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Migrant Workers' Perspectives on Targeted Training Pathways: A Comparative Analysis Across Four European Countries¹

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Abstract

Context: European countries increasingly rely on migrant workers to address labour shortages, yet significant challenges remain in the recognition and utilisation of migrants' skills and qualifications. While national VET and integration systems differ considerably, less is known about how migrants experience these processes of recognition across different destination countries.

Approach: This paper presents a comparative mixed-method analysis of migrant workers' experiences in Norway, Lithuania, Italy, and Germany within the Horizon Europe SKILLS4JUSTICE project (S4J). Survey and interview data were analysed to explore access to qualification recognition, vocational education and training (VET), and employment.

Findings: Despite significant differences in institutional arrangements, migrants reported similar challenges across countries. Language proficiency emerged as a key factor affecting access

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to training, qualification recognition and employment opportunities. Bureaucratic complexity, lengthy recognition procedures and administrative barriers often delayed labour market integration and contributed to underemployment and deskilling. Migrants frequently relied on employers, private actors and informal networks to navigate these obstacles.

Conclusions: The findings suggest that differences in national VET and integration systems do not necessarily eliminate the barriers migrants face in translating their qualifications into labour market opportunities. Strengthening language support, simplifying recognition procedures and improving access to coordinated support services remain crucial for fostering more equitable pathways into education, training and employment.

Keywords

Skills4Justice, migrants' perspectives, barriers to skills recognition, VET pathways in Europe

1 Introduction

Across Europe, vocational education and training (VET) systems have become increasingly important instruments for addressing labour shortages, supporting labour market integration and managing migration processes. However, VET systems are embedded within specific national cultures, labour market structures and welfare regimes, resulting in different opportunities for skills development, recognition of prior learning and occupational mobility (Busemeyer & Trampusch, 2012; Cedefop, 2025). While comparative research has extensively examined VET systems and governance at policy and institutional levels, less attention has been paid to how migrant workers themselves experience and navigate these pathways across different national contexts (Morrice et al., 2017; SKILLS4JUSTICE, 2025).

Existing research suggests that migrants' engagement with VET is shaped not only by institutional arrangements but also by legal status, migration trajectories, biographical resources and everyday life constraints (Bauder, 2006; Kogan, 2011). As a result, access to training, recognition and employment opportunities is often uneven, contributing to processes of deskilling, labour market segmentation and differential inclusion. Recent scholarship has therefore called for approaches that move beyond policy-centred and functionalist understandings of integration, paying greater attention to migrants' lived experiences, agency and interpretations of educational and labour market institutions (Anthias, 2012; Schinkel, 2018).

From the perspective of migrants, transparent pathways for education, training, and recognition are crucial for successfully navigating educational and occupational trajectories across countries. However, challenges often arise during transitions between education and training systems when previously acquired qualifications, skills, and educational experiences do not align with the requirements or opportunities present in the destination country (Chiswick & Miller, 2009; Muñoz-Comet & Miyar-Busto, 2018; Schaarschmidt et al., 2010). While migrants' educational backgrounds and the institutional characteristics of their countries of origin undoubtedly influence these transitions, this study primarily focuses on migrants' experiences within the education, training, and recognition systems of the destination countries.

Building on these perspectives, this article explores migrant workers' experiences of VET and social inclusion in four European countries: Norway, Lithuania, Italy and Germany. Drawing on both online survey and qualitative interviews conducted within the Horizon Europe SKILLS4JUSTICE project (S4J), the study examines how migrants experience access to VET, recognition of qualifications and employment opportunities across different institutional settings.

In this article, the term «targeted training pathways» pertains to educational and training opportunities designed to assist migrant workers in developing, adapting, or formally recognizing their skills and qualifications in line with the demands of the labor markets in their destination countries. In this context, the study explores the following research question: How do

migrant workers perceive and navigate the opportunities and challenges associated with the recognition of skills and qualifications, vocational education and training, and labor market integration across various national contexts? By comparing institutional arrangements with migrants' lived experiences, the article highlights how opportunities for skills development, recognition and occupational mobility are unevenly distributed across national contexts and individual trajectories. Rather than portraying migrant workers as passive recipients of integration policies or merely as labour market resources, the study emphasizes their active role in interpreting, negotiating and responding to the opportunities and barriers encountered throughout their educational and occupational pathways. In doing so, it contributes to ongoing debates on migration, VET, and social inequality in contemporary Europe.

2 Method

This study draws on both quantitative and qualitative data collected within Work Package 4 (WP4) of the S4J project. WP4 investigated migrant workers' experiences of skills formation, their integration in the European labour market, their perceived discrimination, socio-cultural integration, and social justice across multiple European destination countries.

The research project globally adopted a comparative mixed-method design. The qualitative component was designed to complement the quantitative survey implemented within WP4 and to provide a deeper understanding of migrants' lived experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Attention was devoted to participants' own interpretations of opportunities and barriers encountered throughout their educational and occupational pathways. Data were collected through both an online survey and semi-structured interviews conducted using a common protocol collaboratively developed by all the project partners.

The data collection tools were developed applying the Delphi method and refined by adjusting the results based on multilateral reviews of the guidelines. Each partner had the opportunity to add country-specific questions or delete those which were not applicable. The adaptations were carefully documented.

Although data collection and analysis were carried out independently by the national research teams, comparability was ensured through a common research protocol and shared analytical dimensions developed collaboratively within WP4. The findings at the country level were subsequently integrated into a comparative framework that focused on migrants' experiences regarding skills and qualification recognition, access to vocational education and training, and employment, as well as the strategies employed to overcome related barriers. This comparison thus emphasized recurring patterns and context-specific differences across the four national cases rather than directly comparing equivalent datasets. Additionally, this approach allowed for the Norwegian survey-based findings to be analyzed alongside the qualitative findings from Lithuania, Italy, and Germany, while recognizing their methodological differences.

2.1 Sample

The Norwegian quantitative survey sample ($n = 251$) consists of labour immigrants from 72 non-EU27 countries, primarily from Asia and Europe, with somewhat more females (59%) than males (40%), while about 1% preferred not to say. Those with status as refugee/asylum seeker were not included in the sample. Close to one in five (18%) were below 35 years, about one third 35-44 (33%) and 45-54 (30%) years, while 19% over 55 years of age (Table 1). Most of the migrants were well-educated: 19% had a maximum of secondary level education, a third (30%) held a bachelor's degree, and 41% a master's degree, while 10% held a doctoral degree. About one in four (26%) had lived in Norway for five years or less, 17% 6-10 years, while majority (57%) over 10 years.

Table 1

The Norwegian Sample Broken Down by Gender, Age, and Region of Origin

Region of origin	Gender, % (n)			Age, % (n)		
	Female		Male	Prefer not to say	< 45 yrs	≥ 45 yrs
Africa	47.1 (8)		52.9 (9)	0.0 (0)	52.9 (9)	47.1 (8)
Asia	57.0 (53)		40.9 (38)	2.2 (2)	53.2 (50)	46.8 (44)
Europe non-EU	67.5 (56)		32.5 (27)	0.0 (0)	51.8 (43)	48.1 (40)
North America	58.3 (21)		41.7 (15)	0.0 (0)	36.1 (13)	63.9 (23)
South America	47.1 (8)		52.9 (9)	0.0 (0)	64.7 (11)	35.3 (6)
Oceania	25.0 (1)		75.0 (3)	0.0 (0)	50.0 (2)	50.0 (2)
Total	58.8 (147)		40.4 (101)	0.8 (2)	51.0 (128)	49.0 (123)

Note. Values are percentages with frequencies in parentheses. Gender data were available for $n = 250$ participants and age data for $n = 251$ participants. Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding. Adapted from Tikkanen et al. (2026).

In the Lithuanian qualitative survey, there were interviewed 45 migrants from the different countries including Ukraine, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Ecuador, Peru, Morocco, Syria, Lebanon, Russian Federation, India, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. Regarding the legal status of migration, the sample consisted of 18 regular labour migrants (40%), 26 asylum seekers (58%) with the right to employment, and 1 migrant student. Thirty informants (67%) have attained a higher education degree in their countries, 9 (20%) hold a vocational education and qualification, and 6 (13%) have general secondary education. Furthermore, 41 (92%) informants are employed on a work contract, 2 (4%) are self-employed or business owners, and 2 (4%) are unemployed (Table 2).

Table 2

Gender/Age of the Participants in Lithuania

	N	Age				
		18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-67
Male	28	0	5	6	3	3
Female	17	4	4	11	8	1
Total	45	4	9	17	11	4

Note. N = 45, edited by the Lithuanian working group.

The Italian qualitative survey sample consisted of 33 migrant workers residing in Italy and originating from both EU and non-EU countries. Most of them came from African countries such as Egypt ($n = 9$), Cameroon ($n = 4$), Ivory Coast ($n = 4$), Guinea Conakry ($n = 4$). Other geographical areas represented were Eastern European countries (Ukraine, Moldova and Albania) and Asia (Pakistan). Participants represented diverse educational backgrounds, employment situations, legal statuses, and migration trajectories. The sample included labour migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers employed in sectors such as manufacturing, construction, hospitality, people-care work, logistics, and services. 9 participants (I_22-I_30) were involved in a

structured Skills Partnership (European Migration Network & OECD, 2022) initiative linking vocational training provided by the Don Bosco Salesian Institutes in Cairo and Alexandria (Egypt) with employment opportunities in the Italian manufacturing sector in the North-East Region of Friuli-Venezia Giulia. The remaining participants followed more heterogeneous migration and labour market pathways (Table 3).

Table 3
Gender/Age of the Participants in Italy

	N	Age 18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-67
Male	27	9	13	3	0	2
Female	6	0	2	1	2	1
Total	33	9	15	4	2	3

Note. N = 33, edited by the Italian working group

In the German qualitative survey, 24 people were interviewed, most of whom came from Syria. Other countries represented included Türkiye, Israel, Kazakhstan, Lebanon, Ukraine, Russia, Afghanistan, Brazil, North Macedonia, Nigeria, Iraq and Cameroon. The majority were refugees (11 people), followed by educational migrants (4 people), labour migrants (3 people), late migrants (1 person), family reunification migrants (4 people), and 1 other (Table 4).

Table 4
Gender/Age of the Participants in Germany

	N	Age 18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-67
Male	17	0	9	7	1	0
Female	7	0	3	3	0	1
Total	24	0	12	10	1	1

Note. N = 24, edited by the German working group

2.2 Procedure

In Norway, data were collected with a quantitative online survey, jointly developed in S4J working group, carried out during the period June-October 2025. The eligibility criteria for the survey were a) age 18-68 years, b) born in a country outside of Norway and of EU27, c) having immigrated to Norway, and d) worked in Norway for more than 3 months. The survey was carried out in two languages, Norwegian and English. The questionnaire comprised 33 questions in total, most of them of type multiple choice, while some were open (e.g., country of origin and length of stay in the destination country). Besides background information (including information about e.g., the first job), the themes covered in the questionnaire were skills and skills match/mismatch, justice at work, social participation and civic rights, and discrimination. The last question was open ended, requesting the informants to freely add comments about the survey thematic. Responses to this question are used in this paper as qualitative data to describe migrants' own experiences in order to enrich the numeric presentation of the findings from the quantitative data with authentic quotes. The latter was analysed with SPSSX, primarily using descriptive statistics (frequency and percentage distribution) while exploring the effects of the

background variables (gender, age, education, continent of origin, and length of stay) with cross-tabulations and correlations.

In Lithuania, semi-structured interviews were conducted, 32 of them face-to-face and 13 online or by phone. The interviews were conducted between May and November 2025 and lasted between 25 and 90 minutes. They were carried out in English, Ukrainian, Russian, Arabic, and Lithuanian. The interview transcripts were prepared in the original languages and then translated into English. The interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis.

In Italy, semi-structured interviews were conducted between May and December 2025 by researchers from the University of Verona. Participants were recruited through VET providers, migrant support organizations, labour market intermediaries, and Skills Partnership initiatives. All interviews were conducted in person. 31 have been conducted in Italian, and the remaining two respectively in English and French. All of them were audio-recorded with participants' informed consent and subsequently verbatim transcribed for analysis using Zoom AI Companion plug-in. They lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. The Italian dataset – manually constructed – was analysed using a hybrid thematic analysis approach, combining deductive categories derived from the S4J conceptual framework with inductively generated themes emerging from participants' narratives (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006), with particular attention to migrants' experiences of skills recognition, vocational education and training, labour market integration, perceived skills mismatch and social justice.

In Germany, data collection took place from July to November 2025, applying a data triangulation of mixed empirical methods and a literature review (Flick, 2011). The qualitative inquiry based on the dimensions «skills and qualification profile», «recent employment and perceived skills mismatch», «social inclusion in everyday life and at workplace» as well as «justice and discrimination», enriched by detailed reports about decision making and migration pathways, reflected feelings, attitudes and personal insights. 24 problem-centred interviews (Witzel, 2000) were conducted, in German with some exceptions in English, either face to face or via Zoom. They lasted between 45 and 120 minutes. The interviews were also recorded as audio files and transcribed with the programme f4 transcript (AI-supported). Participants were recruited via respondent-driven sampling (Volz & Heckathorn, 2008).

2.3 Ethics, Data Protection and Limitations

All participants were fully informed about the study's aims and procedures and provided their informed consent prior to taking part. Interviews were recorded only with the participants' consent, and research materials were managed in accordance with the ethical guidelines and data protection protocols established within the S4J project, as well as applicable GDPR requirements. Transcription procedures varied slightly across country teams. In Germany, DeepL was employed for translation assistance and f4analyse was used for transcription, with all materials subsequently reviewed and finalized by the researchers. In Italy, interviews recorded via Zoom were initially transcribed using Zoom AI Companion; these transcripts were then manually compared against the recordings and corrected verbatim by the research team before analysis. Digital and AI-supported tools were utilized solely to aid in the transcription and translation processes, while the responsibility for the accuracy and finalization of the research materials rested with the researchers. Participant data were anonymized prior to analysis, ensuring that any identifying information was removed or masked.

The comparative analysis faces several limitations. Research involving migrant populations presents inherent challenges in participant recruitment and access, largely due to the diverse nature of migration trajectories, legal statuses, linguistic backgrounds, and relationships with institutions and support networks. These challenges have also led to variations in recruitment strategies and sample composition across the four national contexts. As a result, the national samples differ in size, composition, and migration backgrounds, while the country cases

utilize different types of empirical data, with Norway primarily relying on quantitative survey data, and Lithuania, Italy, and Germany focusing on qualitative interviews. These disparities hinder direct cross-country comparability and preclude the interpretation of findings as representative of migrant workers within the respective national contexts. Therefore, the comparison aims to identify recurring patterns and context-specific differences in migrants' experiences, rather than establishing direct equivalence between the datasets from the four countries.

3 Findings

The findings presented are based on the independent analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data collected by each research team.

3.1 Norway

In Norway, institutional measures for migrants include regulated immigration channels managed by the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration (UDI), alongside integration programs such as the Introduction Programme for refugees administered by the Directorate of Integration and Diversity (IMDi), after a residence permit is granted. The recognition of education and qualifications is the responsibility of the Norwegian Directorate for Higher Education and Skills (HK-dir), which has a range of recognition schemes for education acquired abroad: recognition of non-EU higher education; recognition procedure for persons without verifiable documentation (UVD-procedure); turbo evaluations (an assessment of foreign education for employers who have job seekers with foreign HE and assistance to HE in their assessment of foreign HE degrees in the context of PhD admission); recognition of professional qualifications – teachers in school and kindergarten with foreign higher education; recognition of foreign tertiary vocational education, and recognition of foreign VET (the latter currently limited to Denmark, Iceland, Poland, Germany, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) (HK-Dir, 2025). Formal recognition of education acquired abroad is not mandatory in non-regulated occupations and professions, which most of them are, as it is the employer that makes the decisions for approval of the type and scope of qualifications required to perform the job available, but it generally makes access easier to the Norwegian labour market (Ny i Norge, 2026). Directive 2005/36/EC on the recognition of professional qualifications regulates most regulated professions in Norway. Its amendment, Directive 2013/55/EU, introduced several new measures, including the European Professional Card and alert mechanisms (HK-Dir, 2023). Other measures are an automatic recognition scheme available for a smoother access to the labour market, but only for certain countries - especially for citizens from Ukraine and EEA states - and a five-day fast-track option (expedited or priority processing of visa or residence permit application by UDI) for employers (OECD, 2025, p. 298). Immigrants between the ages of 16 and 55 years with a residence permit and labour immigrants from countries outside the EEA/EFTA have access to language training, free of charge (Ministry of Labour and Social Inclusion, 2014). Access to vocational education and training (VET) is granted through the Introduction Programme and the right to adult upper secondary education under the Education Act (Ministry of Education and Research, 2019) (also the Integration Act), including trade certificate at work (for a formal trade or journeyman certificate) and intensive bridging programmes for skilled migrants, tailored to different professions (for nurses, teachers, and engineers) (IMDi, 2022).

Most migrants (67%) had their VET/HE diploma recognized in Norway (41% fully, 27% partially), more often those who were younger, under 35 years (70%), those with higher education (48% of those with master's and 68% with a doctoral degree were fully recognized), and those with short stay (under 5 years) (72-86%). The rate of recognition was lowest for migrants from non-EU Europe. There were also caveats, for example in that the degree was recognized, but on a lower level than as attained in their home country, when it was outside the EU, leading to frustrations.

The pharmaceuticals education is approved in its entirety by the previous NOKUT [current HK-Dir], but the Norwegian Directorate of Health approves it only as a bachelor's degree, because the education is taken in a country outside the EU. (Pharmacist, female, 55-64 years, from Serbia) [Translation: Google Translate]

I have been working as a manager at a pharmacy for many years, almost straight after basic training. I am approved as a bachelor, with exactly the same responsibilities and tasks as everyone else who is approved as a master. It's just that the salary is much lower, and you can't choose the positions yourself like others who have approved a master. Disappointing. (Pharmacist, female, 35-44 years, from Bosnia-Herzegovina) [Translation: Google Translate]

The findings showed that employment was accessible for most skilled migrants. A vast majority (86%) of them were employed, most of them (72%) after their arrival in Norway, while 28% already before it. Almost half of them (47%) got their first job in less than six months, 23% between 6 and 12 months, a further 15% between the first and second year of their stay in, while the rest later. As expected, education plays a crucial role in access to employment, low educated often facing vast challenges.

It took 7 years to get any permanent work. Before that I took whatever I could find, including so-called 0% positions and temporary substitute jobs. (Previous nurse's aid, female, age 65-67 years, from USA)

Some migrants voiced also frustrations, for example in regards the slowness of the bureaucratic processes in getting the required paperwork for a job, discrimination hampering the settling down in their jobs and beyond, and the lack of networks vis-à-vis the discretion «power» of employers.

It's very difficult to integrate to Norwegian society or to find a job here as a foreigner, especially if you're not from Western Europe countries. I didn't experience much discrimination in society, but I feel the subtle discrimination/unconscious bias at work from foreign colleagues. Norwegian is mostly politically correct, so they won't say anything, but the discrimination is subtle and it's there. (Office worker in an international company, female, 25-34 years, from China)

The employer in this country is very powerful, they hire people based on their network rather than by competence, if don't have a network you cannot find easily based job application, Since I am switching from academia to industry I have applied for more than 1300 jobs in last 3 years without success. I am doing contract jobs at universities. (Researcher/postdoc, male, 35-44 years, from Pakistan)

Most migrants experienced good access to education and training in Norway: 77% were confident that they could enrol in the training courses if needed for their work. While a bit less than half of them had not participated in VET in Norway, the rest had attended various forms of it, most typically at a university, technical college, or trade school (mentioned by 49%). For many their current/former employer had provided various forms of support to their adaptation to their jobs, the most often mentioned things being guided on-the-job training (mentioned by 41%), internal vocational courses (mentioned by 38%), and individual feedback provided (31%) (note, several choices were possible, hence the percentages do not sum up to 100). While one in five (21%) had migrated to Norway for long-term work, quite many (16%) had migrated to get an education (correspondingly 62% and 73% of those under 45 years of age).

The survey did not shed much light to migrants' personal strategies and solutions, nor to sources/drivers to their resilience. Again, not unexpectedly, one of the major barriers was language skills, for as one migrant wrote:

The language plays a big role how we feel as an immigrant. (Support engineer, male, 35-44 years, from Brazil)

New technology, especially artificial intelligence, has been of great help in overcoming the language barrier.

There is a lot of pressure to learn Norwegian and use Norwegian at work really fast. I only started learning Norsk, but I am expected to follow meetings in Norsk from the start which I was able to do with the use of translation apps. (Female, age 35-44 years, Researcher / Policy Adviser, from Philippines)

The findings suggest, as already indicated above, that also prejudices and discrimination can hamper the employment and integration processes, and especially when it's subtle, it can be hard to find good strategies and solutions to tackle with.

I experienced discrimination in my first two years in Norway because of language, but it was more subtle. (Biologist in fish farming, male, 25-34 years, from India) [Translation: Google Translate]

I work in the municipality of [...] and am treated poorly, to put it mildly, by the management of the [...] Agency because I am male, 45+ and a foreigner. It is because they have automatically assumed that we in that group are against pride and have pre-labelled us. Without this being correct. (Advisor, male, 45-54 years, from Iran) [Translation: Google Translate]

3.2 Lithuania

Institutional measures for the acceptance of labour and involuntary migrants in Lithuania are largely influenced by the recent transition from net emigration to net immigration status. The immigration of a workforce from third countries has traditionally been viewed by Lithuanian policymakers as a secondary or auxiliary measure for solving skill shortages, giving priority to investment in local human capital and enhancing return migration (Platačiūtė, 2015; Sipavičienė & Jeršovas, 2010). As a result, public bodies are not yet ready to provide services for the acceptance, integration, recognition of qualifications and competences, training, and employment assistance of involuntary migrants. Despite this, trade unions in Lithuania seek to expand their activities to include support for labour migrants; however, so far, their services reach only a very small proportion of migrants working in Lithuania.

Migrant workers surveyed in Lithuania did not note any particular challenges regarding the recognition of vocational skills and qualifications acquired in their home countries. Recognition does not present a challenge for migrants without qualifications who target low-skilled seasonal jobs, nor for those with vocational qualifications applying for skilled positions in shortage occupations, because it is not officially required for employment. Cases were reported of smooth pathways to the recognition of international vocational qualifications in regulated occupations (such as welders), based on formal vocational education obtained in countries of origin (e.g., Central Asia). In the case of workers with vocational qualifications from Ukraine, it is sufficient to present the vocational qualification certificate acquired in Ukraine to the employer without formal recognition.

Regarding the reported pathways for skill formation and development in Lithuania, the interviews disclosed that these pathways largely depend on the type of education and qualifications acquired by migrant workers, as well as the types of jobs in which they are employed. Migrant workers with general or VET qualifications are provided mainly with on-the-job training, or they declare that they do not need any further skill development.

In some cases, involving regulated industrial occupations that require vocational qualifications, migrant workers with a general education undergo on-the-job training provided by the

employer in Lithuania and receive a certificate. Some Ukrainian refugees with higher education acquired in their home country also take vocational training courses to start a career in a new field. Furthermore, obstacles and challenges were identified for unemployed Ukrainian refugee women with higher education seeking access to training courses to acquire new qualifications demanded by the labour market. This problem is driven by the recently implemented reform of continuing training for adult jobseekers, under which such training is only available as a work-based learning or apprenticeship course organized in cooperation with an enterprise. Refugees cannot benefit from this option due to a lack of contacts with potential employers in Lithuania, as well as a lack of orientation within the local labour market and VET system.

Regarding the VET pathway, initial VET was highlighted by several interviewed Ukrainian refugees as an accessible, relevant, and viable temporary alternative for their children's skill formation—especially when higher education is inaccessible due to a lack of resources. Some migrants identify self-learning (occasionally supported by coworkers and superiors) as the most suitable training option when the vocational qualifications obtained in their home country align with their job in Lithuania.

Self-learning (occasionally supported by coworkers and superiors) is identified as the most suitable training option when the vocational qualifications obtained in the home country match the job requirements in Lithuania. Involuntary migrants, particularly war refugees from Ukraine, also reported being proactive in exploiting vocational training opportunities both in VET centres and on the job. This proactivity is especially typical among refugees with higher education. In some cases, this strategy is combined with the ambition of launching independent business activities in fields such as the beauty industry, retail trade, transport, and catering.

Regarding migrants' job searches, individuals often find employment in Lithuania through private recruitment agencies or active personal searches, but much less frequently through the public employment service. The latter has received very reserved evaluations from informants. Interviews revealed the critical importance of personal relationships and migrant networks in the job search. The younger generation, who have successfully integrated into the IT and financial sectors, reported using professional social networks for their career searches. For many, the arrival and employment process is not linear. This pathway includes participating in the accreditation or recognition of qualifications in the destination country or other EU states, obtaining licensing for regulated professions, relocating to larger cities for better employment prospects, pursuing education for career advancement, and taking auxiliary jobs or practical training as a temporary transitional stage.

3.3 Italy

Italy provides several institutional measures aimed at supporting migrants' labour market integration, including legal migration channels regulated through the quota system established by the so-called «Flow Decree» (in Italian «Decreto Flussi», currently covering the 2026–2028 period), adult education programmes offered by CPIA centres, regional vocational education and training (VET) programmes, and procedures for the recognition of qualifications acquired abroad and credentials. In recent years, Skills Partnerships have also introduced more structured pathways combining language training, vocational education, and employment opportunities. However, access to these opportunities remains uneven. While participants in Skills Partnerships generally benefit from more structured forms of support (our sample included nine workers from Egypt trained at the Don Bosco Salesian Institutes in Cairo and Alexandria), many other migrants encounter fragmented opportunities shaped by their legal status, language proficiency, family circumstances and place of residence.

Most interviewees highlighted the numerous difficulties involved in obtaining recognition of qualifications acquired abroad, unless these had been issued by institutions officially recognized by the Italian state (e.g., Skill Partnership Egypt–Italy) (I_22–I_30). Migrants perceived

recognition procedures as lengthy, bureaucratic, and difficult to navigate, to the extent that some did not even consider initiating the process.

Here our qualifications are not recognized, and you must be a caregiver. When I was in Bergamo, among the people I met during the hours of break from the caregiver service, there were Russian professors, however educated people who did the same job as me. (I_32) [Translation: Edited by the Italian working group]

Several interviewees reported accepting jobs below their qualification levels because they considered the process too complex or costly or while waiting for their recognition. Some refugees and asylum seekers were indeed unable to interact with institutions in their countries of origin to obtain the documentation required for recognition procedures. These situations frequently resulted in deskilling and overqualification, accompanied by feelings of frustration and devaluation of previously acquired competences. Access to vocational training and employment was similarly characterized by significant inequalities. Skill Partnership participants entered coordinated pathways involving language preparation, training providers and employers already in the country of origin. Other migrants relied more heavily on individual initiatives, such as interviewee I_32, who had set herself the goal of learning a basic Italian vocabulary independently before arriving in Italy. Across interviewed workers, Italian language proficiency emerged as one of the main barriers. As one participant explained:

Language barrier is such a big problem for us [...] and it tends to make a lot of people not involve themselves in learning new skills. (I_14)

Additional challenges included mobility constraints, driving license requirements, working schedules, care-giving responsibilities – often falling disproportionately on women – and the distance between training centres and workplaces (i.e. I_2, I_6). In this sense, access to training depends not only on the availability of educational opportunities but also on the ability to reconcile work, learning, mobility, and family responsibilities.

Despite these barriers, migrants demonstrated considerable resilience and agency. Within our sample, Skills Partnership participants appeared to rely more extensively on the support provided by the organizations involved in the programmes – in this case, the host company and the Salesian institutes that delivered the training – as well as on training providers and employers. Other migrants more frequently drew on personal initiative, family and community networks, self-directed learning and gradual integration strategies.

I took the theory exam studying alone at home and on YouTube (he didn't attend driving school) because getting a driving license is very expensive. I started studying a year ago and to pass the exam I had to leave my previous stable job to work with food delivery to have sufficient time to study. (I_12) [Translation: Edited by the Italian working group]

Finally, across both groups (Skill Partnership participants and the rest of migrant workers), the pursuit of economic stability, family well-being, housing autonomy, and professional recognition emerged as key sources of motivation and resilience.

3.4 Germany

With the establishment of labour migration as a strategy to address the shortage of skilled workers, the Skilled Labour Immigration Act (FEG) was introduced in 2020 and amended in 2023. The FEG regulates migration for work and education, as well as residence (Schröder, 2024). The amendment brought about changes regarding the recognition of qualifications acquired abroad: Recognition depends on the occupation. For regulated occupations, recognition is mandatory; for non-regulated occupations, it makes it easier to enter the labour market. Advice centres, language support, skills assessments and preparatory courses help facilitate the transition into training and employment (Federal Institute for Vocational Education and

Training, 2026; Studthoff & Bushanska, 2025). In the case of forced migration, the Residence Act and the Asylum Act generally apply, but these migrants are also entitled to have qualifications acquired abroad recognised, which entails a change of status to an (labour) migrant (Brücker et al., 2024). Research on these new structures often follows economic perspectives and refers, e.g., to estimated effects (Adunts et al., 2024) or increased efficiency (PD, 2024). The recognition result depends largely on the country of origin and the qualifications obtained. Some of those who applied had it rejected, e.g., because they lacked original documents, which are difficult to obtain due to their flight, as in the case of interviewee MI_11:

[...] my A-level was not recognised at first. I had to go back to [country of origin] to get it. In my village, that was a bit difficult. (MI_11, 22)

This recognition process may also result in a downgrading of the qualification acquired abroad, which often means that additional qualifications must be obtained in the destination country:

I had to retake my A-levels here because my A-levels and first two semesters at university were recognised as equivalent to secondary school qualifications. (MI_1, 25)

The challenges mentioned in the recognition process include language barriers, a lack of accountability on the part of the authorities, the length of the procedure, and the costs involved, particularly for document translations.

Regarding accessibility to VET and employment, respondents report that employers have reservations when hiring e.g., due to lack of a German passport or minor language mistakes. Mobility also affects access to work: refugees who cannot provide proof of a driving licence are reliant on public transport or cycling; particularly in rural areas, where public transport is often unreliable, this entails a considerable additional burden.

Furthermore, qualifications are often valued more highly than work experience, even when the skills involved are essentially the same, a fact that is particularly evident when it comes to salary:

[...] the system values the qualification actually more than probably your experience. And that is the reason why there is a little gap between salary of those that have that qualification and those that don't. Even though they do the same job. (MI_24, 82)

The most essential component is the use of social networks and support within the diaspora. This is particularly evident in the way new migrants receive targeted support from those who have already settled, to help them get off to a better start and have a more positive experience:

I have two families that I've looked after from the very beginning. (MI_6, 83)

Friends and acquaintances were particularly important when dealing with the authorities, as they provided linguistic support by acting as informal «interpreters» (MI_13, 106).

Personal resources such as multilingualism and a high level of intrinsic motivation are highlighted as key strategies for addressing the challenges surrounding recognition and access to vocational education and training (VET) and employment:

I always spoke up and asked people [...]. I took the initiative. (MI_6, 88)

Overall, social inclusion was reported as much more important than, e.g., the match between qualification and current job, which has also an impact on intentions to remain (Kosyakov et al., 2025).

4 Discussion and Conclusion

The findings reveal significant differences in the integration, qualification recognition, and vocational education and training (VET) systems across the four countries—Norway, Lithuania, Germany, and Italy. While all four countries formally acknowledge the importance of migrants' skills and qualifications, they vary in how their institutional arrangements facilitate the recognition and transferability of these competencies into labour market opportunities.

Norway offers a more structured and coordinated framework, characterized by centralized recognition procedures and stronger institutional support for migrants seeking access to education, training, and employment. Lithuania represents a recent destination country for immigration, which is one of the key reasons for the insufficient institutional capacity and know-how regarding the acceptance of migrants (especially involuntary migrants) and their integration into the labour market and VET system. Although migrant workers targeting jobs in shortage occupations that require low- and middle-level skills and qualifications do not experience particular challenges with the recognition of their qualifications, the accessibility of vocational training for adult migrant job seekers is hindered by a lack of contacts with local employers when searching for apprenticeship positions.

On the other hand, participants in Italy described a more fragmented and often burdensome institutional landscape. In addition to the difficulties associated with qualification recognition, migrants frequently reported barriers that limited their access to vocational training and employment more broadly. Language barriers, mobility constraints, driving license requirements, geographical distances between training providers and workplaces, care-giving responsibilities, and complex administrative procedures often combined to restrict opportunities for labour market participation. Consequently, challenges extended beyond just the recognition of prior qualifications; they affected the entire process of entering and navigating education, training, and employment pathways.

In contrast, Germany has a more differentiated system, where recognition pathways depend on occupational regulations and the country from which qualifications were obtained. Participants noted the crucial role of social networks and diaspora communities in navigating recognition procedures, entering the labour market, and interacting with public authorities. Friends and acquaintances often serve as informal interpreters and mediators, helping migrants overcome language and bureaucratic barriers as in Italy.

Although these findings point to significant differences in the organization of recognition and integration systems, they also reveal common patterns in migrants' experiences across the countries. Despite substantial differences in welfare arrangements, VET systems and qualification recognition frameworks, participants consistently reported challenges related to the recognition of prior qualifications, language proficiency and access to employment opportunities commensurate with their educational backgrounds. While these barriers manifested in diverse ways depending on the national context, they similarly shaped migrants' educational and occupational trajectories, often resulting in delayed labour market integration, underemployment, deskilling, and occupational downgrading. Across several contexts, migrants also described limited institutional support in accessing training and employment opportunities, leading them to rely heavily on employers, private intermediaries and informal social networks to secure employment and develop their skills. This suggests that, regardless of the specific national framework, responsibility for labour market integration is often shifted from public institutions to individual migrants and their personal support networks.

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ChatGPT powered by GPT-5.6 (OpenAI) was used for linguistic revision and to improve the clarity and conciseness of selected passages. Automated and AI-supported translation tools were also used for selected excerpts, with all translations subsequently reviewed and revised by the authors. All data selection, analysis, interpretation, argumentation and substantive content are the sole responsibility of the authors.

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