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The great need for migrants in the Italian economy: overcoming educational barriers, skills mismatch, and socio-economic integration

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Introduction: Migration has become a structural component of the Italian economy, particularly in sectors such as construction, manufacturing, elderly care, and service activities. Despite persistent demand for migrant labour, significant barriers continue to hinder the full integration of foreign workers, including educational gaps, skills mismatches, and bureaucratic obstacles related to the recognition of qualifications.

Methods: This study adopts a qualitative multi-method approach, combining an online open-ended questionnaire with company representatives (human resource managers) and focus groups with employers and key stakeholders—including vocational education and training providers, higher education institutions, NGOs, and organizations engaged in migrant reception and inclusion in Italy. The analysis explores sector-specific factors shaping migrants' employment trajectories.

Results: Findings indicate that labour market dualism and ethnic segmentation remain widespread, with migrants frequently channelled into occupational roles based on nationality rather than skill level. These patterns are consistent with the "Mediterranean capitalism" model (Amable), as the Italian case exhibits relatively strong employment protection alongside comparatively weaker social protection mechanisms. The study further examines the opportunities and limitations of skill partnership initiatives involving selected African countries, including Tunisia (construction) and Egypt and Ghana (manufacturing). While these programmes provide targeted benefits, they appear insufficient in promoting long-term employment stability and career progression.

Discussion: The findings point to the need to reform qualification recognition mechanisms, expand sector-specific vocational training, strengthen workplace-oriented language education, and design more inclusive skill partnership frameworks. Such measures are essential to ensuring that migration functions not only as an economic resource but also as a socially sustainable process.

KEYWORDS

Italy, labour-market inclusion, migration, skill mismatch, skill partnership

1 Introduction

The Italian labour market exhibits distinctive structural characteristics shaped by long-standing social, economic, and demographic dynamics. Over recent decades, Italy has experienced relatively modest economic growth (ISTAT, 2024), alongside persistent challenges including high youth unemployment, comparatively low female labour-force participation, and pronounced territorial disparities, particularly affecting Southern regions. The predominance of micro- and small enterprises, combined with sectoral productivity differentials—notably the stronger performance of parts of the industrial sector relative to services and information and communication technology (ICT)-related activities (European Commission, 2024)—contributes to an economic structure characterized by structural fragilities. Among these, recurrent labour shortages and skills mismatches have emerged as central concerns (CNEL–Unioncamere, 2026). Within this context, migration has progressively assumed a structural role in sustaining labour supply, especially in sectors such as construction, manufacturing, elderly care, and selected service activities. Figure 1 presents the evolution of regularly resident non-EU citizens in Italy, highlighting a steady increase from 2010 to 2021, followed by a partial decline, primarily due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Fondazione ISMU, 2025).

Two long-term dynamics further exacerbate these fragilities. On the one hand, population ageing increases the demand for labour in care and health sectors. On the other hand, the scarcity of skilled workers, driven by the misalignment between education and labour-market needs (Gavosto, 2022), results in significant skills shortages, affecting 46% of Italian companies (CNEL–UNIONCAMERE, 2026). This mismatch is especially evident in construction, industrial, manufacturing, people-care (elderly care), services for companies, and the agriculture sectors, which are increasingly dependent on foreign labour. Migration has therefore become a structural component of the Italian economy. Foreign-born workers now account for more than 8% of the resident population and about 10.5% of the workforce, with even higher proportions in construction, manufacturing, people-care services (elderly care), and agriculture—sectors therefore increasingly dependent on foreign labour (Direzione Generale dell'Immigrazione e delle Politiche di Integrazione, 2023a, 2023b; INAPP-ANPAL, 2024b; Unioncamere, 2024).

Despite the growing reliance on migrant labour, integration remains hindered by persistent barriers, including language and educational gaps, difficulties in recognizing qualifications, and enduring mechanisms of ethnic segmentation within the labour market. The regulatory framework governing the entry and integration of foreign citizens in Italy is widely recognized as complex and continuously evolving, reflecting shifting political priorities and public debates on migration. The *Testo Unico dell'Immigrazione* (Italy, 1998) constitutes the primary legal reference, subsequently amended by reforms that have alternated between more restrictive measures—such as the *Bossi-Fini Law* (Italy, 2002)—and comparatively more inclusive approaches. This pattern of regulatory adjustment has progressively reinforced the link between residence permits and employment status, while simultaneously reshaping access to protection and

integration measures, thereby affecting migrants' labour-market stability and long-term inclusion trajectories. More recent interventions further exemplify this dynamic. The *Decreto Sicurezza* (Italy, 2018) significantly reduced access to humanitarian protection and limited integration provisions, contributing to increased legal precarity among migrants (AIDA, 2025; Italy, 2018). Conversely, subsequent reforms, including the *Decreto Cutro* (Italy, 2023b) and the expansion of entry quotas through the *Decreto Flussi* (Italy, 2023a), combined stricter border-control measures with policies aimed at facilitating legal labour migration. These provisions explicitly foresee the adoption of skill partnerships, linking migration governance more directly to labour-market needs and creating new opportunities for cooperation between Italy and countries of origin.

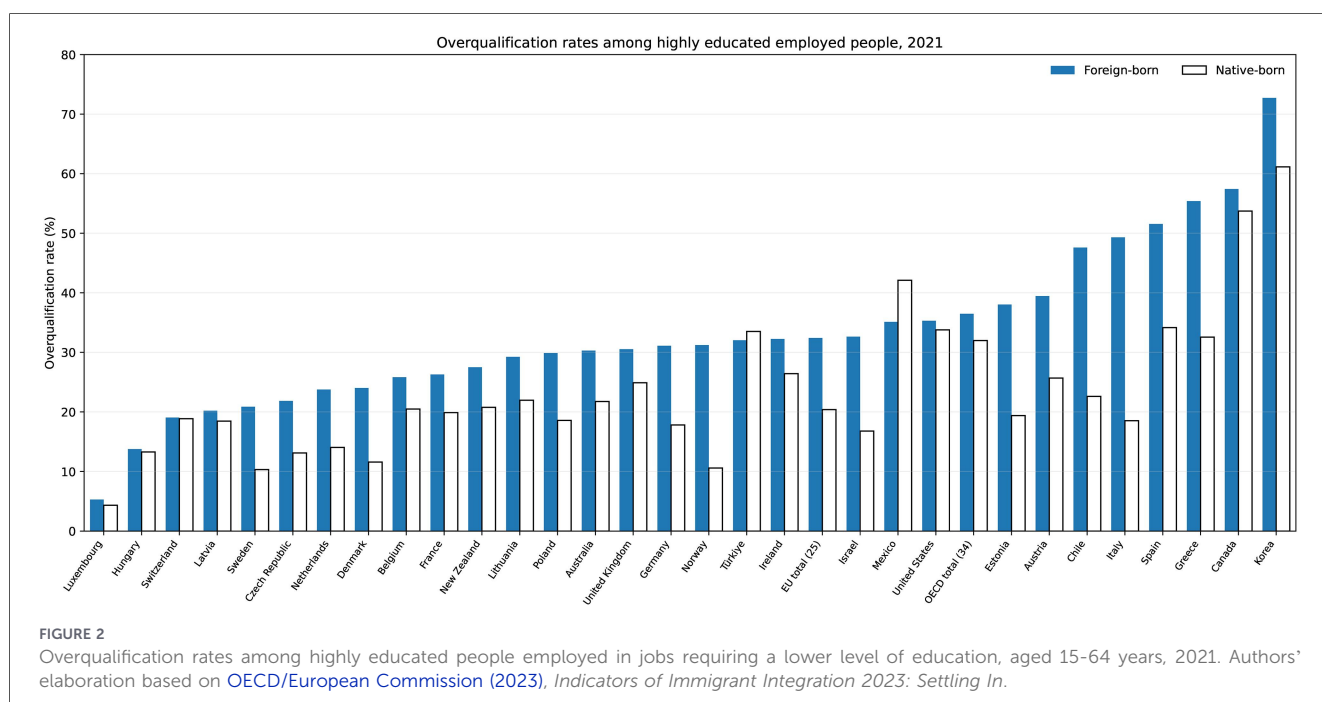
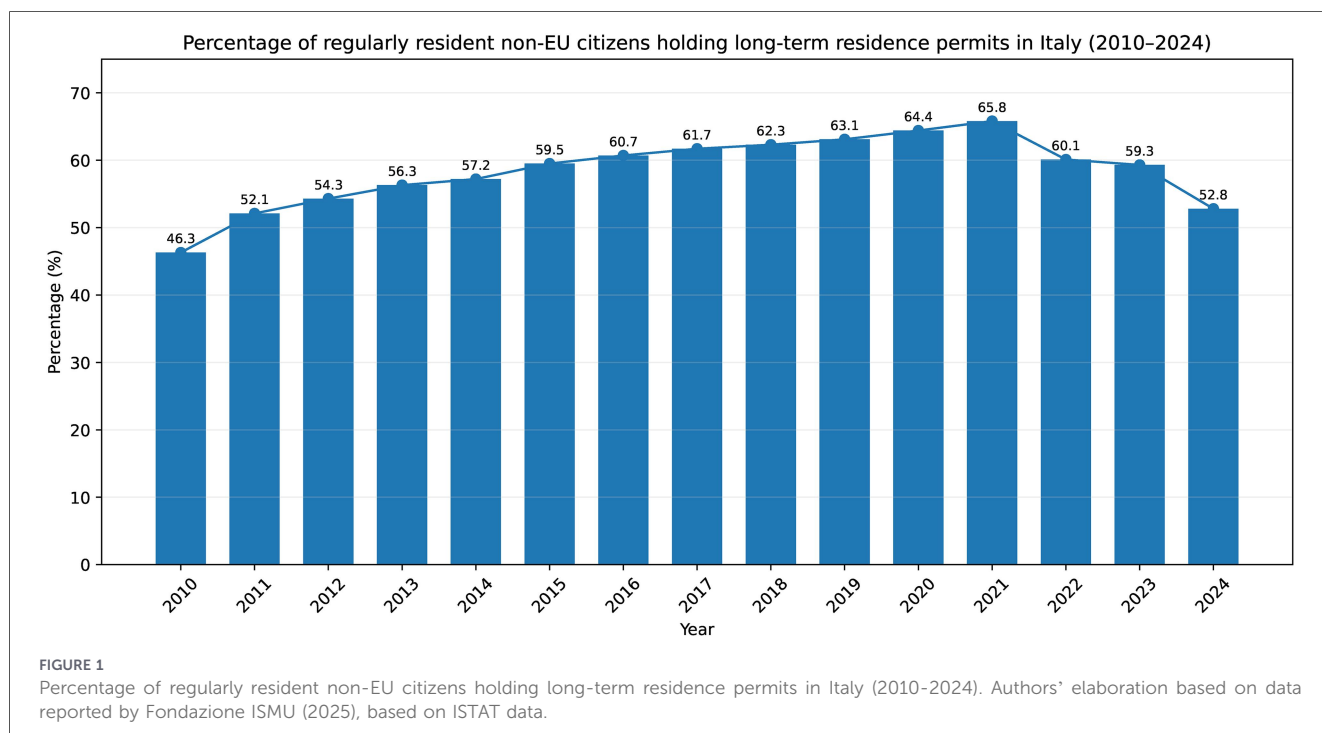
Despite recent policy efforts to better align migration governance with labour market needs, structural challenges persist. Labour market data highlight enduring inequalities affecting migrants' employment trajectories.

According to the *Direzione Generale dell'Immigrazione e delle Politiche di Integrazione* (2023a, 2023b) and INAPP-ANPAL (2024a, 2024b), highly educated migrants experience disproportionately high rates of overqualification, alongside marked sectoral segregation and gender disparities in employment outcomes. Almost half of migrants holding university degrees are employed in positions below their skill level, compared with significantly lower rates among native workers (see Figure 2). These patterns suggest that formal labour-market access does not necessarily translate into adequate recognition and utilization of migrants' skills (Donlevy et al., 2016).

Before outlining the theoretical framework, it is helpful to briefly recall the scope and contribution of this study. This article examines migrants' employment trajectories in Italy within the broader context of skills shortages, labour-market segmentation, and institutional barriers affecting skill recognition and utilization. Drawing on qualitative evidence from companies questionnaires and focus groups with employers, vocational education and training (VET) providers, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and labour-market stakeholders, the study explores how regulatory frameworks, training systems, and workplace dynamics interact in shaping migrants' labour-market outcomes. Particular attention is paid to VET, language acquisition, and skill partnerships as emerging governance instruments linking migration and skills policies. To interpret these dynamics, the following section outlines the theoretical framework guiding the analysis.

2 Theoretical framework: interpreting the Italian case

What has been outlined in the Introduction can be more fully understood when situated within an appropriate theoretical perspective capable of capturing the specificities of the Italian case. Compared with countries such as the United Kingdom, France, and Germany, Italy has experienced large-scale immigration more recently, yet with significant quantitative and structural implications (Colombo and Dalla-Zuanna, 2019). The dynamics of immigration to Italy can be interpreted through the dual labour market theory (Piore, 1979). Migrant workers are



disproportionately concentrated in the “secondary segment” of the labour market, typically characterized by physically demanding, unstable, low-paid, and lower-status occupations. This pattern is clearly reflected in the sectoral distribution of foreign employment. In 2024, foreign workers numbered approximately 2.514 million (10.5% of total employment) (ISTAT, 2025a), with a substantially higher incidence in specific sectors:

- Care and collective services: 30.9%
- Agriculture: 20.0%
- Hotels and restaurants: 18.5%
- Construction: 16.9%

This picture points to a structural demand for labour in segments increasingly perceived as difficult to fill—including care/domestic work, seasonal agriculture, logistics, tourism, and construction—where migrant labour plays a stabilizing role for both businesses and households. While labour-market entry often occurs rapidly, upward professional mobility tends to remain more limited, as migrants frequently access employment through low-skilled

positions or narrowly defined occupational niches within the secondary segment.

The Italian case also partially resonates with human capital and assimilation frameworks (Todaro and Maruszko, 1987). Differences in employment outcomes are influenced by migrants' educational attainment, skills, and language proficiency. However, labour-market trajectories are shaped not only by individual endowments but also by entry conditions. Concentration in less productive sectors or firms, combined with informational barriers and discriminatory dynamics, may restrict opportunities for skill recognition and the valorization of migrants' social and cultural capital. Institutional arrangements, therefore, play a decisive role in mediating these processes.

The institutional variable operates across at least two interconnected dimensions:

1. Welfare provisions, active labour-market policies, qualification recognition systems, and access to training, housing, and mobility services.
2. The structure of production systems and labour-market regulation.

Social networks, particularly family- and community-based ties, represent a primary channel for labour-market access (Boyd, 1989). These networks can reduce entry costs by facilitating information flows, accommodation, and job matching. Nevertheless, without guidance services, language training, and formal skill certification, they may contribute to employment instability and occupational entrapment in low-mobility niches.

To account for the interaction between these multiple dimensions, a broader interpretative model is required. The theoretical perspective developed by Amable (2005) offers a particularly relevant framework. In *Les cinq capitalismes*, labour markets are conceptualized not as isolated domains but as components of broader institutional configurations, including employment regulation, wage-setting mechanisms, social protection systems, education and training structures, and financial arrangements. From this viewpoint, no single universally "efficient" labour-market model exists; rather, distinct varieties of capitalism emerge from specific institutional complementarities. Among the five ideal-types identified by Amable—neoliberal/market-based, socio-democratic, continental European, Mediterranean, and Asian—the Mediterranean model appears especially pertinent for interpreting the Italian context. This configuration is characterized by relatively strong employment protection alongside comparatively weaker and less universalistic welfare provisions. Under conditions of intensified competition, such institutional arrangements may foster pronounced labour-market dualism, separating protected insiders from more flexible or precarious workers, often including young people and migrants. Italy exhibits several features consistent with this model:

- Strong protection of standard employment (high employment protection legislation (EPL) for permanent contracts);
- Less generous and less universalistic welfare compared with Nordic systems;

- Weaker active labour-market policies and lifelong learning mechanisms;
- Fragmented production structure dominated by small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs); and
- Marked dualism between protected and flexible workers.

This framework provides the analytical lens through which the empirical findings are interpreted in the following sections.

3 Materials and methods

The theoretical framework outlined above provides the analytical lens through which migrants' labour-market experiences, institutional constraints, and organizational practices are interpreted. Perspectives on labour-market segmentation, human capital, and institutional complementarities highlight the importance of investigating not only structural patterns but also the meanings, perceptions, and strategies articulated by labour-market actors.

Given the complexity of these dynamics, a qualitative multi-method approach was adopted to conduct the study. This design enables an in-depth exploration of how employers, training providers, and stakeholders perceive skills shortages, migrants' integration, and the functioning of skill recognition and training systems. Qualitative methods are particularly suited to capturing the interplay between regulatory frameworks, organizational practices, and individual trajectories that cannot be fully understood through quantitative indicators alone. Accordingly, the study combines online open-ended questionnaires administered to company representatives with focus groups involving key stakeholders operating in VET, migrant reception and inclusion services, and selected economic sectors. This methodological strategy enables triangulation of perspectives across institutional, organizational, and sectoral levels. This study forms part of a broader international research project examining the interconnections between migration governance and skills mismatch (SKILLS4JUSTICE, 2025). The research design was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Department of Human Sciences at the University of Verona.

3.1 Employers' open-ended questionnaires

Data were collected through an online, open-ended questionnaire designed to elicit qualitative insights from company representatives. The questionnaire was administered via Google Forms between June and October 2024. The online format enabled respondents to complete the questionnaire autonomously and at their convenience, thereby facilitating participation.

Participants were recruited through a purposive sampling strategy (Patton, 2015). Company representatives (primarily HR managers) were approached via the professional networks of CNOS-FAP vocational training centres—partners of the Horizon Europe consortium—as well as through the researchers' professional contacts. As of 24 October 2024, a total of 19 completed questionnaires were received (coded as COMP_1–COMP_19).

The participating companies represent a range of economic sectors: services (5/19), including elderly care and business services; restaurants, hospitality, and tourism (6/19);

TABLE 1 Focus groups dataset and coding.

ID	Participant	Level of operation	Sector	FG_ID	Date
COMP_1	Intesa Costruzioni (Lombardy)	Regional	Construction	FG_1 (Lombardy)	23 July 2024, at 3.30 p.m.
HE_1	ISRE-IUSVE	National/international	University/HE institution	FG_4 (HE_IT)	7 November 2024, at 4.00 p.m.
HE_2	ITS San Marco Venezia-Mestre (Veneto)	Regional	VET/HE (manufacturing, mechatronics, ICT, graphic communication)	FG_4 (HE_IT)	7 November 2024, at 4.00 p.m.
HE_3	University of Bergamo	National/international	University/HE institution	FG_4 (HE_IT)	7 November 2024, at 4.00 p.m.
Int_1/ VET_1	Cassa Edile (Lombardy)	Regional	VET provider (construction sector)	FG_1 (Lombardy)	23 July 2024, at 3.30 p.m.
Int_10	Gi Group	National	Labour market intermediary (multi-sector)	FG_3 (Italy)	27 September 2024, at 4.00 p.m.
Int_11	Don Calabria Foundation per il sociale E.T.S.	Regional/national	NGO working in the reception and integration of migrants/refugees	FG_3 (Italy)	27 September 2024, at 4.00 p.m.
Int_5	CIES Onlus (SOFeL Spokesman) (Lazio)	Regional	NGO working in the reception and integration of migrants/refugees	FG_2 (Lazio)	19 September 2024, at 4.00 p.m.
Int_6	Salesiani per il Sociale (Lazio)	Regional/national	NGO	FG_2 (Lazio)	19 September 2024, at 4.00 p.m.
Int_7	Randstad (Person 1)	National	Labour market intermediary (multi-sector)	FG_2 (Lazio)	19 September 2024, at 4.00 p.m.
Int_7bis	Randstad (Person 2)	National	Labour market intermediary (multi-sector)	FG_3 (Italy)	27 September 2024, at 4.00 p.m.
Int_8	Confcooperative (Tuscany)	Regional	Employers' organization (social cooperation)	FG_3 (Italy)	27 September 2024, at 4.00 p.m.
Int_9	Confindustria	National	Employers' organization (industry, manufacturing, etc.)	FG_3 (Italy)	27 September 2024, at 4.00 p.m.
VET_2	ENGIM (Lombardy)	Regional/national	VET provider (care sector and others)	FG_1 (Lombardy)	23 July 2024, at 3.30 p.m.
VET_3	Ciofs (Lazio)	Regional/national	VET provider (restaurants, hospitality, and tourism)	FG_2 (Lazio)	19 September 2024, at 4.00 p.m.
VET_4	ENAC (Veneto)	Regional	VET provider (services for companies, manufacturing, industrial mechanics, ICT, logistics)	FG_3 (Italy)	27 September 2024, at 4.00 p.m.
VET_5	CEFAL (Emilia-Romagna)	Regional	VET provider (manufacturing, services for companies, construction, restaurants, hospitality, and tourism)	FG_3 (Italy)	27 September 2024, at 4.00 p.m.
VET_6	CIVIFORM (Friuli)	Regional	VET (restaurants, hospitality, and tourism, construction, manufacturing, wellness, ICTs)	FG_3 (Italy)	27 September 2024, at 4.00 p.m.

Authors' elaboration on data analysis.

manufacturing (4/19); and industry (4/19), including marble, wood, and construction. Reflecting the structure of the Italian economy, characterized by a predominance of small and medium-sized enterprises (CNEL-UNIONCAMERE, 2026), 12 out of 19 companies employ fewer than 100 staff members, five employ up to 500, and only two employ more than 1,000 workers. Most companies (17/19) have operated in their respective sectors for at least 10 years. The companies are geographically distributed as follows: Northern Italy (15/19), Central Italy (3/19), and nationwide operations (1/19).

3.2 Focus groups

To complement the questionnaire data and further explore the research objectives, four focus groups were also conducted (see Table 1):

FG_1: involved stakeholders from Lombardy (Northern Italy), representing the construction and people-care services sectors (three participants).

FG_2: involved stakeholders from Lazio (Central Italy), including representatives from tourism, restaurants, and hospitality, as well as professionals engaged in migrant reception and training (four participants).

FG_3: gathered stakeholders operating at the national level across strategic economic sectors and migrant inclusion initiatives (eight participants).

FG_4: involved representatives from higher education (HE) institutions, including universities and VET providers (three participants).

The focus groups lasted between 64 and 107 min. All sessions were conducted via Zoom, audio-recorded with participants' consent, and transcribed verbatim. Transcription was supported by an AI-based tool and subsequently reviewed by the research team to ensure accuracy and consistency. AI technologies were used exclusively to assist transcription and preliminary data organization. The researchers conducted all coding, interpretation, and analytical decisions. The use of AI tools complied with institutional ethical guidelines and data protection standards.

The research team consisted of scholars specializing in education, migration, and critical and social pedagogy. Throughout the research process, careful attention was given to fostering balanced participation during focus groups and minimizing potential power imbalances among participants. Moderation strategies were implemented to encourage contributions from all attendees and prevent any single stakeholder from dominating the conversation. As with any focus group research, the findings may have been influenced by group dynamics, varying levels of expertise among participants, and the institutional positions represented (Krueger and Casey, 2015; Morgan, 1997). To address these challenges, researchers

actively facilitated dialogue across stakeholder groups and promoted the expression of diverse viewpoints. Nevertheless, some perspectives may have held greater visibility than others, and the potential underrepresentation of certain viewpoints should be considered when interpreting the findings.

3.3 Data analysis

The Italian research team conducted the thematic analysis following the methodological framework of Clarke and Braun (2017). This approach enables the systematic identification, analysis, and reporting of patterns (themes) within qualitative data. Data organization and coding were performed using conventional text-processing tools to support the systematic application of thematic analysis.

The analysis followed six phases:

1. Familiarization with the data;
2. Generation of initial codes;
3. Searching for themes;
4. Reviewing themes;
5. Defining and naming themes; and
6. Producing the analytical report.

Coding was conducted manually by the researchers. To enhance analytical rigour, coding was performed independently by two members of the research team, with support from digital tools for data organization. The researchers compared and discussed their coding outputs to resolve discrepancies and refine the emerging thematic structure. This iterative process contributed to analytical rigour and credibility. Disagreements were resolved through discussion until a consensus was reached.

TABLE 2 Emerging themes from thematic analysis.

Theme	Description	Sources
Skills shortages and recruitment difficulties	Employers report persistent challenges in attracting and retaining qualified workers, particularly in technical and care-related sectors	Questionnaires, FG_1, FG_3
Labour-market segmentation	Migrants are concentrated in specific sectors and roles, often in low-skilled or secondary-sector occupations	Questionnaires, FG_1, FG_2
Overqualification and skills mismatch	Stakeholders highlight the underutilization of migrants' qualifications and barriers to skill recognition	Questionnaires, FG_2, FG_4
Language barriers	Limited Italian language proficiency constrains job access, workplace communication, and career progression	FG_1, FG_2, FG_3
Institutional and bureaucratic constraints	Administrative complexity and regulatory discontinuities affect hiring, permits, and integration pathways	Questionnaires, FG_2, FG_3
Training system misalignment	Perceived disconnect between education/training provision and labour-market needs	Questionnaires, FG_1, FG_4
Ethnicization of labour	Allocation of tasks and roles along nationality and gender lines reinforces occupational immobility	FG_1, FG_2, FG_3
Retention strategies	Firms adopt measures such as wage adjustments, workplace support, and language training to retain migrant workers	Questionnaires
Skill partnerships	Viewed as promising yet ambivalent instruments linking migration governance and sectoral labour demand	FG_1, FG_3

Authors' elaboration on data analysis.

The analysis was conducted on the original Italian transcripts. Identified themes and selected excerpts were subsequently translated into English to enable cross-national comparison within the SKILLS4JUSTICE project. Particular attention was paid to preserving contextual and conceptual meanings during translation. The thematic analysis generated a set of recurrent patterns across employer questionnaires and focus group discussions. These themes capture how labour-market actors interpret skills shortages, migrants' employment trajectories, institutional constraints, and integration dynamics. [Table 2](#) summarizes the principal themes identified through the coding process.

4 Results

Following [Unioncamere \(2024\)](#), this study focuses on four sectors characterized by high labour demand and pronounced skills shortages: services, hospitality and tourism, manufacturing, and industry (including construction, wood, and marble). The latter concentrates on sectors marked by strong demand for both skilled and semi-skilled labour, where companies report persistent recruitment and retention difficulties.

The presentation of results follows the sequence of the data collection strategy. Findings from employer open-ended questionnaires are presented first, followed by insights emerging from the focus groups. This structure enables the progressive integration of organizational and stakeholder perspectives.

4.1 Employer perspectives from open-ended questionnaires

In the online open-ended questionnaire, employers [human resource (HR) managers] were invited to list up to five professions or qualifications they considered most difficult to source in their companies. The reported shortages are not randomly distributed but concentrate within five key occupational domains:

- Services (care sector): nurses, socio-health operators, and socio-pedagogical educators.
- Services (business services): junior organizational consultants and staff administrators.
- Hospitality and tourism: bartenders, cooks, pizza makers, and restaurant management roles.
- Manufacturing: computer numerical control (CNC) machine operators, computer-aided design (CAD) and computer-aided manufacturing (CAM) designers, and technical production roles.
- Industry (construction-related): skilled manual workers, technical employees, and finishing operators.
- Services (for companies): Hosting curricular and extracurricular internships (COMP_3) and implementation of targeted training courses (COMP_3);
- Services (elderly care): collaboration with VET providers through internship (COMP_4, 8, 12) and organization of professional training initiatives (COMP_8);
- Restaurants, hospitality, and touristic sectors: provision of training courses (COMP_13; 15; 9) and use of apprenticeship contracts (COMP_14, 15, 7, 9);
- Manufacturing: hosting internships and apprenticeships (COMP_17, 18, 19, 2) and financial support to training centres (COMP_2); and
- Industry: internships, apprenticeships, and dual apprenticeship schemes (COMP_1, 10; 11, 5).

The collaborative approaches described by employers cut across all sectors considered. Apprenticeship contracts and dual apprenticeship schemes emerge as the most frequently adopted mechanisms, particularly in the hospitality, manufacturing, and industrial sectors. These arrangements, strengthened by recent labour market reforms ([Carollo, 2015](#)), are often combined with internships and targeted training initiatives. Employers and training providers alike emphasized that such collaborations play a key role in aligning educational pathways with rapidly evolving labour market needs, especially in technically specialized fields linked to international competitiveness. The main training approaches adopted across the sectors considered are summarized in [Table 4](#).

Notably, 11 responding companies reported significant difficulties in attracting and retaining workers with vocational or higher education qualifications. In this context, employers frequently identified immigration as a potential response to persistent labour shortages. Indeed, 18 companies considered migrant labour a necessary or strategic resource to address both current and future workforce needs. Employers referred to two interconnected challenges: the demographic decline affecting the national labour supply and the increasing difficulty of recruiting native workers for specific occupations, particularly for technically demanding or lower-attractiveness roles ([INAPP-ANPAL, 2024b](#)).

Alongside recruitment constraints, respondents also highlighted critical issues with the training system's responsiveness. For example, COMP_16—a consultancy operating in the business services sector, primarily supporting manufacturing firms—reported close collaboration with universities and training institutions to codesign academies and experimental projects with client companies. As COMP_16 observed:

education and companies operate at different speeds... (yet) today the two systems are not even able to travel on the same train. We notice a strong disconnection between market needs and training provision. COMP_16 (services for companies)

In light of these recruitment difficulties, we examined how companies respond to skills shortages. The most challenging professions to recruit are summarized in [Table 3](#).

Companies reported a range of strategies aimed at mitigating skills shortages, particularly through training initiatives and partnerships with educational institutions:

This collaboration was described as enabling two-way knowledge exchange, particularly in innovation-driven domains such as artificial intelligence (AI), virtual reality (VR) and

TABLE 3 Profession shortages.

ID	Role	Economic sectors	Size	Professions shortage
COMP_16	HR manager	1. Services (companies)	16–50 employees	Young organizational consultants/human resources who, in addition to soft skills, have a minimum of negotiation and administrative skills/staff administration
COMP_03	HR manager	1. Services (people care)	51–100 employees	Nurses, professional socio-health educators, professional socio-pedagogical educators, social and health workers, and coordinators
COMP_04	HR manager	1. Services (people care)	101–500 employees	Social and health workers, medical doctors, nurses
COMP_08	HR manager	1. Services (people care)	101–500 employees	Professional social and health educator; professional nurse
COMP_12	HR manager	1. Services (people care)	1–15 employees	Social and health workers, nurses, doctors, and receptionists
COMP_06	HR manager	2. Restaurants, hospitality, and tourism	101–500 employees	Bartenders, waitpersons, cooks
COMP_07	HR manager	2. Restaurants, hospitality, and tourism	101–500 employees	Staff at restaurants
COMP_09	HR manager	2. Restaurants, hospitality, and tourism	101–500 employees	Restaurant managers, dining room managers, kitchen managers, etc.)
COMP_13	HR manager	2. Restaurants, hospitality, and tourism	More than 1,000 employees	Barmen, bartenders
COMP_14	HR manager	2. Restaurants, hospitality, and tourism	16–50 employees	Cooks, pizza-makers, bartenders
COMP_15	HR manager	2. Restaurants, hospitality, and tourism	16–50 employees	Multi-service operators
COMP_02	HR manager	3. Manufacturing	51–100 employees	Designers, project and product managers, carpenters
COMP_17	HR manager	3. Manufacturing	1–15 employees	Turners, welders, fitters, technical drafters, and CNC operators
COMP_18	HR manager	3. Manufacturing	51–100 employees	CNC operators (full figure, programming, and machine setup)
COMP_19	HR manager	3. Manufacturing	More than 1,000 employees	CNC operators
COMP_01	HR manager	4. Industry (Constructions)	1–15 employees	Skilled and qualified workers, technical employees (fourth to sixth level)
COMP_10	HR manager	4. Industry (Marble)	16–50 employees	CNC machine operators, finishing operators
COMP_11	HR manager	4. Industry (Marble)	16–50 employees	CNC machine operators, finishing operators
COMP_05	HR manager	4. Industry (Wood)	16–50 employees	Technician specialized in the use of CNC machine operators, project managers, and CAD/CAM designers

Authors' elaboration on data analysis.

automation, while also supporting companies' efforts to develop adaptive strategies for attracting, retaining, and training employees.

Employers were subsequently asked how they address shortages of skilled workers with VET and HE qualifications. Across sectors, three main patterns emerged: 18 companies reported efforts to improve working conditions and wages, 15 emphasized investments in workforce skills development, and 14 highlighted increased collaboration with VET and HE institutions.

Despite these initiatives, most companies appeared unprepared for the potential loss of qualified personnel due to the emigration of the native workforce. Specifically, 14 responding companies reported the absence of a defined strategy to mitigate this risk, a concern particularly evident in the industrial sector (four of four companies).

By contrast, the remaining organizations, operating in services (care), hospitality, and manufacturing, outlined a range of adaptive responses. The four companies that reported having a defined strategy described the following approaches:

TABLE 4 Training approaches per considered economic sectors.

Economic sectors	Specific training approach	Features
Services (elderly people care)	Modules on care, empathy, stress management + OSS certification	Great attention to relational and cultural skills. Often integrated with language courses.
Services (for companies)	Modular training for industrial cleaning, facility management, surveillance, and call centres	High incidence of migrants in low-skilled sectors. Focus on language for work context, safety rules, rights/duties, and time management. In some cases, the possession of specific certifications (e.g., HACCP, safety) is required.
Restaurants, hospitality, and tourism	Hands-on training + language for customer relations	Short and professionalizing paths. Often required an update on HACCP, hygiene, and health regulations
Manufacturing	Machinery training + quality management	Chain and teamwork, so linguistic and cultural accompaniment is also essential.
Industry	Technical courses + safety certifications (e.g., PES/PAV, scaffolding), Technical training + forklift license + soft skills	Strong emphasis on safety regulations and teamwork. In Italy, it often involves bilateral bodies (e.g., Construction Funds, Construction Schools—in Italian, Cassa Edile e Scuola Edile), Basic digital skills, precision, and language to read documentation/logistics required.

Authors’ elaboration on data and analysis taken from [Unioncamere-ANPAL \(2023\)](#), [ILO \(2016, 2018\)](#), [CEDEFOP \(2017\)](#), [INAPP \(2024\)](#), and [CENSIS \(2020, 2024\)](#). HACCP, hazard analysis and critical control points.

- The company aims to continuously improve the psychophysical well-being of its staff in the workplace, constantly activating welfare policies or improving existing ones. COMP_12 (services-people care).
- Increase wages and working conditions. COMP_13 (restaurants).
- Keeping working conditions aligned with opportunities that arise in other countries. COMP_2 (manufacturing).
- Strengthen relationships with educational institutions at all professional levels. COMP_17 (manufacturing).

Employers were also asked whether they currently employ, or are considering hiring, migrant workers. Among companies already employing foreign staff—particularly in services, hospitality, and manufacturing—respondents reported limited concern about workers’ national origin amid persistent labour shortages. Overall, 10 responding companies indicated that they had either already recruited or planned to recruit migrant workers:

We are not interested in the origin (workers), but in commitment and collaboration. COMP_2 (manufacturing)

By contrast, employers who were not considering recruiting migrant workers highlighted several constraints, particularly the difficulty of hiring qualified foreign personnel able to operate in regulated or sector-specific contexts. COMP_4 emphasized regulatory barriers, noting the requirement for “a qualification recognized by the region to operate in residential care homes.” COMP_15 reported that recruitment initiatives had been “stopped for bureaucratic reasons.” COMP_5 highlighted integration challenges, stating that “poor knowledge of the language is one of the predominant reasons.” Employers were also asked how they would retain migrant workers if recruited. Three main strategies emerged: improving workplace safety and security (10/12 companies), offering better wage conditions (8/12), and providing career development opportunities (8/12), particularly in manufacturing, industry, and hospitality.

These responses indicate that companies recognize retention not solely as an economic matter but also as an organizational and social process. Employers acknowledged that effective integration requires more than recruitment alone, emphasizing the importance of professional training, workplace socialization, and support measures to facilitate migrants’ inclusion within the organizational and socio-cultural environment. Frequently mentioned initiatives included language support, housing assistance, and measures to improve overall living conditions for workers and their families. Several companies also reported existing collaborations with VET providers and universities to support these processes.

4.2 Stakeholder perspectives from focus groups

Focus Group 1 (FG_1) explored challenges affecting the construction, manufacturing, and care sectors. Discussions centred on declining workforce availability, potential reductions in companies’ productive capacity, and ongoing initiatives to train migrant workers and enhance sector attractiveness. Participants emphasized the need for improved skills forecasting, greater alignment between training provision and labour market needs, and a more culturally informed approach to the integration and inclusion of migrant workers. Within this context, Int_1/VET_1—director of the construction school and president of a major sectoral organization (Cassa Aedile)—highlighted the structural difficulties currently facing the construction sector, particularly the reduction in workforce numbers and the risks associated with declining production capacity.

Int_1/VET_1 highlighted the demographic pressures affecting the construction sector, noting that “53% of registered workers are not of Italian origin” and that the workforce is characterized by a high average age. As the participant observed, “for every five workers who retire, only one enters” (FG_1_Int_1/VET_1), raising concerns about the sector’s capacity to maintain stable production levels.

Participants stressed the urgency of addressing these dynamics to ensure the long-term sustainability of the construction sector. The discussion emphasized that, despite persistent labour shortages, construction continues to rely on a significant artisanal and craft-based component. Several contributors highlighted the growing importance of migrant labour. In this context, Int_1/VET_1 reported the launch of a project scheduled to begin in September 2024, aimed at training Tunisian workers through Italian language instruction and the acquisition of essential technical skills.

COMP_1 further described how language barriers contribute to the fragmentation of construction work into highly specialized tasks. As the participant observed, “the various phases of work have been unpacked [...] we have arrived at an almost Fordist breakdown of work processes,” resulting in simplified roles requiring only a fraction of the skills previously associated with traditional craft occupations. The respondent also noted that this organization of labour often follows nationality-based lines: “We have Pakistani iron installers... subfloor workers who are all Romanian” (FG_1_COMP_1), reflecting segmentation patterns shaped by on-site communication needs.

Participants additionally underscored the importance of highly qualified coordination figures capable of mediating between specialized teams. This restructuring was described as resembling a Fordist logic, characterized by functional decomposition of tasks and role differentiation.

4.2.1 Skills shortages in the services (people care) sector

Focus group participants emphasized the need for a more structured, systematic approach to language education, particularly in workplace communication and integration. Several contributors highlighted the growing competition between firms for a shrinking pool of qualified workers. A recurring concern was the perceived inadequacy of training pathways designed to prepare for “connecting” or intermediate professional roles, especially in the construction sector. Participants observed that existing programmes often struggle to keep pace with rapidly evolving skill requirements. Discussions also addressed persistent forms of labour market segmentation. The care sector was described as strongly characterized by nationality- and gender-based job allocation, with migrant workers frequently channelled into specific roles. Participants noted that language barriers further constrain career progression and reinforce occupational immobility.

Another key theme concerned the declining attractiveness of vocational and technical occupations among younger generations. Participants stressed the difficulty of encouraging secondary-level graduates to enter the labour market directly, contrasting current dynamics with past apprenticeship models that relied on extensive on-the-job learning. VET_2 underscored the importance of strengthening career guidance systems, particularly in sectors

facing demographic pressures such as elderly care. However, participants noted that immediate challenges, including bureaucratic procedures, contract regularization, and the persistence of undeclared work, often overshadow long-term workforce planning. Overall, these discussions highlighted the interdependence among language proficiency, the responsiveness of the training system, and labour market integration.

4.2.2 Integration of qualified workers and migrants in the services (people care), manufacturing, and industry sectors

Discussions in FG_1 further highlighted concerns regarding the transition from education to work. Participants emphasized the difficulty of attracting skilled secondary-level graduates into vocational and technical occupations, particularly in construction and manufacturing. Several contributors contrasted current recruitment challenges with earlier apprenticeship models characterized by extensive on-the-job learning and gradual skills acquisition. Companies were described as increasingly struggling to recruit profiles capable of performing both operational and coordination functions, including office-based and site-management roles. Participants also stressed that integrating migrant workers requires more systematic skills-assessment mechanisms and a clearer understanding of labour-market needs. VET_2 underscored the importance of strengthening career guidance systems, especially in sectors affected by demographic pressures such as elderly care. However, participants noted that immediate constraints, including bureaucratic procedures, contract regularization, and the persistence of undeclared work, frequently overshadow long-term workforce strategies.

FG_2 expanded these reflections by examining the role of migrant reception and training services. Int_5 described initiatives targeting young migrants aged 18–30, particularly those nearing the end of their stay in reception centres or who had recently transitioned out of them. These programmes focus on skills identification, soft skills development, and job placement through extracurricular internships. As Int_5 observed, many beneficiaries initially overestimate the transferability of prior experience: “They often start from the assumption: ‘I already know how to do it.’ Then, they find themselves in the Italian context, which requires new skills to be acquired” (FG_2_Int_5). The participant also highlighted the instability of project-based networks, noting that “you build a fantastic network... but at the end of the project, everything vanishes” (FG_2_Int_5). In response, the organization emphasized the need for more structured and durable cooperation frameworks with companies and local authorities. Int_5 further referenced a pilot initiative to develop a “cluster” model that connects socio-economic and welfare actors, including employers, to support longer-term social and occupational integration pathways.

4.2.3 Training for incoming migrants in the services (people care), manufacturing, and industry sectors

In the second part of FG_1, participants examined the challenges faced by newly arrived migrant workers, with

particular attention to training and integration processes. Discussions focused on language acquisition, access to initial training pathways, and the broader conditions shaping migrants' labour market entry. In this context, VET_2 referred to the "Di casa in casa" ("From Home to Home") project, promoted by Caritas-ACLI in Bergamo, which provides support to young migrants and vulnerable families by developing local assistance networks. As VET_2 observed, employment represents only one dimension of migrants' integration trajectories:

Work is a small piece of the problem of a foreigner who arrives here... there is the theme of housing, health, services, language, and training (FG_1_VET_2).

Participants emphasized the need for more coordinated integration policies that can address these interconnected dimensions. The discussion also highlighted sector-specific implications, particularly for construction, where the perceived attractiveness of occupations was described as closely linked to migrants' lived experiences. Participants noted that adverse integration outcomes may have longer-term effects by discouraging younger generations from pursuing related educational and professional pathways.

4.3 Cross-sectoral perspectives from employment on migrants' integration

Discussions in FG_2 and FG_3 addressed migration dynamics in Italy, with particular attention to migrants' reception, labour-market integration, and adaptation to diverse social contexts. Participants also highlighted persistent barriers related to the recognition of educational qualifications and technical skills.

Stakeholders discussed practices and initiatives to promote labour and social inclusion, emphasizing the need for more structural and systematic approaches. A recurring theme concerned the importance of strengthening collaborative networks among institutions, organizations, and companies to support migrants' integration across sectors

4.3.1 Governance of immigration and emergency framing

Focus group discussions revealed a critical reflection on the governance of migration in Italy. Participants frequently described current policy approaches as predominantly emergency-driven, highlighting the perceived mismatch between the structural nature of migration and the temporary logic underpinning institutional responses. In particular, VET_3 questioned the persistence of the "emergency" narrative, arguing that migration "has been structural in our country for several decades" (FG_2_VET_3). The participant associated this framing with systemic weaknesses, including limited institutional continuity and fragmented integration pathways, particularly in employment and housing. Stakeholders emphasized the need for more stable, long-term policy frameworks that support migrants' social and labour-

market inclusion. The reliance on short-term measures was described as generating uncertainty for both beneficiaries and service providers.

Within this context, VET_3 referred to the so-called "Riace model" as an example of a locally embedded inclusion practice. The initiative was described as "a good practice recognized internationally" (FG_2_VET_3), particularly for fostering community regeneration and reciprocal forms of social integration (Needleman, 2017). As VET_3 observed, the model represented "a form of widespread inclusion" characterized by mutual exchange between migrants and the host community, producing both social and employment-related benefits (FG_2_VET_3). Overall, participants' accounts point to a perceived tension between the structural drivers of migration and governance mechanisms that remain strongly influenced by emergency-based logics. This framing emerged consistently across discussions and was associated with concerns regarding policy coherence, institutional continuity, and the long-term sustainability of integration measures.

4.3.2 Employment and training pathways

Moreover, focus group discussions explored migrants' employment trajectories and the functioning of training and labour market integration mechanisms. Participants—including representatives from VET institutions, employment services, and third-sector organizations—consistently emphasized the importance of cooperation among training providers, public authorities, employment agencies, cooperatives, and NGOs. Such collaboration was described as essential for supporting migrants across interconnected dimensions, including language acquisition, vocational training, skills assessment, and job placement.

However, stakeholders also identified structural constraints limiting the effectiveness of these pathways. Participants highlighted discontinuities between training programmes and labour market opportunities, as well as fragmentation in the governance frameworks regulating access to employment support services. These dynamics were perceived as generating uncertainty for both migrants and service providers. VET_6, representing a vocational training centre with long-standing experience in the reception of unaccompanied foreign minors, reflected on the evolution of migration flows and institutional responses. The participant noted that policy approaches continue to be shaped by emergency-oriented logics. As VET_6 observed, "massive political, institutional, and financial efforts would be needed... to move from emergency immigration towards a structured integration policy" (FG_3_VET_6). Across discussions, migration was widely recognized as a necessary resource for sectors experiencing persistent labour shortages. At the same time, contributors stressed that effective labour market integration requires a more substantial alignment between training systems, employment services, and regulatory frameworks. These accounts further underscore the need for greater policy coherence and institutional continuity to ensure that training and employment pathways effectively support migrants' long-term labour market participation.

4.3.3 Role of social cooperation and transnational training initiatives

FG_3 discussions highlighted the perceived importance of social cooperatives and training agencies in supporting migrants' integration pathways. Int_8, representing the cooperative sector, emphasized the central role played by these organizations in delivering reception, education, and employment-oriented services. At the same time, the participant identified persistent implementation challenges. Despite regional efforts to promote more stable and integrated models, Int_8 pointed to the absence of "an integrated vision between different institutional levels" (FG_3_Int_8), which was described as constraining the continuity and effectiveness of integration programmes. Regulatory changes affecting the reception system were also mentioned as a source of organizational uncertainty (FG_3_Int_8).

Participants further discussed training initiatives developed in migrants' countries of origin. Int_8 referred to Coopermondo's activities¹ supporting cooperative development outside Europe, framing such interventions as attempts to strengthen local institutional and economic capacities (FG_3_Int_8). Differences across geographical contexts were noted, particularly in the cultural and regulatory conditions that influence programme implementation. Complementing this perspective, Int_7bis described projects aimed at training qualified personnel in countries of origin in cooperation with Italian companies (FG_3_Int_7bis). These initiatives were presented as mechanisms to address labour shortages while raising concerns about the balance between labour market needs and migrants' professional trajectories. In this regard, participants warned against approaches that may reproduce forms of instrumentalization or skills selection detached from migrants' aspirations, echoing broader debates on migrant-centred integration frameworks (Bonfanti, 2014).

Participants also emphasized the growing relevance of European-funded programmes supporting capacity-building in VET. VET_4 highlighted that recent Erasmus+ initiatives have funded transnational projects designed to modernize training systems and foster skills development. As VET_4 observed, these programmes are particularly valuable as "bottom-up initiatives" that directly support training institutions and local actors (FG_3_VET_4). Examples mentioned during discussions included the MoVET project,² as well as the INVEST and ADDUPT projects³ (FG_3_VET_4).

Overall, FG discussions highlighted both constraints and opportunities shaping migrants' employment and training trajectories, particularly in relation to professional training, labour market access, and socio-cultural integration across sectors.

4.4 Structural challenges in migrants' employment and housing integration

Focus group discussions also revealed persistent difficulties affecting migrants' employment stability and access to adequate housing, highlighting the interdependence between labour market integration and living conditions. Participants emphasized that barriers to housing access frequently persist even when migrants achieve employment. Int_6 described the difficulty of securing stable accommodation and the limited effectiveness of existing guarantee mechanisms:

Even when individuals leave reception centres with a job and financial arrangements, they might not obtain the housing they deserve (FG_2_Int_6).

The participant further noted that while organizations may attempt to act as guarantors, such mechanisms are often "very complex" and not consistently recognized by housing agencies (FG_2_Int_6).

Alongside housing challenges, discussions highlighted persistent patterns of labour market segmentation. VET_3 referred to processes of occupational ethnicization, whereby migrants are frequently channelled into specific sectors based on nationality or stereotypical expectations rather than individual competencies:

Migrants, based on their cultural and geographical origin, are directed almost naturally into specific segments of the labour market (FG_2_VET_3).

Examples discussed included the concentration of women from Eastern Europe in caregiving roles and workers from South Asia in agriculture and livestock-related occupations (FG_2_VET_3) (Caruso et al., 2024). Participants associated these dynamics with mechanisms of social representation and workplace communication practices. These accounts align with national statistics documenting the concentration of migrant workers in selected occupational segments and low-specialization roles (Direzione Generale dell'Immigrazione e delle Politiche di Integrazione, 2023a, 2023b), suggesting the persistence of structural segmentation patterns across sectors.

4.4.1 Structural vulnerabilities in education and housing pathways

FG_3 highlighted the structural vulnerabilities affecting unaccompanied foreign minors, particularly in relation to educational continuity and housing stability. Int_11, coordinator of a residential community for unaccompanied minors, described the challenges associated with supporting young migrants' transitions towards autonomy. The participant emphasized time constraints linked to the legal duration of reception projects, noting the limited window available to prepare minors for independent living. Difficulties were also reported in balancing participation in education and training pathways with the economic necessity to work:

¹Association for International Development Cooperation ETS <https://www.coopermondo.it/> (accessed 17 February 2026).

²<https://www.enaip.fvg.it/it/42397/movet> (accessed 17 February 2026).

³<https://cesie.org/project/invest/> <https://cesie.org/en/project/addupt/> (accessed 17 February 2026).

Many times, personal needs push these children to abandon the possibility of studying, having to work to send money to their families (FG_3_Int_11).

Int_11 further highlighted integration challenges within training environments, observing that initial vocational courses are often attended exclusively by migrant students. This dynamic was associated with risks of “classroom segregation” and reduced opportunities for interaction in mixed social contexts. At the same time, the participant referred to cases in which volunteer networks and host families supported continued educational participation:

We managed to enroll a boy in a mechanics training school... thanks to the support of a host family (FG_3_Int_11).

These accounts underscore the tension between educational investment, economic pressures, and housing transitions shaping unaccompanied minors’ integration trajectories. The discussions were complemented by contributions from representatives of employment agencies, who introduced organizational perspectives on labour market integration practices, which are further explored in the following section.

4.4.2 ‘The “without borders” project and migrants’ labour market inclusion

FG_2 and FG_3 examined organizational practices supporting migrants’ labour market integration. In this context, Int_7 introduced the “Without Borders” project,⁴ described as an initiative providing free orientation, coaching, and training services for migrants and refugees, while simultaneously engaging companies in diversity and social responsibility processes. As Int_7 explained:

We work on two fronts: the candidate’s and the corporate one... promoting diversity and inclusion policies (FG_2_Int_7).

The project was presented as offering structured pathways, including skills assessment, language training, and employment orientation. Int_7 reported that the initiative has delivered “free orientation, coaching, and training activities” to thousands of beneficiaries, including targeted interventions for Ukrainian refugees (FG_2_Int_7). Complementing this perspective, Int_7bis further detailed the project’s pedagogical approach:

We create pathways that start with skills mapping... from language learning and civic education to labour market preparation (FG_3_Int_7bis).

These programmes were described as gradual processes aimed at strengthening linguistic competence, professional self-presentation, and, where necessary, the development of technical

skills aligned with labour-market demands. Participants highlighted the importance of collaboration between employment agencies and third-sector organizations. Int_7bis emphasized the need to raise companies’ awareness of the value of cultural diversity and migrant inclusion (FG_3_Int_7bis).

However, discussions also revealed structural constraints that affect programme effectiveness. VET_4 reported that several internships activated within regional projects (GOL Paths)⁵ were interrupted due to communication difficulties and mobility limitations:

Many internships have been activated, but some have been interrupted due to communication difficulties (FG_3_VET_4).

Transport barriers—including the absence of driving licenses and private vehicles—were described as particularly critical in geographically dispersed territories (FG_3_VET_4). In addition, participants noted misalignments between migrants’ professional aspirations and available employment opportunities, especially in sectors such as agriculture. FG contributors further stressed the fragility of project-based initiatives, highlighting the dependence on external funding:

These initiatives are not stable... without funding, it is difficult to support these projects (FG_3_VET_4).

Overall, these accounts underscore both the innovative potential and the structural vulnerabilities of labour-market inclusion programmes targeting migrants.

4.5 Skill partnerships and pre-departure training initiatives

All analysed discussions highlighted a few initiatives aimed at addressing labour shortages through structured cooperation between Italy and countries of origin. Int_1/VET_1 referred to a recently introduced national programme designed to enhance the attractiveness of the construction sector while responding to persistent workforce gaps. The initiative, developed in collaboration with the Italian Ministry of Labour, the Tunisian government, and Italian training centres, aims to train and facilitate the labour-market integration of 2,000 Tunisian workers. Participants consistently associated such programmes with the growing difficulty Italian firms face in recruiting qualified personnel, particularly in technically specialized segments such as plant engineering. Similar needs were reported in manufacturing and industrial sectors, including high-skill domains.

Within FG_3, Int_9 described organizational experiences related to pre-departure training models. The participant emphasized the importance of delivering vocational preparation directly in countries of origin, referencing cooperation with training institutions in Egypt:

⁴<https://www.randstad.it/azienda/servizi-per-le-aziende/diversita-e-inclusione-in-azienda/without-borders/> (accessed 17 February 2026).

⁵<https://www.lavoro.gov.it/temi-e-priorita/occupazione/focus/pagine/programma-gol> (accessed 6 November 2024).

They see Don Bosco as a sort of excellence they try to copy... We have been attempting to create bridges with these academies. It will take more time; it is not immediate (FG_3_Int_9).

These initiatives were framed as mechanisms for transferring technical know-how, aligning training standards with Italian labour market requirements, and facilitating subsequent employment integration. Int_9 further cited pilot experiences involving the recruitment of Ghanaian welders in Northeast Italy, noting how pre-existing migrant communities may support workplace insertion processes. At the same time, the participant highlighted administrative obstacles, particularly concerning qualification recognition procedures and entry visa systems.

Across discussions, Skill Partnerships were described as promising yet structurally constrained instruments. While such programmes may support targeted labour matching, participants observed that they often prioritize highly trained profiles shaped by “Italian-style” training models, raising questions about scalability and inclusiveness.

5 Discussion

The analysis of the phenomenon of skills mismatch, the labour market, and the integration of migrant workers into the Italian economic and socio-cultural fabric has highlighted a series of structural issues that hinder the alignment of labour supply and demand, thereby penalizing foreign workers. This evidence emerges from the statistical data presented in the first paragraph and the qualitative data analysis. The next sub-sections intend to intertwine what emerged from the contextual data of the Italian case.

5.1 Interpreting skills shortages: structural and cultural drivers

The findings should be interpreted in the context of the broader structural transformations currently affecting the Italian labour market (CNEL–Unioncamere, 2026; European Commission, 2024; ISTAT, 2024). Employers’ accounts indicate that skills shortages are shaped not only by demographic pressures but also by evolving expectations towards work, including work–life balance considerations, mobility constraints, and shifting career aspirations among younger generations. These dynamics appear particularly salient in sectors characterized by a predominance of small and medium-sized enterprises (CNEL–UNIONCAMERE, 2026). In such contexts, smaller firms face increasing competition from larger organizations able to offer more stable career prospects, higher wages, or more attractive working conditions. Recruitment difficulties, therefore, reflect the interaction between quantitative labour shortages and qualitative mismatches between workers’ expectations and sector-specific job characteristics.

Importantly, skills shortages emerge not merely as a deficit of available workers but as a complex socio-economic phenomenon

linked to changing labour market preferences, sectoral attractiveness, and organizational capacity to attract and retain qualified personnel. This interpretation is supported by questionnaire evidence showing that 11 responding companies reported difficulties in recruiting and retaining workers with vocational or higher education qualifications. This reading is further corroborated by national labour market projections, which consistently highlight persistent recruitment difficulties in technical, vocational, and medium-skilled occupations, particularly in sectors affected by demographic ageing and constrained replacement demand (FORMACENTER, 2023; Unioncamere, 2024). Such trends contextualize employers’ perceptions not simply as organizational constraints, but as manifestations of broader structural imbalances.

5.2 Barriers to education, training, and labour market integration

The findings highlight significant barriers affecting access to education and training pathways for both young people and adults with migrant backgrounds. Unaccompanied minors were described as facing constraints related to limited time horizons, legal-administrative transitions, and pressures associated with economic and family responsibilities. Similarly, migrant adults often encounter difficulties in investing in professional development due to immediate employment needs and income insecurity.

Across discussions, language proficiency emerged as a critical factor shaping both labour market access and socio-cultural integration. Limited command of the host-country language was associated with restricted employment opportunities, reduced participation in training programmes, and slower career progression. Participants further emphasized the persistent challenges in recognizing qualifications and skills acquired abroad. The lack of transparent and timely validation mechanisms, combined with regulatory rigidity governing work permits and visa transitions, was perceived as significantly constraining migrants’ ability to access positions aligned with their competencies. These barriers are reflected in statistical patterns showing disproportionately high rates of overqualification among tertiary-educated migrants in Italy, where foreign workers are significantly more likely than natives to be employed below their educational level (ISTAT, 2025a; OECD, 2025). This mismatch suggests that labour market entry does not automatically translate into effective skill utilization.

These dynamics should be interpreted within a broader and rapidly evolving socio-economic context. International mobility trends provide a relevant comparative perspective. According to the *Education at a Glance* report (OECD, 2025), international student mobility continued to expand across the OECD area, with international students accounting for 7.4% of tertiary enrolments in 2023, compared with 6.0% in 2018. Italy represents one of the few exceptions to this pattern, recording a decline from 5.6% to 4.8%. Complementary evidence highlights structural imbalances in student mobility. In 2023, more than 50,000 Italian students were enrolled in universities across other European countries, compared with approximately 18,500 European students studying in Italy (Barbato, 2026). This

asymmetry reflects both the outward mobility of nationally educated human capital and the limited capacity of the Italian higher education system to attract international students.

Administrative data further illustrate the volatility of study-related migration flows. Residence permits issued for study purposes peaked in 2023 before declining sharply in 2024 (ISTAT, 2025b), suggesting that recent increases may not yet represent a consolidated structural trend. Longitudinal analyses also indicate limited post-study retention: among international students who arrived in Italy in 2010, only 17% were still employed in Italy 5 years later, and just 11% after 10 years (Bruno and Tucci, 2026). These figures point to systemic difficulties not only in attracting international students but also in integrating and retaining them within the national labour market.

A recurrent theme emerging from the focus groups concerns the divergence between workers' expectations and labour market conditions. While many Italian workers—as well as second-generation migrants—were described as prioritizing professional fulfilment and work–life balance, newly arrived migrants often face conditions where economic survival remains the primary concern. This asymmetry may contribute to occupational downgrading, skills mismatch, and constrained mobility trajectories.

Concerns regarding labour shortages and the structural reliance on migrant workers, particularly in care-related occupations, are consistent with national statistics from INPS (2025) documenting a continued decline in domestic and care workers alongside an ageing workforce (Marchetti and Lashchuk, 2025). Overall, the findings suggest that labour market integration is shaped by the interaction of linguistic, institutional, and structural constraints, contributing to persistent patterns of occupational segmentation and limited professional mobility.

5.3 Integration practices and inclusion initiatives

Stakeholders reflected extensively on initiatives and policy frameworks shaping migrants' inclusion in Italy. A recurrent theme concerned the perceived inadequacy of the existing legislative architecture, particularly the need to update regulatory instruments introduced in the early 2000s to better accommodate evolving migration flows and ongoing labour market transformations. Participants highlighted significant territorial disparities in the governance and implementation of reception and integration measures, pointing to uneven service provision and persistent coordination gaps across regions. Regulatory discontinuities were described as generating uncertainty for both migrants and organizations involved in support, education, and training activities.

The functioning of the reception system emerged as a central concern. Several contributors emphasized the importance of strengthening monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, while also noting how the location of reception centres—often poorly connected to public transport networks—constrains migrants' mobility and access to employment and training opportunities. Recent policy changes were perceived as having reduced the

scope of integration services, reinforcing calls for more comprehensive and structurally oriented reforms.

Participants also discussed innovative practices to foster more integrated inclusion pathways. These included “third welcoming” initiatives designed to support long-term autonomy, as well as multidisciplinary approaches that promote stronger collaboration among institutions, service providers, and labour market actors. Within this framework, the Riace model (Versace, 2019) was referenced as an example of a locally embedded inclusion strategy. Contributors, however, noted how governance dynamics and public narratives may influence the visibility, continuity, and scalability of such experiences.

Stakeholders similarly referred to labour-market integration programmes developed through partnerships among employment agencies, training providers, and third-sector organizations. Among these, the “Without Borders” project emerged as a particularly significant example. As illustrated in the results section, the initiative combines skills assessment, language training, career guidance, and employer engagement, highlighting the value of multidimensional support mechanisms addressing both employability and organizational inclusion.

More broadly, discussions underscored the importance of coordinated action among VET providers, NGOs, employers' organizations, and public institutions. Particular attention was paid to training initiatives developed in countries of origin, the integration of unaccompanied minors, and the challenge of balancing employers' workforce needs with migrant-centred inclusion approaches. This perspective aligns with frameworks that emphasize migrants' agency, capabilities, and long-term professional development beyond immediate labour-market demands (Bonfanti, 2014).

5.4 Policy implications

Against this background of structural barriers and institutional constraints, focus group discussions also shed light on existing initiatives and policy frameworks that support migrants' inclusion. The findings of this study suggest that addressing skills shortages and improving migrants' labour-market integration in Italy requires coordinated, multi-level policy responses. Evidence from both employer questionnaires and focus groups indicates that labour shortages are not solely driven by demographic decline but are also shaped by institutional rigidities, training system misalignments, and persistent barriers affecting migrants' employment stability.

First, the results highlight the need to reform qualification recognition mechanisms. This priority aligns with international evidence indicating that delayed recognition of foreign credentials is a key driver of migrant underemployment and skill waste (OECD, 2025). Employers and stakeholders repeatedly identified the non-recognition or delayed validation of foreign credentials as a significant obstacle preventing migrants from accessing positions aligned with their competencies. Simplifying and accelerating recognition procedures could reduce underemployment, improve skill utilization, and mitigate forms of occupational downgrading documented across sectors.

Second, the data point to the importance of strengthening sector-specific VET. Skills shortages were concentrated in technically demanding and care-related occupations, yet participants emphasized that existing training pathways often struggle to adapt to rapidly evolving labour-market needs. Policies supporting flexible, modular, and work-based learning models—including closer collaboration between employers, VET providers, and higher education institutions—may enhance responsiveness and employability.

Third, the findings underscore the central role of language education in workplace contexts. Language barriers emerged as a cross-cutting constraint affecting job access, career progression, productivity, and social integration. Expanding professionally oriented language programmes integrated with vocational and technical training could therefore generate both economic and inclusion-related benefits.

Fourth, the study points to the need to enhance policy coherence across the migration, labour, and education domains. Stakeholders described regulatory discontinuities, administrative complexity, and fragmented governance structures that generate uncertainty for migrants, employers, and service providers. Greater alignment between residence permit regulations, employment services, and training systems appears essential to ensure continuity in integration and career pathways.

Fifth, the findings offer reflections on the development of Skill Partnership initiatives. Empirical evidence from focus groups suggests that these programmes are perceived as promising tools for addressing sectoral labour shortages and skills gaps. Participants referred to collaborations involving Italy and countries such as Tunisia, Egypt, and Ghana, particularly in the construction and manufacturing sectors. These initiatives were described as facilitating targeted recruitment and pre-departure training, including technical and language preparation.

Notably, recent regulatory developments have explicitly incorporated skill partnerships within Italy's migration governance framework. In particular, the *Decreto Cutro* (Law No. 50/2023), alongside the *Decreto Flussi* (Law Decree No. 20/2023), introduced provisions enabling the activation of training and recruitment pathways also through extra-quota mechanisms linked to bilateral cooperation schemes. This policy orientation reflects an increasing institutional emphasis on aligning labour migration channels with sector-specific skills needs.

However, stakeholders also highlighted potential risks associated with narrowly demand-driven or short-term approaches. Skill Partnerships may prove most effective when embedded within broader integration frameworks that include language acquisition, qualification recognition, workplace mentoring, and opportunities for career progression. Without such systemic embedding, these programmes risk addressing quantitative shortages while leaving unresolved the structural dimensions of skills mismatches and labour-market segmentation. Rather than functioning solely as recruitment channels, skill partnerships could be conceptualized as long-term cooperation mechanisms supporting skills development, mobility governance, and mutual capacity building between countries of origin and destination. This perspective aligns with participants' concerns about balancing labour-market demands with migrant-centred strategies that promote sustainable employment trajectories and professional agency. Overall, these

implications indicate that migration governance and skills policies should be approached as interconnected dimensions of labour-market sustainability, social cohesion, and inclusive development, rather than as separate or emergency-driven policy fields.

5.5 Limitations

This study identifies several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings.

First, the research is based on a purposive sample of employers and stakeholders and therefore does not aim to provide statistically representative evidence of the Italian labour market. Instead, the study focuses on providing an in-depth understanding of the perceptions, experiences, and practices of those involved in integrating migrants into the labour market and in developing their skills.

Second, the sample of companies is relatively small and geographically concentrated, predominantly comprising organizations located in Northern Italy. While this reflects the distribution of participating organizations within the project network, it may restrict the applicability of the findings to other regions with different labour market conditions and migration dynamics.

Third, the analysis predominantly reflects the perspectives of employers, VET providers, labour market intermediaries, higher education institutions, and stakeholders in migrant inclusion. The experiences and viewpoints of migrants themselves were not directly examined in this study and should be prioritized in future research.

Finally, as with all focus-group research, the findings may have been shaped by group dynamics, variations in institutional perspectives, and uneven participation among discussants. To mitigate these risks, moderators took active steps to encourage balanced participation and the expression of diverse viewpoints throughout the discussions. Nonetheless, it's possible that some perspectives gained more prominence than others.

Despite these limitations, this study contributes to understanding the institutional, educational, and labour-market mechanisms that influence the inclusion of migrants in Italy. It provides evidence-based insights that may inform policymakers, employers, and education and training providers in addressing skills shortages, labour-market integration, and the development of more inclusive migration and training policies.

6 Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that the inclusion of migrants within the Italian educational and economic systems is undergoing a significant transformation. The traditional emergency-oriented model, historically centred on first reception and labour-market insertion in lower-skilled segments, appears increasingly inadequate in addressing contemporary demographic and economic dynamics. Two structural drivers emerge as particularly salient.

First, demographic change is reshaping labour supply. Italy's persistent decline in birth rates, combined with population ageing, is progressively reducing the size of younger cohorts entering

education and employment, contributing to a contraction of the native workforce and intensifying recruitment difficulties across sectors.

Second, economic pressures are reinforcing demand for migrant labour. Employers report growing challenges in filling vacancies, particularly in construction, manufacturing, hospitality, and care services. Migrant workers are therefore increasingly perceived not merely as a supplementary workforce but as a necessary component of organizational sustainability, prompting companies to invest more actively in training and skills development, including for technically qualified roles.

Despite this transition, persistent tensions remain. Institutional frameworks governing entry, qualification recognition, and integration pathways continue to reflect elements of earlier emergency-based approaches. Bureaucratic complexity, policy discontinuities, and fragmented coordination across migration governance, training systems, and labour-market regulation impose constraints on both migrants and employers.

From an interpretative perspective, these dynamics align with analyses that describe Italy as a variant of “Mediterranean capitalism” (Amable, 2005), characterized by the coexistence of relatively strong employment protection mechanisms and comparatively weaker social protection structures, shaping labour-market regulation and integration trajectories. Beyond the economic sphere, demographic transformations are also reconfiguring the social fabric. Rising demand for care and welfare services, alongside evolving household structures, is intensifying reliance on migrant labour across the health, domestic, and community-based support sectors. Participants identified several interrelated policy priorities, including improving access to education and training for minors and young adults, ensuring income continuity during training participation, expanding affordable housing and mobility services, stabilizing residence permit pathways, and strengthening the recognition and valorization of prior learning and competencies acquired abroad.

Overall, the Italian case reflects a broader historical shift in which migration is increasingly embedded within both economic and social systems. Yet this shift remains characterized by a structural misalignment between demographic trends, labour market needs, governance mechanisms, and integration policies. At the same time, the analysis documents the presence of innovative and locally embedded practices, including community-based inclusion models, structured cooperation between training providers and employers, and international initiatives developed through skill partnerships. Although limited in scale, these experiences suggest possible directions for more systemic, coordinated, and sustainable inclusion strategies. Future research should expand empirical investigation, incorporate migrants’ lived experiences, and further examine the long-term outcomes of emerging policy instruments, vocational training pathways, and skill partnership initiatives, particularly concerning their effects on labour-market integration, career progression, and social inclusion.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/Supplementary Material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by the Ethics Committee of the Department of Human Sciences (University of Verona). The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study. Written informed consent was obtained from the individual(s) for the publication of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article.

Author contributions

DN: Methodology, Writing – review & editing, Data curation, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Resources, Formal analysis, Validation, Conceptualization. FV: Investigation, Software, Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Resources, Visualization, Data curation, Methodology, Project administration, Validation.

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Conflict of interest

The author(s) declared that this work was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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The author(s) declared that generative AI was used in the creation of this manuscript. ChatGPT (GPT-5.2, OpenAI) was used solely for language editing and formatting of references and declarations. The authors retain full responsibility for the manuscript’s content and interpretations.

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