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Article — Published Version

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International Journal of Training and Development

Provided in Cooperation with:

John Wiley & Sons

Suggested Citation: Kassberg, Gunnar; Dornberger, Utz (2022) : Perception of export intenders on relevant resources and competences for the internationalization of vocational education and training (VET) providers, International Journal of Training and Development, ISSN 1468-2419, Wiley, Hoboken, NJ, Vol. 26, Iss. 4, pp. 606-628, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijtd.12278>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/287790>

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Perception of export intenders on relevant resources and competences for the internationalization of vocational education and training (VET) providers

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Funding information

Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung

Abstract

The local market conditions for VET in Germany naturally affect the exportability of these educational products. In the rarest of cases, education and training products are transferable to foreign markets without any adaptation. The existing literature on international VET cooperation focuses on several transfer aspects as well as case studies of active exporters, investigating drivers and challenges of foreign engagement or analysing international business models. The perspective of resources and competences of VET providers going international has not been considered so far, failing to understand the relevancy of specific factors. This study analyses the required resources and capabilities of internationally active VET organizations (exporters) as well as those without any international experience, but intending to internationalize (intenders). Based on a literature review, this study applied four constructs of company resources and six constructs of competences necessary for conducting international business, each containing two to five

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indicators. Applying a quantitative research approach, data from 43 exporters and 37 intenders were collected to explore the most relevant resources and competences of both groups. Based on a ranking of all factors, a significant difference in terms of relevance perception was detected comparing both groups. Exporters rate relational resources, intercultural competence, physical resources, and product adaption abroad as much more relevant than export intenders do. Intenders, on the other hand, seem to rely heavily on their strengths in the national market and give high priority to organizational resources like quality management and strategy development for opening up international markets. These findings indicate that support programmes fostering the internationalization of VET providers should put more emphasis on the relevant resource and competence development that export intenders need.

INTRODUCTION

Education is directly related to the skills of the population and thus, in turn, to the economic development of individual nations or regions. As not all countries are equally capable of establishing efficient education systems and/or creating equal educational opportunities to meet current and future qualification needs, a fertile ground is being created for a wide variety of approaches to international cooperation and educational transfer. From an international business perspective, there is most certainly an opportunity for internationally oriented VET providers that offer their services on foreign markets (BMBF, 2003). Since the 1990s, the idea of transferring the dual system—or elements of it—has been a central aspect of Germany's efforts in international VET cooperation to support reforms at the national or systemic level (Heller et al., 2015). However, it has been demonstrated in several publications over the past decades, that replicating the German dual system in another country is neither feasible nor practical (Euler, 2019; Geiben, 2017; Stockmann & Silvestrini, 2011). Instead, any type of transfer must reflect the existing conditions of the recipient country, and be adapted to its social, cultural, and economic goals (Euler, 2013; Hummelsheim & Baur, 2014). From today's perspective, the goal is rather to establish collaborations at the political, societal or economic level that can benefit from German experiences in the area of vocational education and training (Frommberger & Baumann, 2019).

The commercial aspect of international VET cooperation as a service export has only been discussed to a very limited extent (Gessler et al., 2018; Strehle, 2019) and remains

underexplored. The majority of publications here are case studies of state-funded international VET cooperation projects that aimed to implement sustainable business models or business relationships. While these provide information about individual situations and circumstances, they allow only limited conclusions to be drawn about the total number of providers based on country- or sector-specific conditions. Furthermore, the current studies cannot explain the existing gap between the positive worldwide reputation of the German VET approach and the limited commercial success of the German VET providers in the international market. According to a series of surveys by iMOVE (2017, 2019), the share of exporters in the German VET sector is estimated at 15% with markets primarily in Europe and Asia. Recent studies show that the overall education industry accounted for 4.6% of Germany's GDP, but education exports still account for a relatively low share of 0.1% of total economic exports but with a strong growth rate at 7.3% since 2010 (Legler et al., 2018). To address this export weakness of German VET service providers it is not only relevant to understand the success factors of exporters, but also to analyse the required resources and capabilities for organizations without international experience but with the intention to internationalize. Specifically, the intenders,¹ for which most of the measures of the German supporting ecosystem are designed, have received no attention by academia so far.

Differences in frame conditions, due to stronger regulation by formal institutions, between home and host country are relatively large in the VET sector compared to other export-oriented industries. The same business model can hardly be applied for entering foreign markets (Hilbig & Nirenberg, 2019; Pilz, 2016) as expectations of customers, involvement of governmental institutions or other external factors change. That causes a challenge because tangible or intangible resources needed in the home market are not necessarily relevant for adapting business models to foreign market conditions.

In summary, this paper aims to analyse how German VET providers, experienced exporters as well as intenders, perceive the relevance of selected resources, capabilities and competences for a new internationalization endeavour. This would in turn allow us to deduce which mistakes were made in initial internationalization projects and which areas of internal factors experienced players consider particularly important in international business activities. As a result for the VET sector in Germany, this paper shall inspire organizations in the field of management training to develop content and methods to improve the internationalization competencies of intenders, allowing them to plan international business activities properly.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND STATE OF RESEARCH

Internationalization of VET

International cooperation

Frommberger and Baumann (2019) state that the term 'internationalization of vocational education and training' is discussed in several contexts. One is the identification of impulses for domestic VET, while another one is the content adaption of VET against the background of global economic requirements. Third, the term deals with international cooperation in

¹Companies with an export intention shall be referred to as export intenders or intenders.

vocational education. The first two streams of literature are strongly linked to international education transfer which, according to Adick (2017), seems to be a generic term for policy lending and policy borrowing (Steiner-Khamsi & Waldow, 2012) that refer to transfers from abroad to Germany and vice versa. The third stream of literature focuses on the international cooperation in VET. However, this field also includes a variety of sub-areas, ranging from development-oriented approaches to rather commercially centred discussions concerning the export of VET services. Furthermore, there seems to be some disagreement in the literature on the term 'VET export'. From the perspective of policy studies and from a systemic point of view, VET export has often been used to describe a 1:1 transfer of a VET system to another country (Geiben, 2017; Gessler et al., 2018). On the other hand, the commercial aspect of the internationalization of VET is also referred to as educational export. This includes the export of products and services of German providers of education and training (Adick, 2017; Kaßberg et al., 2018). Therefore, the export of VET services is mostly used as an umbrella term for all international market entry modes of VET providers.

Frommberger and Baumann (2019) state that approaching the topic exclusively through the terminology of development cooperation would be too narrow, as all activities of VET cooperation lie in a context of international relations, economic growth and foreign trade as well as social and educational policy transfer. All of these factors are intertwined and can to a certain extent be found in any international VET cooperation. This broader approach is already evident in the strategy paper of the German government (Die Bundesregierung, 2013), as it seeks to involve German education and training providers, promote business-related education systems, and engage German companies. The Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training (BIBB) is designated as the central office and national competence centre for international vocational training cooperation. In addition to the iMOVE initiative, which is based within the structures of the BIBB and promotes the development of international markets by education providers, the recruitment of skilled personnel for German companies abroad is also a priority.

Gessler and Kühn (2019, p. 37) address the vagueness of terminology and conclude that international VET cooperation has a wider scope of goals and actions than the context of VET export allows. The argument is guided by the definition of private sector and public sector business models, where the authors believe the former always has a profit motive and the latter shows a very broad set of motives that are not necessarily driven by financial interests. There is consensus in the literature on business models on the point that value must be created for customers, but in the heterogeneous group of providers of VET services not all operate purely profit-oriented. Long-term cooperation with partners abroad plays a major role which could strengthen the provider's position at home and abroad, or secure mobility projects for trainees or teachers.

Commercially oriented internationalization of VET providers

In 2000, the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research or BMBF (2000) stated that due to a growing demand for further education and the increasingly strong appearance of international training and further education providers in the German market, one can speak of a growing market for further education. A similar conclusion was reached in the anthology of contributions to the BMBF-sponsored initiative 'weiterbildung worldwide' (2003) which highlights opportunities and potentials as well as best practice examples. However, the

presence of German providers of further education and training services on the international market is less developed as they focused more on the domestic market. At the same time, the studies emphasized that the internationalization of the sector was of central importance to explore growth opportunities and as a reaction to declining public funding (BMBF, 2000, p. 97 ff.).

In the past decade, quite a number of publications have dealt with drivers and challenges to the internationalization of VET services from a German perspective. The country-of-origin effect in VET was discussed by Abdelkafi and Salameh (2014) as German providers of VET services gain competitive advantages from a globally active German industry and the high reputation of the so-called ‘German quality’. Aside from that, success factors of VET internationalization include the ability to adapt products and services to new markets and client groups (Kühn et al., 2020) as well as existing institutional support that enables cooperation with governmental organizations and the cooperation with partners abroad (Fraunhofer, 2012). In the context of alliances and networks, the ‘follow-the-customer principle’ (Abdelkafi & Salameh, 2014; Hilbig, 2019) should also be mentioned which states that educational services are ordered by companies already operating in the target market (e.g., through local production). A parallel with the literature of internationalization can be drawn here to the so-called ‘piggyback export’ (Foscht et al., 2004), as education providers use structures already created by other German companies abroad to offer their products.

The obstacles for operating abroad created by linguistic, cultural and geographical distances are also perceived in the literature regarding VET service internationalization (Fraunhofer, 2012, 2014a; Kaßberg et al., 2018). In addition, the infrastructure abroad is also addressed which can become a hurdle especially for providers with a technical background (Kühn et al., 2020). Another group of barriers is of a legal or political nature. These barriers range from simple travel and visa restrictions to local structures that are difficult to enter. This is particularly evident in the case of state-owned education systems which require a certain degree of networking, including at the political level, to be perceived in the market at all.

The drivers and barriers previously presented show that products, services and customer communication must be adapted to the environment in the target market. This is strongly linked to the fact that education providers also have to adapt their own business models and their strategies to the socio-cultural, economic and environmental conditions in the target market to be successful (Abdelkafi & Posselt, 2018; Hilbig, 2019; Kühn et al., 2020; Posselt et al., 2019).

The first scientific research specifically on business models of German VET providers was conducted to analyse ‘good practice strategies’ (Fietz et al., 2003) to guide future organizations. Building on the discussions in entrepreneurship and strategic management research on business model design (Chesbrough & Rosenbloom, 2002; Johnson et al., 2008; Osterwalder & Pigneur, 2010) qualitative studies with internationally active VET providers have shed light on relevant elements (Posselt et al., 2019) or patterns (Abdelkafi & Salameh, 2014) of business model design as well as occurring business model types (Hilbig, 2019).

The aforementioned literature has provided excellent insights from a small number of articles that have already dealt with specific barriers, challenges and motivational factors for a more commercially oriented internationalization of VET providers. The scientific discussion has gathered a first look at existing business models of German VET providers

(Hilbig & Nirenberg, 2019) and, at the same time, generated an overview on certain internal factors that seem to be relevant for a successful foreign market entry. Shortcomings of the current body of literature are the purely qualitative approaches and the strong focus on the business model development aspect of the internationalization process. So far, there is no in-depth analysis of the relevant resources and competences for VET provider internationalization and on how exporters and intenders perceive these factors.

Competences and resources in international business research

An important stream of literature originating from the strategic management is the resource-based view (RBV) (Barney, 1991, 2001; Wernerfelt, 1984) and its sub-schools like the knowledge-based view (Grant, 1996) or the capability-based view (Prahalad & Hamel, 1990; Teece et al., 1997) which all have found their appraisal in explaining different variables of international business (Peng, 2001). The connection between resources and capabilities lies in the fact that resources represent inputs and organizational capabilities are needed to coordinate them. Organizational capabilities can be seen as both product and producer of the resource bundle as organizations with identical resources may develop different capabilities (Freiling, 2004; Prahalad & Hamel, 1990). Competences represent sets of knowledge, skills and personality variables that refer to a repeatable, non-random ability to render competitive output (Freiling et al., 2008). The logic of the RBV suggests that unique characteristics of intangible resources (especially knowledge) are particularly important in ensuring that competitive advantages are sustained, as these resources are difficult to imitate and form the basis for sustained differentiation (Curado & Bontis, 2006).

The perspective of resources and capabilities has served as a theoretical framework for studying the behaviour of companies going international and continues to be one of the leading research approaches to internationalization (Ibeh & Wheeler, 2005; Morgan et al., 2004; Wach, 2014). This theory argues that the company's resources, capabilities and competences facilitate the development of sustainable competitive advantages. Also building on the RBV, and specifically on the competence-based approach, dynamic capabilities (DC) can integrate, build, combine and reshape the company's existing resources and capabilities to respond to changing requirements. According to the DC approach (Teece et al., 1997), companies are competitive if they do not only use existing resource stocks but are also flexible enough to respond appropriately to a changing environment and new developments being successful in the long term. The adaption of a business model or the creation of a new one is discussed in the literature of business model innovation (Chesbrough, 2010; Loon et al., 2020; Mikhalkina & Cabantous, 2015) which states that the reconfiguration of the firms structure to create, deliver and capture value to its customers is the main factor that drives business (McQuillan & Scott, 2015; Teece, 2010). This links directly to the literature of internationalization as adaptations of business models over country borders become necessary to react to changing socio-cultural, environmental or competitive situations in the host market (Rask, 2014). A company is therefore more than the sum of its existing resources, more than the sum of the capabilities of its members and also more than the sum of its routines.

Quite a number of studies and scientific articles (Chen et al., 2016; Leonidou et al., 2002; Sousa et al., 2008; Zou & Stan, 1998) have already dealt with resources and/or capabilities and

how they affect export performance. Export performance is generally defined as the result of a company's activities in international markets and is mostly used as a dependent variable to test individual factors and their influence. In all studies, both internal and external factors were examined.

The application of the RBV and DC perspective in the analysis of the internationalization of VET providers has not been done yet. A few publications focusing on educational service providers, mostly higher education institutions, deal with their export readiness (Naidoo, 2010), partner selection or international recruitment strategies (Jiang & Carpenter, 2011).

Research framework

Our research framework is rooted in the scientific contributions of the RBV (Barney, 1991; Peng, 2001) and the related approaches of the competence-based view or knowledge-based view. The resources consist largely of the know-how, skills, and general business competences embodied in managers and strategically important employees. Peng (2001) states that the schools of the RBV can make a significant contribution to international business by identifying specific knowledge and competences as valuable, unique, and difficult to imitate resources that separate the winners from the losers in global competition, allowing smaller companies to stand out and succeed abroad (Knight & Kim, 2009). The research framework is displayed below in Figure 1, with four sub-categories of company resources and 6 sub-categories of capabilities and competences for conducting international business.

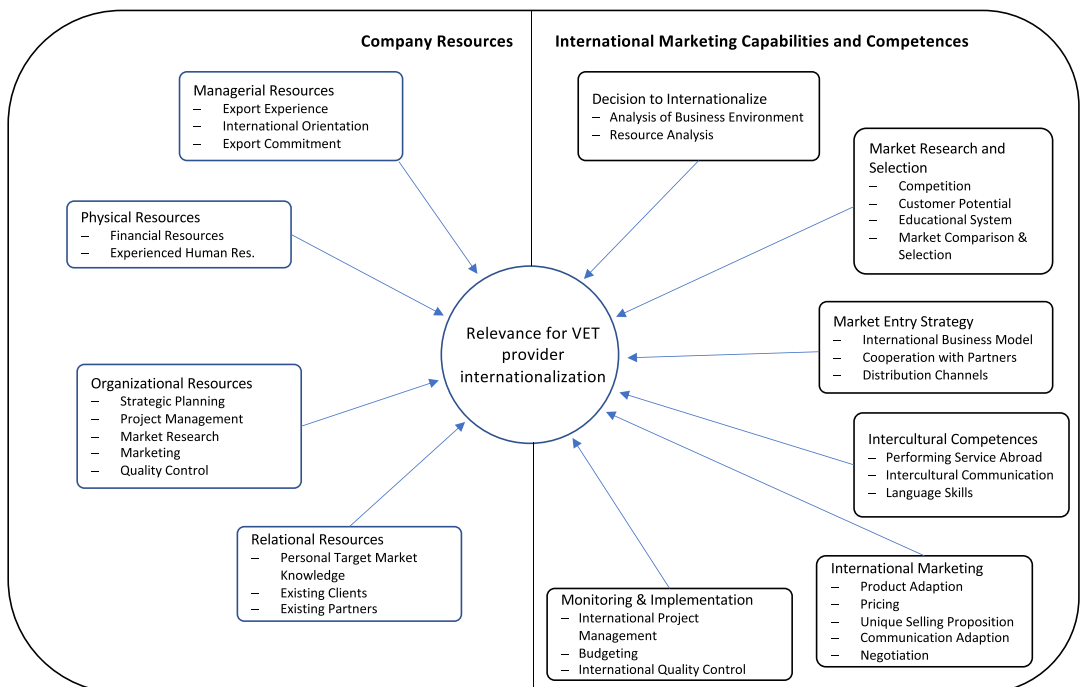


FIGURE 1 Research framework [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

Company resources

Following the suggestions of Burr (2008), there are sets of tangible and intangible resources that form the starting point for the creation of services on an international level. These resource bundles are closely related to the management of the organization, personnel and financial resources, and organizational processes.

Managerial resources

The role of management or its international orientation is part of a number of publications. Wheeler et al. (2008) find that positive attitudes toward exporting on the management level, including management training and international orientation, appear to have a strong effect on export performance. This includes motivation, perception or commitment. For example, Bloodgood et al. (1996) demonstrate that the international experience of the managerial level is positively related to the degree of internationalization of a company. However, the authors also note that this fact is not only due to a better international network through experience or to a better knowledge of international markets. According to Ciravegna et al. (2014), the positive influence of the managers' international experience and their proactive approach to the internationalization process is consistent with the arguments in the literature on international entrepreneurship, as internationalization is an entrepreneurial act involving people whose skills directly affect the outcome. In addition to proactivity—or international orientation—innovativeness and risk-taking are also key aspects of entrepreneurial behaviour in international entrepreneurship (Asemokha et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2009).

Physical resources

Within the physical resources, experienced human resources refer to the quality and composition of personnel in the company and are essential for the success of companies, specifically the ones operating in the service sector (Burr, 2008). Export performance is positively influenced by the management of cross-border activities (Junaidu et al., 2012). Therefore, empirical evidence from previous research seems to suggest that a lack of qualified personnel is a major obstacle to successful service export. Insufficient human resources in a company may also result in a lack of adequate communication with customer groups or inadequate handling of export processes.

Additionally, financial resources and raising funds is difficult for smaller companies due to their limited equity which curtails their ability to enter new markets. The financial constraints of SMEs also mean that investments have to be amortized more quickly which reduces the intensity of export activities. Thus, more financial resources do not per se increase export performance but a lack of financial resources inhibits SMEs from engaging in export activities. For financial resources, it was also found that exporters expect higher costs of internationalization projects compared to non-exporters but see fewer problems in obtaining external capital due to their existing international experience (Ayob et al., 2015).

Organizational resources

The third block of company resources includes characteristics that reflect the basic functional activities and organizational routines (Grant, 1991). Therefore, the focus lies on routines to develop strategies, project management and the ability to market products or services without mentioning the international setting.

Relational resources

Partnerships and stable networks are a way for SMEs to mitigate their risk exposure and cushion market fluctuations (Johanson & Mattsson, 1988). Networks are particularly crucial in the international context for market diversification, testing ideas, and gathering resources to establish new organizational structures. Furthermore, networks have proven to contribute to the success of small and medium-sized exporting companies by helping to identify new market opportunities and contributing to knowledge building (Solano Acosta et al., 2018). From a DC theory perspective, Weerawardena et al. (2007) claim that building and maintaining relevant, superior and effective networks are an essential component of an internationalization process. This is particularly true for the acquisition of complementary resources which are crucial for accelerated internationalization.

International marketing capabilities and competences

The so-called international marketing skills (Knight & Kim, 2009) refer to the ability of a company to carry out effective segmentation of international customer groups and, based on this, to be able to develop an effective target group approach. Morgan et al. (2018, p. 63) offer as a definition that *'[...] firm-level marketing capabilities in international marketing are generally viewed in terms of a firm's ability to use available resources to understand and fulfil foreign market customer needs better than its rivals'*. This includes creating integrated marketing activities for foreign customers and planning and evaluating them accordingly (Morgan et al., 2004, 2012). Relevant sub-measures are the adaptation of products and marketing activities as well as the actual placement of the product in the target market.

Decision to internationalize

Regardless of its industry, some of the first questions an organization needs to answer are: Are we willing to be active in international markets, and do we have the necessary resources to do so? At the centre of these questions is the organization and the environment in which it operates (Porter, 1990, 2010) and how this environment may impact the internationalization decision (Časas & Dambruskaitė, 2011). This is connected to the capability to assess the organizational strengths and weaknesses within this environment and to analyse the business model to find the specific areas of activity that are particularly suitable for the international market (Kaßberg et al., 2018; Sachse, 2008).

Lisboa et al. (2011) have shown that exploration and exploitation capabilities are positively related to the export performance in manufacturing companies. This capability, also known as information acquisition capability, directly influences which target markets to enter and in turn affects the development of services/products (Lu et al., 2010). Cavusgil (1984) has shown that committed exporters pay more attention to market research than the ones who are in the experimental stages of their internationalization practices. This field of capabilities analyses if the organization pays adequate attention to assessing the competitive situation, the customer potential and the educational system in the target market. Additionally, this survey will study the perceived relevance of comparing and selecting new markets. In addition to the procurement of information, the implementation of international marketing strategies is also a core aspect.

Market entry strategy

The term market entry strategy refers to the organizational structure that a company uses to manage its international business. This is a very critical decision in international expansion (Giachetti et al., 2019). The market entry modes range from welcoming clients to the national location as an 'incoming' form to 'outgoing' activities such as exporting, licensing or foreign direct investment (FDI). Depending on internal and external factors the entry mode choice determines the organization's resource commitment, the level of risk and the level of control over its foreign activities (Hill et al., 1990; Laufs & Schwens, 2014). The internationalization of a firm heavily depends on its ability to create a business model that ensures the creation and capture of value also in markets abroad (Bohnsack et al., 2021; Rask, 2014). Therefore, the development of an international business model is bound to the specific market it targets to address and that for VET providers the choice for a business model pattern is a central piece of the internationalization process (Hilbig & Nirenberg, 2019).

Within this capability field, this study adds the ability to establish international cooperation through contracts to the capability of choosing the right market entry mode as VET providers often use local partners to establish cooperation-based market entry modes (Hilbig & Nirenberg, 2019).

Intercultural competences

Intercultural competence describes the ability to deal with people from different cultural backgrounds and is a central prerequisite for making strategically intelligent decisions (Schroll-Machl, 2009) to minimize risk factors. This capability is measured through items reflecting the availability of personnel that is able to work abroad, the language skills and the competence to deliver the service to customers with international backgrounds.

International marketing

International marketing capabilities refer to an organization's ability to create value for customers in the target country through targeted offers that exceed the expected value of the competitors (Knight & Kim, 2009) through an adaptive marketing mix. These skills include the pricing capability with which an international organization can effectively set and manage pricing strategies that create a competitive advantage (Zou et al., 2003). To respond to customer needs detected in the market, the organization needs to have the capability to develop and/or adapt products to the market (adaptive capability) (Lu et al., 2010) as well as the communication capability to efficiently use and manage the communication channels and content with partners and customers (Zou et al., 2003).

Monitoring and implementation

This field of capabilities measures the relevance of international project management and the ability for budgeting and quality control in international ventures as the '*implementation of a coherent export marketing programme is a dynamic task which requires continuous monitoring, evaluation and revision*' (Leonidou et al., 2002).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This paper applies a quantitative research approach to explore and identify the most relevant tangible and intangible resources and capabilities of an internationally active VET service provider as well as organizations intending to go abroad.

To achieve a substantial number of respondents, several databases were accessed for contact data of VET service providers. In total, 1865 organizations were contacted via an anonymous mailing campaign. The questionnaire divided the respondents into exporters and non-exporters, asking all non-exporters about their intention to internationalize to be able to identify the intenders. A total of 147 organizations participated in the survey between December 2017 to February 2018, and after organising the collected questionnaires, this study can draw on $N = 80$ usable data sets that include 43 exporters and 37 intenders.

Of those who responded to the survey, 71% held positions on the board of directors or in management. Another 19% of respondents consider themselves in a managerial position. A total of 5% are employed in a special unit for foreign trade or directly in sales. Four per cent are divided between teaching staff and administrative staff.

Within the survey, companies represent the largest share of responses at 57%, followed by non-profit institutions at 28%. The group of public institutions which is important for education providers was represented by 9%, while 7% are other forms of organizations.

More than 50% of the respondents confirmed that more than 90% of their revenues originate from products and services related to VET. About 20% generate 70%–90% of the total revenue from vocational education and training services and another 7% at least 50%. For a total of 21% of respondents, VET services are a smaller portion of revenue. About 5% of the respondents indicated that less than 10% of their revenue comes from this type of activity.

The level of relevance of each internal factor was measured through an online survey using a Likert scale (not important = 1/very important = 5). The evaluation focuses on the relevance of the resources and competences of the surveyed providers of VET services already presented in the research framework. The mean values and the standard deviation of the constructs will be listed and compared between the two groups of exporters and intenders.

Cronbach's alpha test was used to prove the reliability of all ten constructs, indicating that all constructs show a value higher than 0.7 with only one exception being higher than 0.6.

RESULTS

In general, the exporters rated all of the constructs in the questionnaire as important to very important. The most relevant one is intercultural competences followed by relational resources, decision to internationalize and international marketing with mean scores above 4.30. A total of four constructs which are the capabilities for market research and selection and those for monitoring and implementation and the resource constructs of managerial resources and physical resources receive ratings of 4.00 to 4.30. The less relevant constructs of market entry strategy and organizational resources show a mean of below 4.0.

Intenders also show a tendency toward 'partly relevant'. The high rating of the resource complex of organizational resources is striking which contrasts with the rating of exporters. Organizational resources were the only resource complex not directly linked to the objectives of internationalization, but rather represent generally applicable resources and core competences that are also necessary to position the organization in the national market. A very similar observation can be made when observing the least relevant construct for the intenders: relational resources which seems to be a contradiction to the opinion of the exporters.

The mean values of all other complexes are relatively close to each other, indicating that the intender is not yet able to assess which factors will be particularly relevant for internationalization. The assessment of relational resources which ranks last among the intenders is noteworthy. The majority of constructs, when considered solely in terms of ranking, are ranked similarly by exporters and intenders. With the exception of relational resources, intercultural competences and organizational resources, the rank of each construct differ by only ± 2 between exporters and intenders (Table 1).

On the superordinate level of resource and competence constructs, it is evident that there are differences in the assessment of relevance when comparing the two groups. This is most obvious in the evaluation of relational and organizational resources which are perceived in a very different relevance by both groups. A detailed insight at the construct level is provided in Table 2 listing all the individual scores of exporters and intenders to gain additional insight for the evaluation.

Managerial resources

Surprisingly the international experience and commitment of the management play a rather minor role in the overall picture for both groups. The entire construct of managerial resources must be viewed critically in the context of the survey, as 72% of respondents classify themselves as management representatives. Only the international orientation of the management receives a decent ranking by exporters and intenders, yet, existing export experience for the management is rated as even less relevant. Neither one of the groups' rates any of the factors among the top 10 but they do show similarities in terms of the ranking positions that they assign to the individual items.

TABLE 1 Relevance analysis of constructs

Rank	Exporter			Intender		
	Construct	Mean	Std. dev.	Construct	Mean	Std. dev.
1	Intercultural competences	4.57	0.726	Organizational resources	4.20	0.780
2	Relational resources	4.39	0.816	Decision to internationalize	3.89	0.821
3	Decision to internationalize	4.37	0.635	International marketing	3.84	0.904
4	International marketing	4.34	0.752	Intercultural competences	3.81	1.039
5	Physical resources	4.30	0.837	Monitoring and implementation	3.78	1.058
6	Monitoring and implementation	4.25	0.883	Market research and selection	3.73	0.999
7	Market research and selection	4.07	0.921	Physical resources	3.58	1.268
8	Managerial resources	4.05	1.128	Market entry strategy	3.58	1.104
9	Market entry strategy	3.94	1.032	Managerial resources	3.50	1.153
10	Organizational resources	3.73	1.090	Relational resources	3.49	1.105

TABLE 2 Relevance analysis of company-level factors

Factors	Exporter			Intender		
	Rank	Mean	Std. dev.	Rank	Mean	Std. dev.
Company resources						
Managerial resources: export experience	29	3.77	1.288	33	3.19	1.126
Managerial resources: international orientation	15	4.28	1.076	17	3.76	1.188
Managerial resources: export commitment	22	4.09	1.019	28	3.54	1.145
Physical resources: financial resources	22	4.09	0.971	25	3.62	1.233
Physical resources: experienced human resources	5	4.51	0.703	28	3.54	1.304
Organizational resources: strategic planning	27	3.98	1.058	1	4.54	0.558
Organizational resources: project management	32	3.40	1.275	11	3.84	1.068
Organizational resources: market research	33	3.37	1.092	3	4.14	0.751
Organizational resources: marketing	11	4.33	0.808	2	4.46	0.691
Organizational resources: quality control	31	3.60	1.218	5	4.03	0.833
Relational resources: personal target market knowledge	13	4.30	0.832	31	3.38	1.037
Relational resources: existing clients	7	4.49	0.798	16	3.78	1.058
Relational resources: existing partners	10	4.37	0.817	32	3.30	1.222
International marketing capabilities and competences						
Decision to internationalize: analysis of business environment	8	4.42	0.626	5	4.03	0.687
Decision to internationalize: resource analysis	11	4.33	0.644	17	3.76	0.955
Market research and selection: competition	20	4.14	0.774	23	3.65	0.949
Market research and selection: customer potential	16	4.21	0.888	9	3.86	1.032
Market research and selection: educational system	25	4.05	0.925	23	3.65	1.033
Market research and selection: market comparison and selection	28	3.88	1.096	17	3.76	0.983

TABLE 2 (Continued)

Factors	Exporter			Intender		
	Rank	Mean	Std. dev.	Rank	Mean	Std. dev.
Market entry strategy: international business model	25	4.05	0.925	25	3.62	1.163
Market entry strategy: cooperation with partners	22	4.09	1.087	21	3.68	1.029
Market entry strategy: distribution channels	30	3.67	1.085	30	3.43	1.119
Intercultural competences: performing service abroad	4	4.53	0.667	25	3.62	1.114
Intercultural competences: intercultural communication	3	4.56	0.666	8	3.89	1.022
Intercultural competences: language skills	1	4.63	0.846	7	3.92	0.983
International marketing: product adaption	2	4.58	0.587	13	3.81	0.967
International marketing: pricing	18	4.16	0.974	21	3.68	0.884
International marketing: unique selling proposition	20	4.14	0.861	13	3.81	0.811
International marketing: communication adaption	13	4.30	0.708	9	3.86	0.887
International marketing: negotiation	5	4.51	0.631	4	4.05	0.970
Monitoring and implementation: international project management	9	4.40	0.821	11	3.84	0.958
Monitoring and implementation: budgeting	18	4.16	0.949	20	3.70	1.222
Monitoring and implementation: international quality control	17	4.19	0.880	13	3.81	0.995

Physical resources

Exporters consider it necessary for the organization to have experienced personnel that is able to support international customers. This item from the category of physical resources seems to match the general impression that exporters pay a lot of attention to maintaining good customer relations through their personnel in the target market which can be seen from the relevance ratings in the constructs of intercultural competences and international marketing. Intenders have a very different opinion as they rank this item 28th of 33 positions. Surprisingly, financial resources are not considered very relevant in both groups.

Organizational resources

The top relevancies of the intenders are dominated by organizational resources. The high relevance of these resources which are not directly related to internationalization suggests that intenders initially rely heavily on strengths relevant in the domestic market. From the point of view of the exporters, it is interesting to note that organizational resources were rated as having rather little relevance with general project management being ranked as the least relevant of all. The items from this construct are the only ones that receive higher relevance ratings from the intenders.

Relational resources

One of the main differences between exporters and intenders becomes apparent when looking at the construct of relational resources. For the exporters, all items from the construct of relational resources are rated as highly relevant. Comparing the three factors of this construct with each other, the presence of existing clients is rated as the most relevant. Following this, the exporters regard network connections to potential partners and personal experience in the target market as rather important. A very different opinion can be extracted from the answers of the intenders who do not consider their personal experience and existing partnerships as relevant. In total, the whole construct receives the lowest ranking. That could be a first signal in the direction of policymakers that the creation of networks to customers and partners seems to be underexplored.

Decision to internationalize

The construct of decision to internationalize forms the basis for an internal audit to identify its strengths and weaknesses, and enable the positioning of the organization in the context of the target market. Within that construct, the ability to analyse one's business field is seen as the most important capability by exporters and intenders for making an informed decision about a future internationalization process.

Market research and selection

Apparently, market research, in general, is not perceived as relevant for both groups which may be linked to the survey of iMOVE Trendbarometer (2019) as VET providers state that they are active in almost all countries worldwide, believing that there is a demand for their offerings in almost any region. Since the internationally active providers already consider it extremely important to be able to fall back on customer contacts and existing partnerships, their own market research is not seen as a core competence field in the narrower sense. This is also reflected in the publications of the iMOVE Trendbarometer (2019) where existing partnerships are also cited as a driving factor for internationalization. According to the exporters, the selection and comparison of potential target markets is particularly irrelevant. One explanation here could be that formal and informal networks provide the basis for deciding which markets are perceived as attractive and this does not take place in a structured selection process.

Market entry strategy

Exporters and intenders seem to agree on a lower relevance of these factors. Discussed in the literature as one of the central elements of internationalization, it clearly lags behind other aspects among providers of vocational education and training. In particular, the item 'My organization can select the appropriate form of market entry' was considered relatively unimportant with a mean of 3.67. This can be attributed to the forms of market development used by VET providers in general. On a theoretical basis, there are market entry modes ranging from lower complexity and managerial responsibility like the provision of services to international clients at home or simple export modes to more complex ones like FDI, but in practice, certain forms of market entry such as FDI are rarely used.

Intercultural competences

A look at the exporters' most relevant factors shows that the top six are all associated to the interaction with customers in the target market. These include all three factors from the construct of intercultural competences which place particular emphasis on the capabilities of staff to be both linguistically proficient and interculturally sensitive.

Intenders have a similar view on the relevance of language skills and intercultural communication but with less urgency. The necessity for personnel being able to perform services abroad receives much lower attention. The reason may be that intenders would be focusing on market entry modes that do not require personnel to travel abroad, but rather rely on the willingness of customers to visit Germany for training offers.

International marketing

From a construct perspective, both groups would consider international marketing as rather relevant. A difference can only be seen when taking a closer look at the single items that show a specific difference for the capability to adapt products and services to the target market. The experienced exporters stress the necessity of assessing the offered educational products on their

market fit and in turn making the necessary changes to increase the value perceived by the customer. This goes in line with the fact that the adaptation of customer communication to the target market is rated quite relevant. Both factors, the value proposition and the corresponding communication with the customer are essential prerequisites for the success of international business ventures. The intenders rank the product adaptation capability much lower which shows that they most likely underestimate the need to localize the educational content. Another difference on the factor level lies in the fact that intenders consider having unique products and services as relatively more relevant than the exporters.

Monitoring and implementation

All items from the construct of monitoring and implementation are placed in the middle by both groups of providers. Very little difference in the responses between the groups can be spotted in this field.

DISCUSSION

As already highlighted in the results on the construct level, it is clearly visible that intenders consider organizational resources as highly relevant, however, exporters seem to have a different perspective. While it is not unusual for companies to apply general capabilities such as market research, strategy development, quality management and marketing as a starting point, the results of this study show a tendency for VET organizations without internationalization experience to pay more attention to internal, existing capabilities rather than taking into consideration the external signals from the target market. The strong focus of the intenders on tangible or intangible resources in the domestic market, which undoubtedly is the basis of their competitive advantage on a national level, seems to reduce their attention on the resources and capabilities related to international business.

The results show that exporters are giving a high ranking to primarily two constructs, that is, intercultural competences and relational resources. The experience of VET exporters goes in line with numerous studies from other industries which emphasize international marketing capabilities and competences as particularly decisive factors (Morgan et al., 2018; Zou et al., 2003). Based mainly on the *uno-actu* principle, the service sector is very profoundly integrated into the international value chain (Koopmann & Straubhaar, 2009), however, the integration of the customer into the creation process, a prerequisite for services, presents a challenge to VET providers. The barriers arising from linguistic, cultural and geographical distances that organizations face in the internationalization process pose the same difficulties in the education sector (Fraunhofer, 2012, 2014a). The service sector typically provides services on-site or in interaction with the target group which further highlights the need for intercultural competences. The factor of distance to the target market causes a whole series of effects on internationalization efforts of education providers. Customer proximity, for example, is only possible to a limited extent, and with it the extensive analysis of the customer's willingness to pay a certain price for a product or the identification of customer needs which in turn makes the adaptation of the value proposition possible in the first place. Last but not least, employees need to have the appropriate language skills to communicate smoothly with participants or customer groups. If either the customer's needs are not met or the customer's

interest is not stimulated, it can be assumed that competitors will fill this gap in the target market or the customer's needs will remain unsatisfied. In the international context, it is particularly important to adapt both the value proposition and its communication to the expectations of the target market to compensate for the competitive advantages of competitors already operating on-site.

The most relevant construct for exporters from the section of company resources is the relational resources. The basis for a successful international cooperation in vocational education and training export is strategic cooperation based on suitable and sustainable relationships with partners in the target country (Fraunhofer, 2014b). The strong focus on partnerships could be the reason for the surprisingly low relevance of the construct of market entry strategies as the mode of entry will predominantly be via partners and, therefore, this specific skill set is not needed.

This leads to the assumption that intenders would be focusing more on bundles of resources and capabilities less needed for an international venture, making them more vulnerable to failure in their first internationalization process. Based on these results, intenders are underestimating certain factors such as intercultural communication, the capability to adapt products and services to the requirements of the target market as well as building necessary relationships with customers and partners abroad. It can be assumed that failed internationalization attempts made by first-time exporters are related to these factors that are not receiving the necessary level of priority. Therefore, German support institutions and programmes for the internationalization of VET could focus their interventions more on the identified areas of action creating an environment that would enable intenders to (1) learn from experienced exporters, (2) develop priorities for their first international endeavours and (3) receive the necessary foundation to establish the relevant resources and competences in business fields like international networking, customer acquisition, product and service adaptation or international marketing. Knowledge transfer approaches could include training sessions aimed to managers and decision-makers of intenders combined with practical input from experienced exporters. This would turn intenders into exporters and subsequently support the VET industry to increase its export rate.

CONCLUSION

This study was the first one that has focused on German VET export intenders and how they perceive the relevance of resources and capabilities related to internationalization. Based on a comparison with experienced exporters the authors found significant differences in the perception of relevance in the constructs of organizational resources, relational resources, intercultural communication and partly in international marketing. The differences among these groups lead to the assumption that intenders would prioritize a different set of resources and capabilities when preparing for their first internationalization venture which could result in a failure or at least in a longer process of trial and error to adjust their internationalization strategy.

Further research, specifically for commercially oriented internationalization ventures in VET, should be done analysing reasons for failure among first-time exporters as a means to explain whether the different focus of exporters and intenders impacts the success of an internationalization project.

Limitations of this study are the country- and context-specific settings of the respondents. Brouthers et al. (2008) suggest that the institutional environment in the host country requires the adaptation of the international business model as the value of resource-based advantages from an institutionally shaped home market will differ in the new setting. The findings of this study could be compared with VET providers from other nations to draw conclusions if the home country environment shapes the perception of exporters and intenders on internationalization and, more specifically, in which fields of tangible and intangible resources. Comparing export performance among VET providers on an international level could be done from the perspective of business model innovation to find differences in business patterns or from the perspective of resource endowment.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study was funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) as part of the ‘Research for the Internationalization of Vocational Training’ funding programme. The authors would like to thank the iMOVE initiative for their support with the data collection. Open Access funding enabled and organized by Projekt DEAL.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data supporting the findings of this study are available upon request from the corresponding authors. The data are not publicly available due to privacy and ethical restrictions.

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How to cite this article: Kassberg, G., & Dornberger, U. (2022). Perception of export intenders on relevant resources and competences for the internationalization of vocational education and training (VET) providers. *International Journal of Training and Development, 26*, 606–628. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijtd.12278>