversampling of foreigners, quotas for language region, age, gender, education, and marital status were applied to avoid further biases.

define—for the purpose of this paper—the group of respondents who are considered to be “migrants” (or “foreign residents,” we use the terms interchangeably). In this analysis, migrants/foreign residents are defined as all respondents who do not have a Swiss nationality, regardless of place of birth. This means that among the foreign residents we may have first-, second-, and possibly third-generation immigrants. We will distinguish further between different subgroups of migrants, since there might be differences across these groups, depending on country of origin, place of birth (Switzerland or abroad), and time (age) of arrival in Switzerland. The survey provides information on nationality and country of birth and on whether the parents were born in Switzerland. To control for the fact that foreigners who have been living in Switzerland for a long time, especially those who were born in Switzerland, might have assimilated more into the country, we included controls for second- and third-generation immigrants, who we define as foreigners born in Switzerland. We also controlled for the fact that among Swiss nationals, there are people who chose to gain citizenship somewhere along the way. It is not clear *a priori* whether these citizens have opinions that are closer to those of the immigrants or to Swiss natives, as despite the fact that many of them have to live ten years or more in Switzerland in order to obtain Swiss citizenship, most of them were born and raised in another country. To control for this, we included a variable that indicates if the person has chosen naturalization. The variable takes the value one if the person has Swiss nationality but both parents were born abroad.⁵

The first hypothesis to be tested suggests that migrants are more likely to prefer academic rather than vocational education for their children than Swiss natives. To analyze this, the following question was included in the questionnaire:

“Irrespective of whether you have children or not: what education would you wish your child to have after completing its compulsory education?”

⁵ This may include some Swiss citizens whose parents are both Swiss but were born outside Switzerland. However, this case is very unlikely and therefore misattribution is minimal. Also, with this definition, we do not consider naturalized Swiss people as naturalized who have at least one parent born in Switzerland. Although this may lead to an underestimation of naturalizations in statistical terms, we assume that given the naturalization laws of Switzerland, most of the Swiss citizens who have only one parent that was not born in Switzerland have become Swiss by birth and have therefore not asked for naturalization.

Respondents could choose from four possibilities:

1. Vocational training/specialist secondary school,
2. Academic baccalaureate school,
3. Either would be feasible, depending on the child's inclination,
4. It wouldn't matter to me.

Our second and third hypotheses do not concern preferred educational choices, but the value of vocational education from the labor market perspective and its associated social status. As mentioned above, migrants might attribute a higher labor market value as well as a higher social status to academic rather than vocational education, based on rational expectations concerning the relative pay-off of these educational pathways or cultural predispositions based on experiences in their home countries.

To test these hypotheses, the questionnaire included two questions: the first concerns the labor market perspective, and the second is about the social status of vocational education:

“Which of the following three statements is most accurate in your opinion? Considering the job market: people in Switzerland with vocational and professional education and training (apprenticeship, tertiary level B professional education and training, university of applied sciences) are...

1. *better equipped,*
2. *equally well equipped, or*
3. *not as well equipped as those with an academic baccalaureate or university education.”*

“Please select one of the following three answers: With a vocational qualification (apprenticeship, tertiary level B professional education and training, university of applied sciences) people in Switzerland enjoy...

1. *a higher,*

2. *an equally high, or*
3. *a lower social status than those with an academic baccalaureate or university education."*

Whereas the first question captures inherent differences between native Swiss citizens and migrants, the second and third questions can help to shed light on the causal mechanisms that might explain these differences (if they exist). For instance, migrants might regard the labor market value of vocational education as lower than that of university or academic education, weighing the relative costs of benefits of the different educational pathways. It might also be the case that migrant respondents do in fact recognize the value of vocational education in the Swiss labor market, but still prefer their children to obtain academic education, because they are uncertain about staying in Switzerland and are worried about the supposedly lower social status and labor market value attached to vocational education in (most) other countries. Alternatively, differences between Swiss natives and migrants might result from cultural predispositions regarding the social status/prestige of vocational education.

To make it easier for readers to interpret the findings, we dichotomized our dependent variables and grouped the four answer categories for the questions about the relative relevance of vocational education relative to academic degrees for the labor market and the social status into two categories: whether people with a vocational education are worse or better prepared for the labor market and whether they had a lower or higher social standing than academic graduates.⁶

As mentioned above, we expected the individuals' educational background to be associated with attitudes toward education policy. To control for this, we created five education dummies based on the highest level of education attained and separated vocational educational qualifications from general academic qualifications. The first dummy is *compulsory school*, which includes people who just completed primary school and lower secondary school. The category *apprenticeship* includes all people who completed a vocational training at the upper secondary level; *baccalaureate* indicates completion of an academic baccalaureate at a general secondary school, which is the

⁶ We tested alternative specifications of the outcome variable and they all led qualitatively to the same results.

university entrance diploma in Switzerland; and the dummy *tertiary nonacademic* includes all people who completed vocational training at the tertiary level (this includes higher degrees in vocational/professional training (ISCED 5B), university of applied sciences and universities of teacher education⁷). Finally, *academic education* includes all people with a university degree. Other control variables are age, gender, language region, whether the respondent has children in school, and marital and employment status.

Descriptive data

Tables 1 and 2 provide a descriptive summary of the data. After deleting observations with too many missing values, the final sample contains a total of 2,247 observations, consisting of 1,670 Swiss citizens and 577 foreign residents. Approximately 9% of Swiss citizens were not born in Switzerland, which means they either have at least one Swiss parent or they chose to acquire Swiss citizenship sometime along the way. As described, we tried to control for naturalization, as the preferences of people who are not Swiss natives but possessing Swiss citizenship at the time of the survey might also differ from Swiss natives. On the other hand, 16% of the immigrants were born in Switzerland. We defined this subcategory of immigrants as second-generation migrants and used this as an additional control in our regressions.

Looking at Table 1, we observed that immigrants are overrepresented among people with only compulsory school and people with university degree and underrepresented in the group of people with vocational education. This shows on the one side, the bifurcated nature of the skill profile of migrants in Switzerland with both low- and high-skilled migrants being overrepresented, and on the other side, the fact that middle qualifications, as basic vocational degrees, are less common outside Switzerland.

The descriptive results in Table 1 show that the percentage of respondents who prefer academic education for their children rather than vocational education is twice as high

⁷ Although today's universities for teacher education are institutions at the tertiary level, they differ from "academic" universities, as do universities for applied sciences, because they cannot award PhD's. These universities also differ in that, particularly in the German-speaking part of the country, many of their students do not possess an academic baccalaureate as the entrance qualification. Although one could question this grouping, the empirical results of our analyses do not change if we include graduates of teacher education into the group of those with an academic university education.

for foreign residents as for Swiss natives. Moreover, immigrants are more likely to think that people with vocational education are less qualified for the labor market. However, Swiss natives in general are more inclined to think that vocational education confers a lower social status.

[Table 1 about here.]

Table 2 presents results that differentiate further among different nationalities of foreign residents to see whether there are differences depending on the country/region of origin. In this differentiation, the different groups are defined according to the geographical region of the birthplace of the respondents. As can be seen in Table 2, the number of observations for respondents born outside Europe is very small (with less than 20 observations). Therefore, we merged these four groups into one category (Non-Europeans) for the subsequent regression analyses. Another issue to consider is that people from Italy and Germany are overrepresented in our sample, while people from Serbia, Kosovo, and Turkey (some of the main immigrant nationalities in Switzerland) are underrepresented. This might be due to the fact that the survey was only carried out in German, Italian, French, English, and Portuguese. The numbers for the other nationalities are in line with those from the Swiss Federal Office of Statistics. To correct for any potential nationality over/underrepresentativeness, we used sampling weights in our regression analyses.

The descriptive data revealed significant differences among immigrants. Those from Southern Europe (Italians being the largest nationality in this group) tend to regard vocational education much more positively than all other groups. For example, in the of the question about social status, only 27% of Southern Europeans think that the social status of vocational training is lower than that of academic education, whereas in comparison, between 40% and 50% of all other migrant groups think that this is the case. One reason for this might be that in Southern Europe, a large fraction of the population attends university and a large portion of these persons are later unemployed or working in jobs for which they are overqualified. This might decrease the social privilege of academic education in the eyes of people from this region. This is in contrast

to Switzerland, where only relatively few get to attend university, which might in turn increase the social status of academic education.

[Table 2 about here.]

Results from regression analyses

In this section, we present findings from regression analyses of the determinants of individuals' preferences for academic vs. vocational education as well as their attitudes toward the relative labor market value and social status attached to these different educational pathways by using standard multivariate regression techniques.

To analyze the first hypothesis, respondents were asked which post-compulsory school educational path they wish for their children. We used standard multinomial logit models, in which the dependent variables are the preferences for vocational education (reference category), academic baccalaureate school, or either one.⁸

Our results (see Table 3) show that migrants as a whole are more likely to prefer academic education rather than vocational education for their children (model 1) and that there is no difference for the answer category "either way is possible." This is supportive of Hypothesis 1a. In model 2, we tested differences between different groups of migrant citizens. The results show that second-generation migrants do not differ in a statistically significant way from Swiss natives in their preferences for academic education relative to vocational education but that naturalized Swiss citizens differ from Swiss natives in almost the same way as first-generation migrants.

In models 3 and 4, we further distinguish between first-generation migrants from different geographical areas and countries with a long-standing apprenticeship tradition and countries without such a tradition. We hypothesized that immigrants from the same geographical region or countries with similar educational systems as that of the host country might share a similar culture and therefore think relatively alike. The results show that all migrants from different regions, except those from Southern Europe, express a strong preference for academic education. Furthermore (see model 4), it can be shown that immigrants from countries with a strong vocational education tradition (Germany, Austria, Denmark, and the Netherlands) do not differ from migrants from countries with no distinct tradition of apprenticeship—again with the exception of migrants from Southern Europe who show similar preferences for vocational education

⁸ We omitted the response category "it wouldn't matter to me," as almost no one chose this answer.

relative to academic pathways as Swiss natives. This finding runs against our expectations as expressed in Hypothesis 2.

[Table 3 about here.]

As mentioned above, one reason why citizens would prefer academic rather than vocational education for their children might be that they believe the labor market value of academic skills to be higher than the value of vocational skills. Table 4 displays the determinants of individual attitudes on the relative labor market value of academic vs. vocational education. In general, immigrants are more likely to associate vocational education with a lower labor market value, which is in line with Hypothesis 1b. When we split the migrants' sample into geographical groups, we observed that this view is mostly shared not only by Eastern Europeans and people from the rest of the world but also by migrants from countries with an apprenticeship training tradition (model 4), while Southern Europeans are less likely to associate vocational education with lower labor market performance. This is at best a partial confirmation of Hypothesis 2. Concerning immigration status, second-generation migrants are even (at the 10 percent level of statistical significance) somewhat less likely to consider vocational education as less successful on the labor market than Swiss natives, whereas naturalized Swiss citizens do not differ in their assessment from Swiss natives.

[Table 4 around here.]

Another reason why immigrants might dislike the notion of vocational education for their children is because they might associate this with a lower social status. However, confirming our results from the descriptive statistics, immigrants actually ascribed a higher social status to vocational education than Swiss natives (see Table 5), which is different from what we expected in Hypothesis 1c. Further analyses revealed that this somewhat surprising result is driven especially by people from Southern Europe (model 3 in Table 5) and immigrants from countries with a tradition of apprenticeship training (model 4 in Table 5). One possible explanation for the large difference between migrants from Southern Europe and Swiss natives as well as most of the other migrant groups was already hinted at above: Many Southern European countries are characterized by a

combination of a large share of young people having university degrees and persistently high levels of youth unemployment or overqualified employment. This could diminish the social prestige of a university education in this group of migrants. The opposite could be true for Swiss natives, where less than 20% of a typical age cohort pursue an academic post-compulsory education (see SCCRE 2014), which would enable them to attend university. This increases the relative status of university education, as it is still a very select group of the population holding such educational credentials.

[Table 5 around here.]

When interpreting the findings in Table 5, we have to keep in mind that respondents had three answer possibilities and that when only comparing the answer categories of lower and higher social status, we found a higher number of people assigning VET a lower social status than assigning a higher social status for both groups, Swiss natives and migrants.

Conclusion and discussion

To summarize our main findings, we found considerably stronger preferences of migrants relative to Swiss natives for academic education over VET, controlling for their educational and social background. As expected, we found that migrants, having less experience with the Swiss VET system, consider the labor market outcomes of VET education to be inferior to academic qualifications. However, contrary to our hypotheses, migrants have a somewhat less pessimistic attitude regarding the social status of VET relative to academic qualifications than Swiss natives. Nevertheless, compared to Swiss natives, there are a higher number of migrants assigning VET qualifications a lower social status than assigning them a higher social status.

Differentiating between different groups of migrants we found that in general, migrants from Southern Europe have a more positive view of VET relative to academic education—both compared to migrants from other regions as well as compared to Swiss natives. The opposite was found for migrants from countries with a long tradition of apprenticeship training. They show an equally stronger preference for academic

qualifications as do other migrants when compared to Swiss natives. Whether this is the result of a difference in preferences for academic over vocational qualifications between the different countries and Switzerland or the result of a selective immigration from these countries to Switzerland cannot be answered on the basis of our survey data. Since we controlled for the highest educational attainment of respondents, unless this selection effect operates through other channels, the selection bias should be small.

Furthermore, we found that the preferences of second-generation migrants in general do not differ in a statistically significant way from the Swiss native population but that naturalized Swiss citizens are more similar to first-generation migrants than Swiss natives. It might therefore be that the length of exposure to and a better knowledge of VET in Switzerland improve its image among immigrants, as for instance shown by Bolli and Rageth (2016). Therefore, a first explanation for the much stronger preferences for academic over vocational education exhibited by migrants compared to Swiss natives is that they are unfamiliar with the educational system of the host country and prefer educational options that resemble the education systems of their countries of origin. An observation that would back this hypothesis is the finding that second-generation migrants have similar preferences to Swiss natives. However, the findings that migrants from Southern Europe, where graduates from academic education have difficulties finding jobs, have an even stronger preference for VET in Switzerland than Swiss natives and that migrants from countries with a long-standing tradition of apprenticeship training favor academic education, does not support the explanation that migrants just prefer the most familiar type of education.

An alternative explanation is that migrants may prefer the education that promises the highest economic success in the country of destination as well as in the country of origin (see Dustmann and Glitz, 2015). The consequence of this explanation would be that migrants who wish to be mobile will have a preference to acquire skills in the host country that are highly transferable to other countries, which in this case are rather academic than vocational skills. On the other hand, migrants, such as second-generation immigrants, who have decided to stay in the host country, or immigrants who do not see an economic future in their countries of origin, such as current immigrants from Southern Europe, wish to acquire or already have acquired skills that guarantee the best

economic success in the host country given their resources, which in the case of Switzerland can also be vocational qualifications. This explanation would thus be in accordance with the rational action theory in the case of educational decisions.

Last but not least, it appears that stronger preferences for academic education among immigrants rather match its perceived labor market value. Why do immigrants then assign a lower labor market value to vocational education than Swiss natives, even when the former originate from a country with a well-established VET system? If we rule out the selective immigration hypothesis, then this means that a well-established VET system is not necessarily tantamount to widespread recognition, although it might slightly improve its standing (Billett, 2014). Individuals from countries with established apprenticeship training systems might pay even more attention to labor market outcomes associated with VET, in particular lower lifetime earnings, limited career mobility, and wage progression (Hanushek et al., 2016; Weber and Falter, 2011), independent of the fact that the real labor market value of VET in Switzerland is better than in other countries.

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Tables

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Swiss</i>	<i>Immigrant</i>	<i>Total</i>
Prefers academic upper-secondary education for their children	12.34 (0.80)	24.86 (1.80)	15.62 (0.77)
Both academic upper-secondary education and vocational training are feasible alternatives	70.0 (1.12)	55.76 (2.07)	61.46 (1.00)
Prefers vocational training	17.84 (0.94)	19.38 (1.65)	17.89 (0.81)
People with vocational education worse prepared for the labor market	16.58 (0.91)	21.39 (1.69)	17.83 (0.80)
Social status of vocational education lower than that of academic education	48.90 (1.22)	39.73 (2.02)	46.52 (1.04)
Social status of vocational education higher than that of academic education	9.52 (0.72)	12.65 (1.39)	10.32 (0.64)
Compulsory school	13.25 (0.83)	31.27 (1.91)	15.32 (0.76)
Vocational training	50.56 (1.21)	28.70 (1.87)	46.26 (1.04)
Baccalaureate school	2.86 (0.41)	6.97 (1.05)	4.00 (0.41)
Tertiary non-academic education	21.80 (1.00)	14.95 (1.47)	20.38 (0.85)
University	11.53 (0.78)	18.10 (1.59)	14.04 (0.73)
Age	49.14 (0.43)	42.32 (0.63)	48.21 (0.35)
Man	48.30 (1.21)	55.35 (2.05)	49.78 (1.05)
Single	29.95 (1.12)	22.24 (1.90)	27.95 (0.94)
Married	55.38 (1.21)	66.89 (1.94)	58.36 (1.03)
Widow or divorced	14.68	10.87	13.69

	(0.86)	(1.49)	(0.72)
Children: yes	64.88	66.72	65.36
	(1.16)	(1.94)	(1.00)
Born in Switzerland	91.38	16.06	72.14
	(0.69)	(15.30)	(0.64)
Non-Swiss partner or spouse	5.23	54.99	17.87
	(0.54)	(2.06)	(0.80)
French-speaking Switzerland	23.52	33.25	25.92
	(1.03)	(1.94)	(0.92)
German-speaking Switzerland	72.07	61.12	69.06
	(1.09)	(2.01)	(1.00)
Italian-speaking Switzerland	4.40	5.62	5.02
	(0.50)	(0.95)	(0.46)
Employed	62.63	68.22	64.35
	(1.17)	(1.92)	(1.00)
N	1670	577	2247
Standard errors in parentheses			

Table 2: Descriptive statistics by region of origin (birthplace)

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Swiss</i>	<i>North Europe</i>	<i>South Europe</i>	<i>East Europe</i>	<i>Africa</i>	<i>South America</i>	<i>North America</i>	<i>West Asia</i>	<i>East Asia</i>
Prefer academic education for their children	12.34 (0.80)	27.29 (3.07)	16.67 (2.47)	38.10 (6.17)	23.53 (10.60)	23.53 (10.60)	45.12 (17.59)	23.5 (10.60)	57.14 (13.73)
Both academic upper-secondary education and vocational training are feasible alternatives	69.82 (1.12)	62.57 (3.33)	54.59 (3.30)	43.29 (6.29)	44.63 (12.43)	77.14 (10.50)	54.88 (17.59)	72.32 (11.19)	29.20 (12.61)
Prefers vocational training	17.84 (0.94)	10.14 (2.08)	31.97 (3.10)	14.91 (4.52)	31.39 (11.60)	5.35 (5.62)	0 (0)	15.87 (9.14)	8.43 (7.71)
People with academic education worse prepared for the labor market	16.58 (0.91)	20.28 (2.77)	14.04 (2.31)	38.10 (6.17)	23.53 (10.60)	29.41 (11.39)	44.44 (17.57)	29.41 (11.39)	50.00 (13.87)
Social status of vocational education lower than that of academic education	48.90 (1.22)	45.75 (3.43)	27.19 (2.95)	52.38 (6.34)	41.18 (12.30)	41.18 (12.30)	66.67 (16.67)	52.94 (12.48)	71.43 (12.53)
Social status of vocational education higher than that of academic education	9.52 (0.72)	9.91 (2.06)	14.47 (2.34)	11.11 (3.99)	29.41 (11.39)	17.65 (9.53)	11.11 (11.11)	11.76 (8.05)	7.14 (7.14)
Compulsory school	13.25 (0.83)	10.27 (2.09)	33.33 (3.13)	28.57 (5.74)	29.41 (11.39)	11.76 (8.05)	0 (0)	35.29 (11.95)	21.43 (11.38)
Vocational training	50.56 (1.21)	26.36 (3.03)	33.77 (3.14)	41.27 (6.25)	47.06 (12.47)	41.18 (12.30)	0 (0)	41.18 (12.30)	42.86 (13.73)
Baccalaureate school	2.86 (0.41)	5.74 (1.60)	10.53 (2.04)	6.34 (3.10)	5.88 (5.88)	11.76 (8.05)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Tertiary non-academic education	21.80 (1.00)	22.49 (2.87)	14.04 (2.31)	6.34 (3.10)	0 (0)	5.88 (5.88)	58.49 (17.42)	11.76 (8.05)	21.43 (11.38)
University	11.53 (0.78)	35.14 (3.29)	8.33 (1.83)	17.46 (4.82)	17.65 (9.53)	29.41 (11.39)	41.51 (17.42)	11.76 (8.05)	14.29 (9.71)
N	1670	212	228	63	17	17	9	17	14
Standard errors in parentheses									

Table 3: What education would you wish your child to have after completing its compulsory education. Multinomial logit models (vocational training is the base category)

	Academic Baccalaureate School	Either would be feasible
1)		
Immigrant (Reference Swiss)	0.61 (0.23)**	-0.07 (0.18)
Pseudo R ²	0.10	
2)		
Immigrant (Reference Swiss)	0.94 (0.25)**	-0.05 (0.20)
Second generation immigrant	-0.60 (0.54)	0.02 (0.33)
Naturalized	1.30 (0.29)**	0.22 (0.25)
Pseudo R ²	0.11	
3)		
North-west Europe	1.14 (0.34)**	0.30 (0.30)
South Europe	0.14 (0.36)	-0.34 (0.25)
East Europe	1.69 (0.48)**	-0.16 (0.45)
Non-Europeans	1.01 (0.51)*	0.04 (0.44)
Second generation	-0.38 (0.54)	0.13 (0.34)
Naturalized	1.26 (0.29)**	0.20 (0.25)
Pseudo R ²	0.11	
4)		
Countries with Vocational education broad (Germany, Austria, The Netherlands, Luxemburg and Denmark)	1.09 (0.41)**	0.32 (0.35)
Rest of North-West Europe	1.21 (0.57)*	0.25 (0.50)
South Europe	0.14 (0.36)	-0.34 (0.25)
East Europe	1.69 (0.48)**	-0.16 (0.45)
Non-Europeans	1.01 (0.51)*	0.04 (0.44)
Second generation	-0.38 (0.54)	0.13 (0.34)
Naturalized	1.26 (0.29)**	0.20 (0.25)
Pseudo R ²	0.11	

Standard errors in parentheses. **, *, + significant at the 1, 5 and 10 percent level respectively. The regressions include controls for highest level of education achieved, age, gender, employment status, civil status, whether the respondent has children, region of residence, and whether the respondent has a partner/spouse of foreign nationality. N=2247

Table 4: Probability of assigning a lower labor market value to vocational education in Switzerland (marginal effects after a probit regression)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Immigrant (Reference Swiss)	0.04 (0.03)	0.06 (0.03)*		
North-west Europe			0.05 (0.04)	
Countries with Vocational education broad (Germany, Austria, The Netherlands, Luxemburg and Denmark)				0.10 (0.05)*
Rest of North-West Europe				-0.03 (0.05)
South Europe			-0.06 (0.03)+	-0.06 (0.03)+
East Europe			0.14 (0.05)**	0.14 (0.05)**
Non-Europeans			0.14 (0.06)*	0.14 (0.06)*
Second generation		-0.09 (0.04)*	-0.07 (0.04)+	-0.07 (0.04)+
Naturalized		0.03 (0.03)	0.03 (0.03)	0.03 (0.03)
Pseudo R ²	0.08	0.08	0.09	0.09
N	2247	2247	2247	2247

Standard errors in parentheses. **, *, + significant at the 1, 5 and 10 percent level respectively. The regressions include controls for highest level of education achieved, age, gender, employment status, civil status, whether the respondent has children, region of residence, and whether the respondent has a partner/spouse of foreign nationality.

Table 5: Probability of assigning a lower social prestige to vocational education relative to academic education in Switzerland (marginal effects after a probit regression)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Immigrant (Reference Swiss)	-0.08 (0.03)**	-0.10 (0.03)**		
North-west Europe			-0.09 (0.04)*	
Countries with Vocational education broad (Germany, Austria, The Netherlands, Luxemburg and Denmark)				-0.13 (0.05)*
Rest of North-West Europe				0.01 (0.07)
South Europe			-0.22 (0.05)**	-0.22 (0.05)**
East Europe			-0.03 (0.07)	-0.03 (0.07)
Non-Europeans			-0.02 (0.06)	-0.02 (0.06)
Second generation		0.04 (0.07)	0.08 (0.07)	0.08 (0.07)
Naturalized		-0.06 (0.04)	-0.06 (0.04)	-0.06 (0.04)
Pseudo R ²	0.06	0.06	0.07	0.07
N	2247	2247	2247	2247

Standard errors in parentheses. **, *, + significant at the 1, 5 and 10 percent level respectively. The regressions include controls for highest level of education achieved, age, gender, employment status, civil status, whether the respondent has children, region of residence, and whether the respondent has a partner/spouse of foreign nationality.