



How to make the most of migrants' skills

Hurdles and potential of up-/re-skilling of migrant and refugee workers

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Hurdles and potential of up-/re-skilling of migrant and refugee workers

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Abstract:

In a context of shared high priority given to structural skill shortages, there is a wide consensus at Member State and EU level that international migrants and refugees who are already legally in the continent represent an under-used and potentially valuable pool of human resources. But the way in which this priority is interpreted and acted upon varies deeply across countries. Some policies and programmes to promote the up-skilling and re-skilling of migrant and refugee workers (and inactive people with migration background) exist in all Member States, but with different design and levels of uptake. It is however clear, that the impact of existing up-/re-skilling schemes is largely insufficient to "make the most of migrants' skills". The goal of this report is to go beyond the generic complaint through a more articulate empirical understanding of this untapped labour potential. Based on qualitative and participatory research conducted in four Member States (Estonia, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands) and in Switzerland, we analyse the main hurdles (at both personal and structural level) and the main mechanisms preventing a more systematic and effective involvement of migrants and refugees in up-/re-skilling initiatives. In doing so, we show that these obstacles are linked to broader socio-economic and legal conditions that shape the opportunities available to migrants and refugees. This combination creates what has been called the "hyper-precarity trap" (Lewis et al., 2014; Schenner et al., 2019; Palalar Alkan et al., 2024), describing how the interaction between limited rights, restricted access to services, and insecure or unstable jobs can push people into multiple forms of insecurity at the same time, making it difficult for them to improve their situation. On this basis, we highlight some policy implications and potential avenues for policy innovation.

Keywords: skill shortages, migrant and refugee workers, up-skilling and re-skilling, integration, labour market inclusion, active labour market policies, structural and personal barriers, hyper-precarity trap.

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1. The context of the study

1.1. Making the most of migrants' skills: a shared priority at EU level?

There is a growing global consensus that humanity urgently needs to upgrade its collective skills base to adapt to the deep transformations brought about by the green and digital transitions and demographic change. The World Bank¹ highlights that economies worldwide are facing a “skills imperative”, a need to equip people with new competences to remain resilient in the face of automation, climate change and emerging technologies.

However, as emphasised by IndustriAll Europe², the current transformation will only be fair and effective if training rights become a reality for all workers and potential workers currently unemployed or inactive (including NEETs). As the union warns, “what is needed is hard legislation to ensure a training right for all workers, with cost-free access to training during working hours, so that they feel empowered to make the most of the transformation.” In this view, up-skilling must not be limited to the high-skilled segment of the labour market, as the medium and lower-skilled sectors are also facing acute labour and skills shortages.

In recent years, the European Union has been facing a structural challenge: an increasing shortage of skilled labour in many strategic sectors, exacerbated by the ageing of the workforce. Within this context, identifying effective ways to address labour and skills shortages has become a shared priority at the EU level. Yet one potentially crucial resource remains largely underused: the skills of international migrants already living in the EU.

Despite the growing recognition of migrants' contribution to the European economy, their potential continues to be only partially utilised. As highlighted by previous quantitative research (OECD, 2018; Elo et al., 2020; Riaño, 2021; Frattini et al., 2022; Eurostat, 2025), the phenomenon of skill waste—that is, the mismatch between qualifications and actual occupations—remains widespread. Many highly educated or skilled migrants are employed in low-skilled jobs or excluded from the labour market, resulting in a loss both for individuals and for host societies (Dalmonte, Frattini & Giorgini, 2024). This situation represents a double waste: while European economies urgently need workers with the right skills, motivated and capable people face systemic barriers to training, recognition, and employment, and often even to a decent living. This dynamic already reveals a potential tension between policy priorities aimed at filling labour shortages and migrants' own aspirations for self-fulfilment, wellbeing, and meaningful careers.

This report addresses this challenge by exploring how the skills of migrants already living in the EU can be better deployed to meet labour market needs and to build more equitable and inclusive societies. Our approach allows us to capture and analyse this tension between instrumental policy goals and migrants' individual trajectories and aspirations. Unlike most existing studies, which have taken a macro and quantitative approach, we adopt a qualitative and micro-level perspective focused on migrants' own experiences and perceptions. The study investigates migrants' willingness to engage in up- and re-skilling programmes, as well as the personal and structural

¹ For further information, see: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/skillsdevelopment>

² “The Union of Skills falls short of concretely delivering on lifelong learning and employment security” (06 March 2025): <https://news.industrial-europe.eu/Article/1228>





factors that may discourage or prevent them from doing so. This perspective makes clear that participation in such programmes cannot be reduced to a matter of activation; instead, it requires conditions that nurture migrants' capabilities and future projects. By incorporating migrants' voices, we aim to identify the main unsatisfied needs and demands for policy change for the goals of social inclusion and sustainable growth.

While some qualitative research has explored the specificities of refugees' experience with labour market integration (Newman et al., 2018; Van Heelsum, 2017; Walther et al., 2021), it has been stressed (Zacher, 2019) that further investigation is needed into specific subpopulations - such as women, younger and older refugees, and those from different cultural or religious backgrounds - as these groups face distinct challenges and vulnerabilities. Building on this gap, this paper broadens the focus by including other often overlooked groups, such as women who arrived through family reunification and international students.

This focus aligns with the broader priorities set out in EU policy frameworks. The Mid-term Review of the Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021–2027³ reaffirms the commitment to “promote greater participation in the labour market by as many working-age individuals as possible, including by removing existing barriers and reaching out to groups with fewer opportunities.” However, it is worth stressing that in the current drafting of the Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion there is no specific mention of the potential role of migrant workers to fill structural labour shortages. This could actually be an important addition for the next edition of the Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion. As a matter of fact, recognising migrants' contribution to the EU economy and their significant potential is essential. As the Commission notes, integrating migrants into the labour market early, sustainably, and in line with their skills and qualifications is key not only for the individuals concerned but also for fostering economic growth and social cohesion across the Union.

This view is also highlighted in the Draghi Report (September 2024)⁴, which underlines that migration can make a significant contribution to addressing Europe's labour shortages. The Report stresses how, while Europe faces challenges in attracting and retaining skilled talent, migrant workers, despite being more likely to work in shortage occupations, are often employed in low-skilled jobs.

Making better use of this workforce is therefore not only a matter of fairness and inclusion, but a strategic necessity for an ageing Europe striving to remain competitive, cohesive, and sustainable. Doing so, however, requires moving from a logic of mere utilisation of migrant labour to one of nurturing human potential, where skills policies support not only economic needs, but also migrants' wellbeing, ambitions, and capacity to build stable and fulfilling lives.

³ Mid-term Review of the Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021–2027: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52025SC0162>

⁴ “The future of European competitiveness”: https://commission.europa.eu/topics/eu-competitiveness/draghi-report_en#paragraph_47059





1.2. Up- and re-skilling of migrants: between social integration and labour market efficiency

Up- and re-skilling of migrants already living in the EU should be a key policy priority, where the EU institutions could give a decisive contribution to the policies of Member States, which still hold primary competence. Many Member States have incorporated migrant up- and re-skilling measures into their national Active Labour Market Policies (ALMPs), though with different levels of emphasis and varying objectives.

For this report, we conducted desk research and expert interviews across five countries (Italy, Germany, Estonia, the Netherlands and Switzerland) to analyse how such initiatives are designed and implemented, and how they balance different strategic aims. The interviews involved stakeholders and experts in migration and integration policies, as well as in labour market and vocational training.

As our comparative analysis shows, up- and re-skilling policies are characterised by a **“strategic multi-dimensionality”** and they pursue multiple, sometimes conflicting objectives. On one hand, they are framed as tools for social and economic integration, helping migrants gain relevant skills, enter employment and build stable lives in their host countries. On the other, they are designed to improve labour market efficiency, addressing skills shortages and aligning workforce supply with employers’ needs. In some national contexts, a third rationale is reducing welfare dependency, that also plays a significant role, as up- and re-skilling is used to encourage labour market participation and self-reliance. The coexistence of these diverse goals frequently involves different actors, whose priorities do not always align, making it difficult to design coherent and consistent policy frameworks.

With regard to the five countries researched in this study, each is marked by a different combination of these different strategic policy goals.

The **Italian case** exemplifies a **prevalent focus on socio-economic integration**. The GOL programme⁵, Italy’s flagship active labour market policy, (see Box 1 for an in-depth description) is centrally coordinated by the Ministry of Labour but implemented regionally. This programme supports (re)integration through tailored pathways including up- and reskilling, basic education (such as Italian language courses), and job placement. Regions like Piedmont, where the fieldwork was conducted, stand out for their advanced coordination capacity and targeted attention to migrants as a group with specific needs. Yet stakeholders also highlight limitations: training systems remain too rigidly standardised, not adapted to target groups and **employers are not sufficiently involved in the design of training systems**. Therefore, employers highlight the need for more personalised training in order to adapt to local labour market dynamics and reach the broader objective of filling labour shortages. In this view, few promising models are emerging, among which some employer-led training initiatives⁶.

⁵ The GOL Programme (Garanzia Occupabilità dei Lavoratori) was launched in 2021 as part of Italy’s National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR), in the framework of the Next Generation EU (NGEU) programme.

⁶ As an example, in March 2022, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed between the Italian government and the social partners in the construction sector, including ANCE (National Association of





Beyond the rigidity of training pathways, we should consider broadening the range of educational offerings, especially by listening to the needs of the local job market. We often find ourselves working with training agencies that, historically, keep offering the same types of courses (...). But it's worth asking whether these courses are still relevant. Maybe they're not anymore (...). Another important aspect would be to involve employers directly in these pathways, to ensure they are more effective when it comes to actual job placement. (WP5_ITA_STK_6)⁷

In the **Netherlands**, the prevailing approach is **work first**: up- and re-skilling typically occurs within the workplace and is primarily considered an employer responsibility. Dutch ALMPs emphasise activation and the **reduction of welfare dependency**, with the success of programmes measured largely by the number of beneficiaries exiting social assistance. As several experts from the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment (SZW) and the UWV⁸ (Uitvoeringsinstituut Werknemersverzekeringen, standing for Employee Insurance Agency) noted, filling labour shortages and promoting social integration are only recognised as secondary objectives.

The success, more or less, is if more people work and fewer people are dependent on welfare. That's one of the successes. Another one, of course, concerns labour market shortages. Social integration is second best, but still important. In the short term, it's mostly about getting people out of welfare. (WP5_NL_STK_5)

The **Estonian model** illustrates how up- and re-skilling can be embedded within a highly coordinated, data-driven governance structure, with shortage reduction as the main priority.

In Estonia, ALMP competences are held at national level with significant horizontal collaboration, and practical implementation involves multiple stakeholders across levels of governance. The MKM (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications) and the semi-autonomous EUIF (public employment service) are responsible for ALMPs, with engagement from multilevel public (municipalities) and non-public actors (social parties such as unions and employers' organizations).

In understanding how up- and reskilling fit into the overall governance of ALMPs, two distinctive features of the Estonian case emerge: the preventive policies developed by the EUIF, and advanced tools for measuring and forecasting labour market needs. Estonia stands out for its

Building Contractors), with the aim of promoting the labour market integration of third-country nationals. The protocol includes professional training, apprenticeships, and internships leading to employment, helping to match labour demand and supply in a sector facing significant workforce shortages. For further information, see: <https://integrazionemigranti.gov.it/it-it/Altre-info/e/2/o/49//id/118/Il-Protocollo-dintesa-tra-governo-e-parti-sociali-del-settore-edile>

⁷ Interviewee codes were constructed as follows: for stakeholder interviews, codes such as "WP5_ITA_STK_2" indicate the work package (WP5), the country where the interview was conducted (ITA for Italy), the type of interviewee (STK for stakeholder), and the interviewee number (5, in this example). For focus group participants, codes such as "WP5_ITA_FG1.2_CMR_M" indicate the work package (WP5), the country where the focus group took place (ITA), the focus group number and participant number within the group (FG1.2: focus group 1, participant 2), the country of origin of the migrant (CMR for Cameroon), and the gender of the participant (M for male).

⁸ The UWV is an autonomous administrative authority partially funded by SZW and contributions, that provides basic services (with digital medium being first point of contact) while delegating others. Its organizational structure consists of five divisions: WERKbedrijf (Public Employment Services), Socio-Medical Affairs, Benefits, Data Services, and Client and Service. In addition to ALMPs, UWV offers unemployment, disability, sickness benefit, etc. Since the late 2000s, the UWV consolidated its organization from law-oriented to process-oriented.





forward-looking instruments, such as OSKA, a labour market and skills forecasting system managed by the Estonian Qualifications Authority (*Kutsekoda*), and the EUIF Labour Market Barometer, which captures short-term employers' demands (see Box 2 for further information). These tools guide the national public employment service (EUIF) and underpin preventative, skills-based ALMPs aimed at **reducing sectoral shortages**, particularly in the fast-growing digital sector.

In **Germany**, up- and re-skilling initiatives are framed around the **dual aims of integration and economic performance**, although the emphasis varies across actors. The Federal Ministry of Education and Research promotes education as a cornerstone of integration, while employer associations such as the Confederation of German Employers' Associations (BDA) and the Association of German Chambers of Industry and Commerce (DIHK) tend to emphasize demand-oriented training formats and faster recognition of foreign qualifications, primarily to address sectoral labour shortages (SVR, 2024; Netzwerk IQ, 2022). In contrast, trade unions like the German Trade Union Confederation (DGB) and civil society actors including Caritas and Diakonie advocate for approaches focusing on more holistic and long-term empowerment, highlighting concerns about precarious employment and the need for transferable, future-proof skills (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2019; SVR, 2022).

Finally, **Switzerland** (although not an EU Member State) provides a relevant benchmark due to its labour market shortages and dual education system, whereby 3–4 year VET counts towards a federal certificate of competence in up to 250 occupations, giving VET a societal weight close to that of tertiary education (university degree), since the majority of Swiss young learners still today opt for VET. Additionally, vocational training runs on a dual track of on-the-job training and theoretical in-class modules. Compared to the EU and other countries, VET apprentices in Switzerland complete their education and start working on the job while still at the upper secondary education level, while similar VET trainees abroad complete their training only after college, meaning at tertiary education level (Bonoli, Emmenegger & Felder-Stindt 2025).

The implementation of Swiss integration and vocational programmes, both at federal and cantonal levels, is rendered more complex because EU and Swiss nationals benefit from the priority principle under the federal law on migration and integration. However, the Swiss government's efforts to bolster mandatory language training for refugees as part of their integration have seemingly been paying off for younger adult refugee learners, who have been able to start work in the healthcare and IT sectors. Less qualified, older refugees find it more challenging.

The Swiss emphasis on linguistic aptitude in one of the three official languages for the upgrade of the residence permit (from N to C) can allow for an early issuance or ease of renewal and is also a pathway to naturalization. In some jobs, like healthcare with client contact, language requirements are higher. The active involvement of employer associations representing different firms in designing active labour market policy (ALMP) courses and unemployment training helps ensure close alignment with labour market needs. However, more recent voices have called for improving adult education instead.





In sum, the findings show that while the up- and re-skilling of migrants has become a recognised component of European and national policy agendas, the coexistence of multiple strategic objectives (social inclusion, labour market efficiency, and welfare expenditure reduction) creates tensions that complicate coherent policy design. Table 1 presents a tentative ranking typology derived from a qualitative assessment of interviews with stakeholders and the analysis of relevant policy documents. The table illustrates the relative weight of three main strategic goals underpinning ALMPs focused on the up- and re-skilling of migrants and refugees across the five target countries (Goal I: Reducing labour and skills shortages; Goal II: Promoting socio-economic integration; Goal III: Reducing welfare expenditures). For each country, we indicate the level of priority attributed to each goal (classified as high, medium, or low) based on how frequently these objectives were prioritised by interviewed stakeholders and emphasised in policy documents.

Table 1. Relative weight of different strategic goals of ALMPs aimed at up-/re-skilling of migrants and refugees

	CH	DE	EE	IT	NL
GOAL I (Reducing shortages)	XX	XX	XXX	X	XX
GOAL II (Promoting socio-economic integration)	XX	XX	X	XXX	XX
GOAL III (Reducing welfare expenditures)	(not mentioned)	(not mentioned)	(not mentioned)	X	XXX

XXX: high priority (i.e. frequently mentioned by stakeholders and policy documents)

XX: medium-level priority

X: low priority





1.3. A changing policy landscape: innovation and projectification

The EU agenda has increasingly emphasised the role of skills in driving economic recovery, social inclusion, and the green and digital transitions. Over the past decade, this focus has been accompanied by a significant evolution of policy frameworks and instruments at the EU level (see Annex 1. *Timeline of EU policy developments on up-skilling and re-skilling*, which summarises the main EU policy milestones shaping the European agenda on skills and labour market inclusion). ALMPs, in particular, are undergoing a phase of profound innovation, characterised by growing experimentation.

A key feature of this evolving landscape is the **process of projectification** (Ponzo & Milazzo, 2025), where policy implementation increasingly takes place through time-bound projects and programmes, often supported by EU funding mechanisms. While a possible factor of dynamism, projectification also brings challenges, including the fragmentation of initiatives, uneven project development capacity in different territories, and limited sustainability beyond funding cycles. In this context, innovation and projectification are reshaping how ALMPs and up- and re-skilling policies for migrants are conceived, financed, and delivered across Europe.

This is particularly the case of the target countries where the research was conducted. In particular, we select a few examples from Italy, Estonia and the Netherlands, where we found features of innovation and/or projectification among national ALMPs.

In Italy, the governance of ALMPs is currently undergoing a phase of transformation, marked by a) the consolidation of a long-term institutional shift toward decentralisation, b) significant financial investments, and c) the launch in recent years of a number of significant policy experiments.

This institutional shift was further consolidated with the launch of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR), funded through the European Union's Next Generation EU programme, which earmarked €4.4 billion for ALMPs between 2021 and 2025 through the GOL Programme (Guarantee of Workers' Employability, *Garanzia Occupabilità dei Lavoratori*).

GOL is scheduled to conclude in 2025 (except for the possibility of last-minute extensions), and its future remains uncertain. Its conclusion raises concerns about the continuity of services, particularly for vulnerable groups such as migrants (see Box 1).



Box 1. The GOL Programme

Launched in 2021 as part of Italy's National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR), in the framework of the Next Generation EU (NGEU) programme, the GOL Programme (*Garanzia Occupabilità dei Lavoratori*) is the country's flagship active labour market policy. With a total funding envelope of €4.4 billion euros over the 2021–2025 period, GOL aims to reach 3 million beneficiaries by the end of its implementation. As of December 2024, over 3.2 million individuals had already participated in the programme (Ministry of Labour and Social Policies and INAPP 2025).

GOL is coordinated centrally by the Ministry of Labour but implemented regionally within a national framework. Regions are allowed a degree of flexibility to adapt and expand upon central guidelines, leading to variations in execution across the country. The programme's core mission is to support labour market (re)integration through tailored pathways that include upskilling, reskilling, basic education (including Italian language courses), and job placement services.

Upon registration, participants are profiled to assess their “proximity” to the labour market (i.e. the expected degree of difficulty in getting a job in each specific case). This process, usually carried out by public employment services (*Centri per l'Impiego*), combines operator input with an algorithm that assigns individuals to one of four pathways:

- Pathway 1: immediate job placement for work-ready individuals.
- Pathway 2: short upskilling training (approx. 120 hours).
- Pathway 3: long-term reskilling training (up to 600 hours).
- Pathway 4: enhanced support for individuals with complex needs (often including migrants with linguistic, social, or educational barriers) which involves multidisciplinary teams.

Following the profiling phase, participants are usually referred to private actors, such as training providers or employment agencies, who are responsible for delivering the next steps of the activation process, including specialised guidance, vocational training, and job placement. However, this model has proven difficult to implement. While public services have strengthened their capacity, private actors have often struggled to meet demand, resulting in long waiting lists and delays in service delivery (WP5_ITA_STK_2).

The fact that GOL is set to end in 2025 highlights the risks of projectification, with uncertainty about what will follow and concerns over service continuity for vulnerable groups like migrants.

For further information, see the [Website of the Italian Ministry of Labour and Social Policies](#).

Examples of innovation and experimentation are particularly evident in the case of **the Netherlands**. As of 2022, Dutch efforts in adult education and training were among the most promising within the EU-27, showing the second highest participation rates and an overall positive balance between skills supply and demand (European Commission, 2024).

In the post-COVID context, new initiatives have emerged to further strengthen this approach. A notable example is the “*Leeroverzicht*” platform (Rijksoverheid, 2024), developed as part of a joint effort by the Dutch Ministries of Education, Culture and Science (OCW), together with employers' and employees' organisations (VNO-NCW, MKB-Nederland, LTO Nederland, VCP, FNV, CNV) and national educational umbrella associations (including MBO Raad, Vereniging Hogescholen, Universiteiten van Nederland, and the Nederlandse Raad voor Training en Opleiding). The initiative provides centralised information on lifelong learning opportunities and available subsidies for adults (from age 18 to retirement) including unemployed and underemployed groups.





These programmes are funded through national budgets but implemented locally, with local governments, social partners, and educational organisations acting as key coordinators.

The Dutch system also illustrates adaptive policy transfer and digital innovation. The “*Leeroverzicht*” model was inspired by a similar Belgian programme and has contributed to the development of CompetentNL—a national digital framework that standardises skill descriptions to improve the matching of vacancies, profiles, and training opportunities. CompetentNL combines expert labour market knowledge with hybrid AI systems, helping employers, jobseekers, and education providers navigate the rapidly evolving world of work (CompetentNL, 2024). The hybrid aspect entails the model in combination with experts: the Dutch based language model extracts labour market documents and labour market descriptions, recommends suggestions of new skills descriptors, and experts attempt to verify and standardize these to update CompetentNL (Ibid).

However, the Dutch case also highlights the **challenges of projectification**. Many initiatives, particularly those targeting migrants and refugees, are implemented within short-term funding cycles and depend heavily on the political composition of government and the decentralised nature of the system. As a result, promising practices often remain fragmented, varying across regions and disappearing once funding ends.

Estonia can be considered another positive example of capacity for policy innovation. As we mentioned in Section 1.2, forecasting methods aimed at better orienting ALMPs have been implemented in recent years in addition to regular programming. Estonia’s tools for measuring and forecasting labour market and skilling needs are noteworthy. In Box 2, we describe two such tools as examples. Firstly, we present OSKA studies by the Estonian Qualifications Authority (*Kutsekoda*), key in offering tailored and improved policies and services that meet needs of various stakeholders long-term. Secondly, we introduce the labour market barometer by EUIF, a tool that captures short-term employer perspectives.





Box 2. Measuring labour market and skilling needs in Estonia.

Stakeholders in Estonia rely on several programmes and tools to understand labour market and skilling needs:

1) OSKA is a forecast model informing the (i) overall ALMP governance and (ii) the work of EUIF (public employment service) and has a substantial role in shaping public policies in Estonia via collaboration with EUIF. OSKA studies have been carried out for the past ten years by Kutsekoda, the Estonian Qualifications Authority. OSKA studies provide evidence concerning labour market and skilling needs. The data model leads to three types of studies (a general report, e.g. the 2022-2031 forecast, sectoral studies and 'ad hoc' studies) as well as labour market megatrends monitoring.

OSKA survey reports results are used to identify the most needed training fields and to align trainings with current and future market labour market needs.

The organization is building a skills system, the "OsKuS" webpage, which will allow different stakeholders, including students, to assess their own skills and gain information about different skills needed in the Estonian labour market (OSKA, 2024, expert interviews).

2) The EUIF also monitors labour market needs. As of 2021, the EUIF began to systematically evaluate skills shortages. The methodology and principles of this exercise are derived from OSKA research practices, and the EUIF engaged with various stakeholders, including trade unions, ministries and professional associations (European Commission, 2024).

The primary outcome of the methodology was the compilation of a list of training that aligned with actual labour market needs, and implementation began in 2024, with the primary target unemployed jobseekers (Ibid). Implementation was monitored by considering the employment outcomes of the training participants, whether employers were hiring skilled workers to fill skills shortages, and a number of high-quality training programmes for jobseekers. Lessons learned related to the necessity of collaboration between stakeholders, co-creation to the extent possible, experimentation with different methods, mixed method data analysis, and considering context—i.e., energy crisis, war in Ukraine, COVID-19 pandemic, inflation, and the cost-of-living (Ibid).

Finally, the EUIF also operates a labour demand barometer that uses qualitative methods to provide a 12-month forecast of short-term labour demand by occupation, based on how employers' needs correspond to available labour supply. EUIF experts explained, echoing remarks by Kutsekoda analysts, that the barometer is considered together with longer-term OSKA studies for a more complete picture of labour market needs.





2. Rationale and design of the study

While the policy discourse highlights the need to activate migrants already residing in the EU, little empirical research has explored the factors that prevent them from engaging in up- or re-skilling programmes. As a matter of fact, existing activation measures often struggle to reach those furthest from the labour market, such as refugees or migrant women who have arrived through family reunification.

Despite their potential, these groups show low participation rates in up- and reskilling initiatives. This is largely due to **structural and institutional bottlenecks** that limit their access and engagement. Such barriers include complex eligibility criteria and administrative requirements, insufficient language support and gender norms that hinder labour market participation. As a result, many migrants remain in situations of inactivity or underemployment.

Previous research has focused on quantitative and macro-level patterns of skills waste and overeducation of migrants (Frattoni et al., 2022; Dalmonte et al., 2024; Impicciatore & Molinari, 2025) and few qualitative studies have investigated refugees' and migrant women's perceptions, motivations, and constraints that influence their participation in the labour market (Newman et al., 2018; Slootjes & Kampen, 2017; Slootjes, Keuzenkamp & Saharso, 2018; Van Heelsom, 2017; Walther et al., 2021; Zacher, 2019). Against this backdrop, we adopt a qualitative approach to capture migrants' perspectives and to identify the conditions that facilitate or hinder their engagement in up-/re-skilling and activation initiatives.

In particular, this study focuses on three main target groups, which can be considered broadly representative of different types of obstacles in accessing up-/re-skilling opportunities. These groups, for various reasons, tend to be overrepresented in the lower segments of the labour market and a potential need for up-skilling is broadly recognised (ETF, 2024; ILO, 2018):

- **Refugees.** They often arrive with unrecognised qualifications or interrupted professional trajectories, facing long waiting periods for work authorisation and uncertainty regarding their legal status. These constraints delay their entry into training and employment, increasing the risk of deskilling and confinement to low-qualified jobs despite existing competences. Yet, refugees hold significant strategic potential if early up- and re-skilling measures are in place.
- **Women arrived through family reunification.** They are commonly overlooked by active labour market policies, as they enter as dependents of a partner and encounter specific linguistic barriers as well as restrictive gender norms. Limited access to language courses and social participation opportunities reduces their employability, often resulting in domestic isolation and concentration in precarious, low-paid sectors such as care and domestic work. Supporting their labour market inclusion is crucial to foster women's economic autonomy and positively impact family and children's integration outcomes.
- **International students.** This group represents a pool of highly qualified individuals with the potential to contribute to Europe's brain gain and address skill shortages. However, strict work-hour limits during studies, complex administrative procedures for transitioning from





student to work permits and limited post-graduation opportunities risk turning them into lost talent. Facilitating their retention could help align migration management with labour market needs.

2.1. Choice of cases and key cross-national policy differences

The choice of the five countries in which empirical research has been conducted aims to ensure the coverage of a wide variety of national situations with regard to: a) migration history; b) fundamental characteristics of migration and integration policies; c) key features of the socio-economic integration of migrants and refugees, with particular regard to levels of overeducation.

As for the first criterion, we selected three countries with a long-standing history of immigration dating back to the post-World War II period—namely the Netherlands, Switzerland, and Germany—and one country with a more recent yet already consolidated immigration history stemming primarily from Southern Europe, Italy⁹. Finally, we included a country belonging to the post-2004 EU enlargement bloc, with a sizable Russian-speaking minority, characterised by more recent immigration flows and a more limited or selective immigration history: Estonia.

As for the other criteria we have employed (i.e. letters b) and c) above), further details are provided below in this section.

As a matter of fact, among the five target countries, there are significant differences in the opportunities and constraints shaped by national legislation on reception, integration and migration. These institutional variations represent structural factors that crucially shape migrants' and refugees' access to up-/re-skilling and labour market participation.

We have identified four key policy domains that define the main legal and institutional opportunity structures across countries:

a. Integration measures during the reception phase. Countries differ considerably in the extent to which the reception period provides access to integration measures, particularly language courses and access to training.

b. Labour market access for asylum seekers. The time required before asylum seekers can legally work varies significantly. Under the 2013 EU Reception Conditions Directive (Directive 2013/33/EU, Article 15), Member States were required to grant labour market access within a maximum of nine months after the submission of an asylum application. However, the recently adopted 2024 EU Reception Conditions Directive (Directive 2024/1346, Article 17) further reduces this maximum period to six months, showing a renewed EU effort to accelerate integration pathways and address labour shortages more effectively. However, practices vary considerably among Member States. These differences reveal policy trade-offs between rapid activation and

⁹ By distinguishing countries according to the length of their immigration history, we do not adhere to a rigid categorisation based on national immigration models. However, for the purposes of this study, we believe that the duration and historical development of migrant presence in a country can make a substantial difference.





more restrictive approaches, that link access to the labour market to the progress of asylum procedures.

c. Post-recognition welfare regimes. National systems differ in the type and extent of support granted after refugee status recognition. Some countries provide only general welfare, while others offer refugee-specific benefits such as housing assistance, income support, or targeted training programmes, that enable a more supportive transition toward labour market integration.

d. Labour market access for international students. Regulations on how much international students are allowed to work vary widely. These rules reflect a trade-off between allowing students to support themselves financially during their studies and preventing excessive work that could lead to academic dropout or irregular employment trajectories.

The following table summarises these cross-national policy differences, which shape the overall opportunities for labour market and training participation among different migrant categories.

Table 2. Key cross-national policy differences conditioning labour market integration opportunities for specific categories

	Language training in reception	When can asylum seekers work?	Welfare after recognition	International students' work rights
CH	Varies by canton and status. Generally excluded during asylum phase; available after temporary admission or refugee recognition.	During their stay in the reception centres, asylum seekers are not allowed to work. After, they can work temporarily under certain conditions ¹⁰ .	Refugees receive social benefits equal to citizens; temporarily admitted persons get reduced support (varies by canton).	Non-EU: up to 15 h/week after 6 months; full-time during breaks. EU/EFTA: more flexible, no hour limit.
DE	Since 2023, it is possible to join Integration Courses during the procedure	Asylum seekers in reception centres are usually allowed to work only after 9 months or more. Those from safe countries of origin are excluded from such possibility. Outside of reception centres, asylum seekers with a permission	Recognised refugees have same rights as citizens; asylum seekers receive lower benefits under AsylbLG.	Non-EU: up to 20 h/week (max 140 full or 280 half days/year).

¹⁰ For more details, see:

https://www.sem.admin.ch/sem/en/home/themen/arbeit/erwerbstaetige_asylbereich/faq.html#-234711587





		to stay can be allowed to work after 3 months ¹¹ .		
EE	Provided mainly to recognised refugees and protection holders via Settle in Estonia and Integration Foundation programmes. Limited access in reception phase.	After 6 months if no decision taken; same treatment as residents for unregulated jobs, recognition required for regulated ones.	Refugees access healthcare, social benefits and employment support similar to residents; NGOs provide additional aid.	International students are allowed to work while studying full-time on the condition that work does not interfere with their studies. Non-EU can stay up to 9 months post-graduation to seek work and apply for a temporary residence permit for work.
IT	Discontinuous provision: language courses abolished in 2018 (Law n. 132/2018), reintroduced (2020) and again discontinued (Cutro decree, 2023).	After 2 months from asylum request.	Access to housing, social and employment support via SAI (national reception system); possible temporary rent contribution when exiting the reception project.	Up to 20 h/week; study permit can be converted to work permit.
NL	Offered in reception only to asylum seekers from selected countries (e.g. Syria, Eritrea). Others access after recognition.	After 6 months from application. Early 'screening and matching' to municipalities for potential employment.	Municipalities manage tailored integration and welfare support; refugees can access social assistance if income is insufficient.	Non-EU: up to 16 h/week during term, full-time in summer; specific work permit is needed (TWV).

These institutional differences represent an important factor contributing to different speed and level of effectiveness of labour market integration. One key indicator reflecting these disparities is **the overeducation among immigrants**, that is the situation in which an individual has completed more education than her current job requires. It represents a suboptimal education-job match, which often, though not always, overlaps with overskilling, i.e. the situation in which an individual is unable to fully use acquired skills and abilities in her current job (Dalmonte, Frattini & Giorgini, 2024).

¹¹ For further details, see: <https://asylumineurope.org/reports/country/germany/reception-conditions/employment-and-education/access-labour-market/?utm>





As part of the GS4S project, the Centro Studi Luca d'Agliano has developed an interactive dashboard section (GS4S – Overeducation), available on the Migration Observatory Dashboard¹², which analyses this phenomenon using microdata from various editions of the European Labour Force Survey (EULFS). In Table 3 and 4 we present the results concerning the five target countries.

Table 3. Share of tertiary education of immigrants in the five target countries (2022).

Country	Share of tertiary education (all immigrants)	EU immigrants	Non-EU immigrants
CH	64.8%	67.9%	59.4%
DE	35%	35.4%	34.8%
EE	57.9%	55.8%	58.1%
IT	14.6%	14.6%	14.6%
NL	54.2%	61%	51.1%
EU average	38.5%	42.5%	36.4%

Table 4. Share of overeducation among immigrants in the five target countries (2022).

Country	Share of overeducation (all immigrants)	EU immigrants	Non-EU immigrants
CH	29%	28%	31%
DE	42.2%	42.9%	41.7%
EE	28.7%	35.2%	28.3%
IT	64.4%	55.4%	68%
NL	25.7%	25.7%	25.7%
EU average	34%	31.5%	35.5%

The main findings reveal that immigrants, particularly those from non-EU countries, are significantly more likely to be overeducated than natives, with substantial cross-country variation. For instance, in 2022, the share of overeducated immigrants varied between 25.7% in the Netherlands and 64.4% in Italy, compared to an EU average of 34%.

The share of migrants' overeducation closely reflects national policy configurations that shape access to language training, early labour market entry, and post-recognition support. In other words, the study shows that **institutional opportunities and constraints condition the extent to which migrants can use their skills and qualifications into appropriate employment**. This suggests that the mismatch is likely influenced by structural factors, such as barriers to

¹² For further information, see: <https://dashboard.europeanmigration.eu/app/dashboard>





recognising foreign qualifications, language difficulties, and limited access to career advancement opportunities in host countries (Dalmonte, Frattini & Giorgini, 2024).

Italy, for example, has one of the lowest shares of tertiary-educated immigrants (14.6%) but a high level of overeducation (64.4%). This paradox reflects **structural and policy discontinuities**, as migrants tend to enter the labour market early but in jobs far below their qualifications, leading to skills underutilisation.¹³

According to a recent UNHCR report on the socio-economic conditions of refugees in Italy (UNHCR, 2025), deskilling is further exacerbated by the **lengthy and complex process of foreign qualification recognition**, which negatively affects both labour market opportunities and public acknowledgement of migrants' professional status. Only 16.4% of surveyed beneficiaries of international protection and 12.3% of beneficiaries of temporary protection have ever applied for recognition of their qualifications, and among them, success rates are very low: 10.3% and 0.6%, respectively (UNHCR, 2025: 84).

According to the same study, **language proficiency** is another key barrier: 18% of respondents in a survey conducted in 2024 among over 1200 beneficiaries of international protection in Italy reported little or no knowledge of Italian, and only 22% considered themselves proficient. The gap is often attributed to insufficient language training during the reception phase, that limits access to integration pathways (ibidem: 72).

Despite these challenges, refugees in Italy demonstrate a relatively high **labour market activity rate**: 84% have performed some remunerated work since arrival, and 70% reported at least one hour of paid work or business in the past week (ibidem: 77). However, limited access to stable, well-paid employment often perpetuates poverty and restricts access to education, training, and professional networks, creating a **vicious cycle** where underemployment reinforces economic vulnerability.

On the contrary, according to GS4S dashboard, the Netherlands displays one of the **lowest rates of overeducation (25.7%)**, despite over half of its immigrants holding tertiary degrees (54.2%). This outcome reflects a **highly selective integration model oriented toward work activation**, where language courses and “screening and matching” procedures in reception centres aim to match migrants with employment prospects. However, language courses in reception centres are only offered to asylum seekers from countries most likely to receive international protection—namely Syrians, Eritreans, Turks, Yemenis, and stateless persons—while others may only access training after obtaining refugee status (Vluchtingenwerk, 2024).

Beneficiaries of international protection and their family members coming in through family reunification are obligated to follow **civic integration programmes**, while those third-country nationals arriving for the purpose of work are exempted from such obligations (as labour migrants already hold employment and are presumed to come temporarily only) (Groenendijk et al., 2021). The mandatory Dutch civic integration programme is not a formal up- or re-skilling initiative, but

¹³ However, a lower level of overeducation is not necessarily explained by a greater effectiveness of policies, but it can simply be a result of the composition of migrant population. For instance, in the Netherlands, the high percentage of high skilled migrants can be a factor that contributes to explain this finding.





still functions as labour market preparation, as it combines language and labour market orientation tests, including the ONA (“Orientation about the Dutch Labour Market”), which focuses on job search skills, mock interviews in Dutch, and portfolio preparation. Refugees granted status after 2015 must pass these exams to obtain permanent residency, though employed individuals may apply for exemptions if they meet work requirements (De Lange et al., 2019).

Another programme of note on this line is the VIA “Voor een Inclusieve Arbeidsmarkt” (Better Integration in the Labor Market) programme, which is described as directed towards non-Western migrant-origin individuals (including refugees) to increase their labour market participation. This initiative is meant to reduce disadvantage and create equal opportunity among the aforementioned group and runs from 2022-2025 (Ministerie van Sociale Zaken en Werkgelegenheid, 2021). VIA programmes can be sector specific, but our expert interviewee pointed to how many are just collaborations between employers seeking to meet labour shortages (WP5_NL_STK_3).

These features confirm the existence of a **work-first approach in the Netherlands** (see above, Section 1.2): integration and skills development largely occur on the job and are often the responsibility of employers, while municipal and national programmes support access to work and basic labour market orientation.

2.2. Methodology

The research adopted a **qualitative methodological approach** aimed at analysing the governance of ALMPs in the five target countries (Estonia, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Switzerland), with a specific focus on up-skilling and re-skilling initiatives for migrants and refugees, and the actual patterns of access (or non-access) of these groups to existing opportunities.

The study was conducted in two main phases: first, a series of semi-structured interviews with institutional stakeholders, both policy makers and implementing partners, and second, a set of focus group discussions (FGDs) involving migrant participants from diverse backgrounds.

In the first phase, semi-structured interviews were carried out with a range of stakeholders operating at different governance levels and with varying degrees of responsibility in the implementation of ALMPs. The interviews aimed at identifying the rules and conditions governing access to general and training-specific ALMPs for different groups of migrants. Particular attention was given to identifying institutional perceptions of the main barriers migrants face when attempting to access or complete training courses. Overall, 36 stakeholders were interviewed (see Annex 2).

The second phase of the research consisted of focus groups discussions with different groups of migrants, in order to explore their personal experiences, needs, and aspirations regarding employment and up-/re-skilling initiatives. Overall, 122 migrants participated in the discussions across the five target countries (see Annex 3).

The focus groups aimed to provide a deeper understanding of how migrants perceive their current professional situation, their motivations and obstacles in accessing training, and their





strategies for improving their labour integration. The focus groups were organised by grouping participants by regional origin, legal status or gender.

The guiding questions for the focus groups included participants' overall satisfaction with their current professional situation; intentions to pursue career development in the near future; interest in and perceived need for upskilling or reskilling; and conditions that would facilitate or hinder their participation in training programmes. The discussions also touched on migration as a possible future strategy to improve employment conditions.

To facilitate access and ensure the diversity of participants, the organisation of the focus groups was conducted in collaboration with several civil society associations and local organisations, including refugee-led associations, university-linked support networks, and organisations involved in the reception system. These organisations played a key role in outreach, participant selection, and logistical support.

In some cases, the research team decided to offer incentives to the participants in order to encourage participation and recognize their valuable contributions, such as shopping vouchers for local supermarkets or book vouchers. In other cases, the incentives were not deemed necessary and the research team offered refreshments as a gesture of appreciation.

Overall, the qualitative approach was effective and provided rich information. Participants generally showed a high level of engagement, although there was a different degree of openness according to individual comfort level and group dynamics. One important note concerns the gender dynamics within the focus groups: in discussions involving migrant women, the presence of a woman researcher enabled greater openness and depth of discussion, highlighting the importance of researcher positionality. No privacy issues emerged, although ethical sensitivity regarding legal status, personal history, and vulnerability remained central throughout the research process.





3. The value of skills: perceptions, motivations, frustrations

Across the five target countries, focus groups with migrants reveal that skills are **perceived simultaneously as a source of empowerment and of frustration**. While training and education are widely recognised as key pathways to labour market inclusion and personal advancement, participants frequently face barriers that undermine their efforts. The “value of skills” emerges as both a subjective perception, linked to self-worth and personal development, and an institutional condition, shaped by recognition systems and access to training.

This section explores migrants’ and refugees’ perceptions, highlighting four interrelated dimensions: awareness and perceived importance of skills; aspirations and expectations for change; frustrations and barriers; motivation and coping strategies. Together, these dimensions show how migrants’ agency interacts with structural opportunities and constraints. As discussed by Fedrigo et al. (2022), individual choices and trajectories are never shaped by personal aspirations alone but are also conditioned by the surrounding institutional and social environments, which may limit or enable the range of possible actions. Drawing on Robertson (2015) and Schoon & Heckhausen (2019), Fedrigo et al. (2022) argue that migrants’ choices and pathways result both from the way in which they construct and attach meaning to their unique lives and careers, as well as from the opportunities and expectations that the institutional and social environments of the host country provide.

3.1. Awareness and perceived value of skills

In all five countries, participants showed a strong awareness of the importance of skills and qualifications to access stable employment. However, the type of value attributed to skills varied: for some, skills were primarily instrumental, a means to obtain better jobs or financial stability, while for others they represented value linked to personal development and social recognition.

Some participants made a distinction between “formal” and “real” competence. International students enrolled in an IT Bachelors’ degree at an Italian university acknowledged that formal qualifications (such as degrees and diplomas) are often required to enter the job market or to access better pay, but they also stressed that practical competence can be acquired in informal or non-traditional ways, including through self-learning and online resources. This leads to the perception that formal education is mainly useful as a symbolic credential, rather than actually preparing for the real work.

What really matters is competence. I mean, in today’s world we have YouTube, websites, and all kinds of online training resources. And it would be a lie to say that there aren’t people who trained outside formal institutions, schools, universities, and who are actually more competent than someone who studied at university. That would simply be false. But in a company, if you don’t have a degree or a diploma, they won’t hire you. (WP5_ITA_FG1.2_CMR_M)

Others consider gaining skills as an investment for the future, particularly to abandon physically demanding jobs that may become unsustainable with age, as a participant affirmed:

Being a warehouse worker is tough. Lifting heavy boxes all day...soap, water, beer... I can manage now, but I’m thinking ahead. When I’m forty or fifty, I won’t be able to do this anymore. That’s why





I want to learn to be an electrician. But for now, I haven't found a place in the course. Also, they require an intermediate school (*scuola media*) diploma, which I don't have yet (WP5_ITA_FG4.3_MLI_M).

In other cases, although skills are perceived as essential for improving one's prospects, investing in skills development is viewed as a luxury that many cannot afford. As confirmed by focus groups, the urgency to find immediate employment and achieve financial self-sufficiency often forces migrants, particularly refugees, to prioritise survival over learning, confirming earlier findings by Dimitriadis (2023).

3.2. Aspirations and expectations

Participants expressed a clear desire and aspiration to improve their professional situation through up-/re-skilling, but these aspirations were frequently hindered by frustration and uncertainty. To understand these dynamics, we relied on the literature on agency and aspirations. While very valuable, this body of research remains scattered across different academic domains, including psychology, sociology, vocational and career development studies, and migration research, reflecting the interdisciplinary nature of the topic and making it challenging to use it as an analytical toolbox. As discussed by Van Heelsum (2017), the ideas on aspirations and capabilities originate from Amartya Sen's (1999) capability approach, which argues that individual well-being improves when people expand their freedom to make meaningful choices in different areas of life. Building on Sen, scholars such as Carling (2002, 2014), De Haas (2011) and Castles (2010) have applied these concepts to migration choices, showing that aspirations reflect migrants' perceptions of what constitutes a "satisfactory life," as well as the opportunities and constraints that shape their ability to achieve it. Van Heelsum (2017) extends this framework to post-migration experiences, analysing how newcomers navigate the **tension between ambition and structural limitations**.

The majority of participants in focus groups arrived in Europe with the strong determination to find work quickly, become self-sufficient, and support their families, often seeing migration as a way to access better opportunities than those available in their countries of origin. However, they frequently encountered structural and institutional barriers that prevented them from reaching their aspirations.

The higher the level of aspiration, the greater the frustration when expectations were not met. Some participants, while still motivated, appeared close to despair during the group discussions because of the lack of progress in achieving their goals, combined with the pressure to accept jobs far below their qualifications. For many this was perceived as deeply demoralising.

During this waiting period, many migrants experience mental health issues, including depression, along with other challenges. I believe this could be alleviated by reducing bureaucracy and speeding up the process so that migrants can be better prepared to enter the job market as soon as possible. (WP5_DE_FG2.2_AFG_M)

An exception was reported in a focus group in **Germany**, where international students and young professionals generally expressed greater optimism, perceiving the local education and training system as a gateway to improve their qualifications compared to what was available in their home





countries. For many migrants from economically disadvantaged contexts, Germany represented an opportunity for skill enhancement and upward mobility:

I think in general, like everyone coming from underdeveloped country, they need to improve their skills here, especially in Germany. Because, if I give the example of Afghanistan, the education level there, the quality of the education, the work experience, it is not even comparable to what the job market needs here. So, I think everyone needs to improve their professional skills and their professional situation (WP5_DE_FG2.2_AFG_M).

3.3. Frustrations and perceived barriers

Several studies in vocational and work psychology¹⁴, as discussed by Fedrigo (2022), have shown that both contextual and personal factors can hinder the career development and labour market integration of refugees and other migrants. Among the structural barriers, researchers frequently mention the non-recognition of formal qualifications and previous work experience, limited access to work permits, discriminatory practices, and restricted professional networks, all of which significantly constrain newcomers' opportunities for professional advancement.

Several sources of frustration emerged across focus groups in the five countries: **recognition barriers** for foreign qualifications, **limited or delayed access** to up-/re-skilling opportunities, **constraints** linked to income insecurity, gender roles, or legal status.

Highly qualified migrants often experienced significant obstacles in having their prior education and professional experience formally recognised. This led to a sense of injustice and waste of skills, as many were forced into positions far below their competence. Participants described the process as opaque, bureaucratic, and emotionally draining. In the Netherlands, for example, highly skilled migrants expressed deep frustration at having to repeat studies or requalify for professions they had already carried out abroad.

Why you ask me to study, study, study all the medicines again. This basic medicine. I studied three times. When I was in my faculty in Aleppo, ... Then for Turkey... Now again for the same information. (WP5_NL_FG3.2_SYR_M)

Moreover, participants described several constraints that hinder accessibility to up- and re-skilling programmes, such as economic hardship, language barriers, gender roles, and family obligations. However, these issues will be analysed extensively in Section 4.

3.4. Motivation and coping strategies

Despite structural and institutional barriers, participants across all countries showed a high degree of **motivation to learn, upskill and improve their professional situation**, though shaped by contextual and personal factors.

Many participants showed a strong commitment to learning new skills. This type of motivation was particularly visible among international students and young participants in structured

¹⁴ See references in Fedrigo (2022): Atitsogbe et al., 2019; Yakushko et al., 2008; Zacher, 2019; Chen & Hong, 2016





training initiatives such as **Powercoders** in Italy (see Box 3) and **Digital Explorers II**¹⁵ in Estonia. For them, training represented a *turning point*, a chance to regain control over their life. As one participant put it:

I feel like upskilling is a never-ending journey... even after the training, it was enough to kickstart the journey. But the moment you start working, you realise you have to keep on upskilling, upskilling... there's always something to learn out there. And we are still learning. (WP5_EE_FG5.3_KEN_F)

Participants of these groups frequently emphasised perseverance and an understanding of learning as a lifelong process. For instance, international students from Cameroon in Italy demonstrated high motivation and described a situation of intense competition among students to obtain a visa to study abroad. Their motivation was primarily driven by the desire to support their families and escape poverty through education, and they viewed studying abroad as their primary opportunity for advancement.

Studying is not a problem for us Cameroonians, we are quite good at it... we try to enhance our skills and above all do everything possible at least to help the family. (WP5_ITA_FG1.2_CMR_M)

A second, more pragmatic form of motivation was observed among **migrant women** and **older workers**, for whom participation in training was often driven by necessity rather than aspiration. Up-skilling was perceived as a way to secure financial stability or avoid unemployment, not necessarily as a path to fulfilment. Several women, particularly those who arrived through family reunification, described enrolling in caregiving or domestic work up-/re-skilling initiatives simply because these were the only accessible options, given their low educational backgrounds and care responsibilities. For them, motivation was less about ambition and more a **strategy of survival**.

Motivation often increases significantly when participants receive **external support**, such as personalised guidance from NGOs and municipalities, mentoring, or internship placements (Fedrigo, 2021). In the Netherlands, several beneficiaries linked their renewed enthusiasm for training to the help of civil society organisations, which provided tailored advice and internships. One participant affirmed:

I was a chemical analyst for an oil company in Iran... After I received my residence permit, I was hired as a chemical analyst for a year. But because I was well received and helped in the Netherlands, I decided to study something else, to help other people. So, I studied social work, with the help of the UAF (Foundation for Refugee Students) ... and worked as a mentor for unaccompanied minors, then as a supervisor for young people with intellectual disabilities. (WP5_NL_FG3.7_IRN_M)

When well-designed and adequately supported, training initiatives can profoundly reshape participants' professional and personal trajectories. The **Powercoders** programme in Italy was

¹⁵ Digital Explorers is a broader talent partnership initiative that has involved multiple migration corridors. While Digital Explorers II was not limited to cooperation between Estonia and Kenya, this edition was the first to feature Estonia–Kenya mobility. Digital Explorers II (2023–2026) is coordinated by ESTDEV (Estonian Centre for International Development) and Tallinn University. The initiative enables 20 recent graduates from Strathmore University (Kenya) to spend four months in Estonia on a student visa, combining training, internships, and networking in the digital sector, followed by six to ten months of remote mentoring and career support upon return to Kenya. For further information, see: <https://digitalexplorers.eu/>





often described as “a lifesaver,” that prevented participants from being trapped in low-skilled employment. In particular, participants emphasised that Powercoders enabled them to distance from the typical pathways of “standard refugees”, where individuals don't have the choice and are forced to work in certain sectors. Powercoders provided them the stability necessary to fully engage with training opportunities. This highlights how training programmes can be transformative when combined with adequate support systems. Similarly, participants of **Digital Explorers II** in Estonia saw their experience as a gateway to new careers or entrepreneurship and as a form of restitution to their country and community origin.

When I was applying for the Digital Explorers Programme, I was very keen on improving the digital knowledge for the kids in our area. Like, some of them, they don't really take it seriously, or rather, their parents don't see the seriousness of the situation. So, when I make money, and then I go to do my master's, that's the plan. And then while I'm there, I work alongside and send money back home to start maybe a digital school for the kids or something, so that we can grow together.
(WP5_EE_FG5.3_KEN_F)





Box 3. The Powercoders Programme

Powercoders was originally launched in Switzerland in 2016 to respond to the employment challenges faced by refugees. The idea of Powercoders was born in 2016 when it was recognized the intersection of two pressing needs: a growing refugee population in Europe struggling to access the job market, and a persistent shortage of ICT-qualified professionals in Switzerland.

The early format typically combined an intensive 12- or 13-week coding bootcamp (covering web languages and programming fundamentals) followed by a 6–12-month internship in a Swiss IT company. Participants often also received additional support – for instance help with navigating asylum-system bureaucracy or even practical support like travel tickets or equipment (e.g. laptops) – to reduce barriers to participation.

Early results proved promising: of the first cohorts in 2017 and 2018, about two-thirds had secured a job or apprenticeship in the ICT sector. Through these first years of piloting and building a network of supportive companies and sponsors, Powercoders laid the groundwork for what would later evolve into a more structured and sustainable “programme” – institutionalizing the training and integration mechanisms while preserving its original mission of up-skilling talent to meet labour-market demand.

Since then, the programme has expanded internationally. The Italian edition was first implemented in Turin (Piedmont region) in 2020 and has delivered several editions, combining digital up-skilling with structured internship placements.

The Italian programme was made possible through a strong public-private partnership, involving actors such as UNHCR, Reale Mutua Foundation (which contributed €100,000), and Accenture (€50,000), alongside civil society organisations. The training was initially aimed at refugees, but over time the target group expanded to include asylum seekers and young Italians and foreign NEETs (WP5_ITA_FG2.1_SD_M).

Powercoders offers a full-time, three-month intensive training programme on coding (8 hours per day), originally delivered in English and later in Italian. In addition to digital skills, a strong emphasis is placed on soft skills through dedicated workshops, including CV preparation, language learning, interview techniques.

The most innovative characteristic is the provision of housing support, transportation assistance, and financial compensation, essential to provide participants with the stability they need to fully commit to training. “There was a refugee working as a rider for Glovo...Powercoders helped him financially so he could stop and study”, a participant noted. For those refugees not living in the reception system, the programme covers accommodation costs too.

Moreover, the programme guarantees interview opportunities with IT companies at the end of the training. From the first Italian cohort in 2020, comprising 20 participants, many of them were selected for internships, and several obtained permanent contracts.

In terms of sustainability, the first edition of Powercoders in Turin introduced a voluntary repayment scheme based on income to help fund future cohorts, such as a “honour loan”. The proposal generated mixed reactions and was eventually dropped, however, it raised concerns about how to scale the model while maintaining its quality.

This initiative represents a promising model for digital inclusion and social mobility, connecting refugees with one of the fastest-growing sectors of the economy. For further information, see: [Powercoders official website](#); [Powercoders Italy website](#); [Reale Mutua Foundation website](#).





Overall, across all five countries, the feelings of hope, perseverance and recurrent frustration reveal a gap between the value migrants attribute to skills and the uneven institutional conditions that determine their ability to use and further develop them.

This is consistent with literature on vocational studies and career development for refugees and migrants in host countries (Fedrigo et al., 2022; Van Heelsun, 2017; Walther et al., 2021). This literature emphasises that migrants' agency and career development are influenced by contextual and personal resources. While adaptability and motivation are crucial, they can only be realised if supported by enabling environments. The strong motivation observed among participants, driven either by ambition or necessity, reveals an untapped potential, as well as a systemic mismatch between migrants' human resources and the opportunities offered by host countries.

As will be explored in the following section, this tension between aspirations and structural constraints emerges through a complex interaction of individual and systemic barriers that shape migrants' access to up-/re-skilling pathways.





4. Disentangling a complex bundle of obstacles

This section explores in greater depth the wide range of hurdles in accessing and completing up-/re-skilling programmes that migrants brought up during the focus group discussions¹⁶. These obstacles vary depending on the individual's personal circumstances as well as on the institutional, legal, and socio-economic conditions of the host country. Several studies in the fields of work and vocational psychology have shown that migrants' career construction and professional integration are influenced by a **combination of contextual and personal barriers** (Yakushko et al., 2008; Zacher, 2019). Among the contextual barriers, scholars have stressed the non-recognition of formal qualifications or prior work experience, the lack of work permits, discrimination, and limited professional networks (Chen & Hong, 2016). These factors often interact and create disadvantage.

However, the literature also reminds us that migrants and refugees are not passive recipients of structural constraints. Despite the obstacles, they often **mobilise personal and social resources to navigate adversity**. Studies have emphasised the role of resilience, psychological capital, coping strategies, proactivity, career adaptability, social support, and religion in overcoming such barriers (Campion, 2018; Newman et al., 2018). In this sense, their trajectories reflect a continuous negotiation between individual agency and the surrounding institutional and social environments.

In this section, our aim is to gain a deeper understanding of the obstacles migrants face, with a particular focus on the three target populations and their access to and completion of up-/re-skilling initiatives. For analytical purposes, the barriers we have identified have been grouped into two broad categories. The first includes individual barriers, linked to personal characteristics, situations and experiences. The second encompasses structural barriers, which derive from the broader context, such as legislation, administrative systems and labour market structures, that all contribute to shape migrants' opportunities for training and employment.

While some barriers emerged consistently across all five countries, suggesting shared difficulties in migrants' access to up-skilling, other hurdles appeared to be highly context-specific, reflecting the policy frameworks and integration models of each country.

4.1. Individual hurdles

While institutional frameworks and policy contexts strongly influence migrants' opportunities for up-skilling, individual-level barriers also play a fundamental role in shaping access, participation, and outcomes. Across the five countries, a complex bundle of personal and contextual hurdles emerged.

¹⁶ The choice to focus on obstacles rather than on enabling or success factors is motivated by the greater effectiveness of this framing for comparative purposes. In fact, an analytical framework based on structural and personal obstacles allows for a more systematic and homogeneous comparison. This does not mean that we neglect success stories or good practices, which are addressed in specific sections, boxes, and other dedicated parts of the report.





4.1.1. Economic vulnerability and the need for immediate income

A crucial and probably the single most important obstacle to accessing and completing up-skilling or re-skilling programmes for migrants and refugees who participated in the focus groups is the lack of financial support during the training period, combined with the urgent need for immediate income (Anderson 2010; Dimitriadis 2023). This emerged as one of the most serious barriers across countries.

Many participants cannot afford to pause work in order to attend a training course, even if some of them are aware that such training could improve their long-term prospects. Even when participants show motivation or interest in training, the financial pressure (often caused by family responsibilities, housing precarity, and the obligation to send remittances back home) makes attendance extremely challenging. As one focus group participant affirmed:

I can't be here, studying, knowing my family is suffering. I need to send money. Even if I'm okay here, I feel guilty if they are not (WP5_ITA_STK_7).

In **Italy**, this emerged strongly: many migrants and refugees are unable to suspend work to attend training due to the urgent need to earn and send remittances home. Even when they would be personally motivated to engage in training, financial insecurity forces many migrants to prioritise short-term income over long-term skill investment. This is clearly explained by one interviewee, a Case manager at a vocational training agency:

When someone is in a more urgent situation and needs income, I can't propose a training course. Because what happens then? Regardless of my professional integrity, if the person starts the course without being sure or convinced, and needs that income, he/she will end up dropping out. So, for me, it becomes a pointless use of energy. I've placed the person in a course, he/she's done a few hours, and then stops. It doesn't make sense. (WP5_ITA_STK_4)

Estonia presents a similar scenario. Focus group participants highlighted the difficulty of combining study with daily life's demands, due to the lack of financial support during the training period. Expert interviewees noted challenges faced by many ALMPs universally, such as the overall problem of simultaneously engaging in formal studies as an adult. While Estonia has a quite generous measure for formal studies, there is still a high dropout rate, likely due to the difficulties of combining work, family life and study. Focus group participants confirmed the observation: even if courses are affordable or free, there is a financial investment required and an opportunity cost, that is the time spent on studying. It may be a critical investment, but it is also time spent away from paid work or other obligations. Although some allowances exist (e.g. EUR 450 per month for degree studies or minimal internship pay), they are insufficient to offset lost income, travel costs, or family responsibilities. As a result, many adults drop out from formal education or vocational training despite their motivation. However, the EUIF offers grant schemes to employers that hire people with a migrant or refugee background, consisting of at least 50 academic hours for up to one year. In particular, one includes a training grant for the improvement of Estonian language skills, aimed at supporting employers in better utilizing foreign workers (EUIF, 2024). The other is a training grant available for employers to develop their employees' ICT skills.



Switzerland also reflects this issue, particularly for women with children. Participants indicated that up-/re-skilling is only feasible when it is affordable, not excessively demanding in terms of time commitment or intellectual load, and when there is clear motivation, particularly if they can envision a future for themselves in Switzerland. Access to childcare was highlighted as essential to enable mothers without family support to take part in such programmes.

In general, it is worth mentioning that having online rather than offline activities can facilitate attendance by some groups who may suffer from specific hurdles, such as dependent migrant women from some countries of origins. This became particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, when, as shown by comparative research across the EU and North America, participation in integration courses increased among certain groups after moving online, especially among working migrants and those (especially women) with family care responsibilities¹⁷.

4.1.2. Language barriers

Language barriers remain the single most recurrent and cross-cutting challenge for focus group participants, though with different variations across contexts. Limited proficiency not only affects their ability to participate in vocational training but also contributes to their confinement in low-skilled, precarious jobs and hinders their career prospects. This issue is particularly present among asylum seekers and refugees, as well as among and dependent women, who often have limited opportunities to practice the language outside the home due to childcare responsibilities.

In many **Italian regions** there is a widespread network of *Centri Provinciali per l'Istruzione degli Adulti* (CPIA: provincial adult education centres) offering free Italian language courses. However, there are logistical and bureaucratic barriers that often prevent attendance, such as long waiting lists, courses that start only in a certain period of the year and, in suburban and rural areas, inconvenient locations and poor transportation. Moreover, in recent years, the provision of Italian language courses in reception centres for asylum seekers has been marked by discontinuity. Since the implementation of the Law n. 132/2018 (the so-called “Salvini Decree”, from the name of the right-wing Interior Minister of the time), the regulatory framework for these services has undergone two significant changes. Language courses, which were discontinued in 2018, subsequently reintroduced under the centre-left Lamorgese administration in 2020, only to be eliminated once more under the centre-right Meloni government through the Cutro decree in 2023. In some periods, language classes were mandatory; in others, the number of teaching hours was drastically reduced, or language classes were removed at all. This instability has seriously undermined the ability of asylum seekers to acquire Italian language skills, creating a huge barrier to their social and labour market integration (Dotsey & Lumley-Sapanski 2021).

In **the Netherlands and Estonia**, this barrier has a particularly paradoxical form: depending on the sector, the **lower the skill level of the job, the higher the language requirement tends to be**.

¹⁷ See here for the reference: The COVID-19 Catalyst: Learning from Pandemic-Driven Innovations in Immigrant Integration Policy <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/pandemic-innovations-integration>





Highly educated migrants can often work in international or English-speaking environments, while those seeking entry-level jobs are required to demonstrate proficiency in the national language. This can reflect integration requirement exceptions made for highly skilled migrants versus beneficiaries. However, this is not a general rule; on the contrary, it is highly dependent on the sector. For instance, the digital sector operates almost entirely in English, and the requirements concerning the national language are usually very low. This is not the case in other fields, such as regulated professions, where the opposite is often true.

For example, in a focus group with higher educated professionals in the Netherlands, several participants noted that working in academia allowed them to use English only. However, this dynamic creates a potential “trap”, where many highly skilled working in English (which is common especially in some sectors, like ICT) do not learn the national language even if living in the host country for long time. In the event of a career transition, they would necessarily need the national language to find adequate employment. As one participant affirmed:

Now I work in the hospital and research, and the language is mainly in English. So, I have not experienced problems regarding the language, but I also know people who transition to industry, and, in industry, the preferred language is Dutch. So, it might be a challenge, if I decide transitioning to industry. (WP5_NL_FG1.1_AZJ_F)

However, in **Estonia**, this issue is currently changing. Participants explained that language proficiency requirements are becoming higher for migrants already in Estonia. According to Ivanović, Boland & Lange (2024), this is part of the efforts to promote Estonian language and culture among the historical Russian speaking minority. This issue has become particularly prominent in the current geopolitical context, since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Such practices, with strict deadlines to improve language skills, however politically understandable, further hamper migrants' possibility to live and work in Estonia.

I have heard that from 2027 there is a law. So, if you do not know the Estonian language at least B1 level, your card or visa will not be renewed... Even if you are working in an international level school or company. Don't bother. So, you have to learn Estonian at B1 level at any cost. (WP5_EE_FG4.3_PAK_M)

Moreover, the lack of training opportunities in other languages (such as English or, in the case of Estonia, Russian) further limits access to up-skilling. Many participants reported that vocational or professional courses were offered only in Estonian, even in cities like Tallinn where large portions of the population belong to the Russian-speaking minority. This lack of linguistic flexibility effectively narrows access to up-/re-skilling for migrants and minority communities.

Another structural issue is the shortage of qualified Estonian language teachers, particularly for intermediate and advanced levels. As a result, even motivated learners face long waiting lists, slowing down their progress and jeopardizing their employment stability or residence rights.

In **Germany and Switzerland**, a high proficiency level is generally required for qualified employment. In Switzerland, particularly, the multilingual labour market often requires migrants to master at least two of the four official national languages (French, German, Italian, and Romansh), which limits their job options even when qualifications are recognised.





4.1.3. Family responsibilities and gender norms

The issue of gender norms and reconciling family obligations emerged strongly in focus groups with migrant women and it was also highlighted by stakeholders as a significant barrier to accessing training and the labour market. Many women, especially those arriving through family reunification or from countries with stronger gender norms, were reported to spent extended periods isolated at home, often without learning the national language or building social networks. In some cases, stakeholders pointed out that the only moment a woman was seen as a “potential income generator” within her family was in situations of acute financial hardship (WP5_ITA_STK_7).

Childcare also repeatedly emerged as a practical constraint, because migrant women often lack strong support networks and have no extended family, such as grandparents, to rely on for help with children.

[in terms of] general satisfaction with work. I am satisfied with what I have now, but I work part time. And I would like to work full time, so 40 hours a week. But my biggest challenge is, I don't know if it's relevant or not.... It's daycare and hardship to access more days in daycare and the costs. (WP5_NL_FG1.5_ARM_F)

Besides, these obstacles are often reinforced by prejudice among employers. Some women reported discrimination from employers that were unwilling to hire mothers. For instance, a participant in a focus group stressed:

The first thing employers ask is: “Do you live alone? Do you have children?” And if you answer, “Yes, I have a daughter,” they immediately say, “No, we can't hire you like that. You'll be working, then you'll get a call and must leave to pick up your child.” (WP5_ITA_FG3.2_MA_F)

4.1.4. Lack of networks and social capital

Across all countries, the lack of social networks emerged as a key individual barrier, both for finding jobs and navigating complex training systems.

Many participants described how they found work not through online platforms or agencies, but through word of mouth, such as friends or acquaintances who referred them.

I think it's mainly the networking. I have developed these skills over the years while doing my PhD, because I know I will need it at some point when I'm looking for a job. But I also noticed that quite some PhDs, they do lack this network, especially international ones. And that makes their life more difficult to find a job. (WP5_NL_FG1.1_AZJ_F)

Volunteering and internships, while not a desired source of income, have been common strategies to develop a network and grow professionally. A network is perceived as extremely relevant to secure opportunities, because often local candidates have priority over others.

In addition, some of our research participants stressed that networks are essential in navigating complex systems of training and employment. Migrants without support often drop out or accept exploitative work simply to survive:





If you have someone supporting you, like a family, it makes a huge difference. I know a Malian friend who was adopted by an Italian family in Turin (Italy). He trained as a pizzaiolo [pizza-maker], spent two years without a job, but didn't have to worry about rent or food. Today, he's the head pizzaiolo in a restaurant. But many others don't have that support. They might have degrees and go through training, but once they leave the reception system, they're on their own. Without help, they're forced to take any job just to survive. You need time and patience to find the right opportunity, but when you're alone, that's a luxury you often can't afford. (WP5_ITA_FG4.3_MLI_M)

Participants highlighted that networks don't only provide practical help, but they also offer emotional support, guidance, and access to information. As some participant said:

Not everyone needs money. Sometimes they just need someone to walk beside them, to open a door. (WP5_ITA_FG4.5_CMR_F)

I would also say that I could still improve when it comes to networking - for example, by attending more events organized by architecture or graphic design offices. There are so many events happening in Berlin, and I think that's one of the great things about the city. People here are generally very open, and these events really encourage interaction and conversation. I just need to stay updated through social media platforms, be present at these gatherings, and take the opportunity to connect with others (WP5_DE_FG1.8_TUR_F).

However, the role of networks is far from univocal. Generally speaking, **ethnic community** networks play a significant role in shaping the training and employment trajectories of migrants. For instance, during the fieldwork in Italy, several stakeholders highlighted that migrants from Pakistan and Bangladesh tend to have tighter links with their ethnic communities. **These networks represent a source of support, but sometimes also a mechanism of control** (this is coherent with abundant literature, see for instance Ambrosini 2000; Ponzio 2005). As a stakeholder reported:

We've seen a few cases of vulnerable migrants where, despite the project's efforts to guide them into less exploitative forms of employment, they ended up going back [in previous occupations]. The reason was the strong influence of their community. These individuals were so tightly connected to their original community, even within exploitative work settings, that when they began to 'emancipate' themselves and move toward more independent, higher-quality work paths, the community effectively pulled them back. They were seen—if I may say so—as traitors. (WP5_ITA_STK_2)

However, this community pressure may also be tied to the **different migration trajectories**: for many migrants from Pakistan or Bangladesh migration is a collective investment involving family expectations, debt, and strong pressures to send remittances home. This concurs with the other factors illustrated above in pushing the person to prioritise immediate income over training aspirations.

4.2. Structural hurdles: navigating institutional and systemic barriers

Beyond personal circumstances, migrants across all of our five target countries face a complex network of structural and institutional barriers that greatly impact their ability to access training, secure employment and utilise their skills to their fullest potential. These barriers are often





caused by rigid administrative systems, fragmented governance, and the persistence of discriminatory practices.

4.2.1. Legal and administrative barriers

The most frequently reported obstacles were complex, inconsistent and often unclear bureaucratic procedures.

In **Italy**, one of the most frequently reported challenges is due to the territorial discrepancies in how institutions handle administrative practices. For example, the process for issuing or renewing residence permits can vary greatly across different local police offices (*Questure*). Some migrants are left waiting for months for their residence permit, due to backlogs and staffing shortages. In addition, these delays have real consequences: without a valid residence permit, it becomes difficult to rent a house, access stable employment, or enrol in training programmes or higher education.

Another related issue concerns the income thresholds required for renewing residence permits or applying for long-term residency and citizenship. Migrants must prove they have a stable income to meet these requirements, and many participants shared how this pressure forces them to take whatever job they can find, even if it means giving up on up-/re-skilling opportunities that could help them build a better future. Those with part-time, precarious, or informal employment find themselves excluded or only granted short-term renewals. These rigid criteria create a sense of being trapped in precarity, making it harder to plan their future or truly settle in Italy.

Moreover, financial barriers exacerbate the situation. For instance, international students enrolled in Italian universities highlighted that, under recent new rules¹⁸, in execution since 1 January 2024, non-EU students enrolling voluntarily in the National Health Service (*Servizio Sanitario Nazionale* – SSN) must now pay an annual contribution of €700, up from approximately €150, therefore making the service unaffordable for many who are without scholarships or family support. At the same time, while refugees are entitled to free university qualifications recognition, many other migrants must pay hundreds of euros to have their qualifications formally validated. This means that even those with university degrees are often discouraged from pursuing high-skilled jobs.

In **Estonia**, the issue of legal and financial barriers at the stage of visa application came to the forefront. In the words of one entrepreneur with extensive experience hiring migrants: *“Here, for every new employee, we have a three-month bargaining with the police officer”* (WP5_EE_FG3.2_IRN_M).

To apply for an Estonian visa, it is common to have to travel to another country because Estonia has a limited number of embassies. For example, citizens of Pakistan may need to travel to India. Often, this step presents an additional hurdle: applying for a visa of the country where the

¹⁸ Law No. 213 of 30 December 2023 (Budget Law 2024), which introduced an amendment to Article 34 of the Consolidated Immigration Act. Published in the Official Gazette No. 303 of 30 December 2023: <https://www.normattiva.it/uri-res/N2Ls?urn:nir:stato:legge:2023;213>





Estonian embassy is based. This may require significant time and financial resources or even result in a rejection. Moving forward, once an application for the Estonian visa is submitted, applicants may be forced to wait for a decision at the location. That is, returning home may be expensive or, for example, applicants had obtained one- and not multiple-entry visas to reach the Estonian embassy. Staying abroad (often for at least a week) means paying all associated living costs with no support. It is thus clear how such a cumbersome process may be identified as a financial and legal barrier to accessing the Estonian labour market.

Another bureaucratic issue regards barriers to entrepreneurship as a way of accessing the labour market. This topic came up during focus groups with women, as most of them were motivated to consider such an option or were already working on establishing a company. They highlighted legal (structural, but also practical) barriers impeding entrepreneurship. Migrants who do not have a permanent residence permit in Estonia must regularly extend their temporary residence permits and satisfy at times extensive associated requirements. For those already in the country, frequent permit renewals and uncertainty about long-term stay discourage entrepreneurship and long-term career planning.

In **Switzerland**, legal and administrative barriers emerged particularly among **Ukrainian citizens**, in the form of a burdensome process for recognising foreign qualifications. As a consequence, some participants restrained themselves from undertaking this pathway, due to the uncertainties of their future. Indeed, most of them came to Switzerland because of the war that is still in act, but without being sure whether in the future they are going to remain in this country or are going to move.

I only know my future a week in advance. I don't know what we're going to do. So I don't even know if it makes sense to build a career here, to get my diploma recognized, if they could send us back at some point... and then what? (WP5_CH_FG2.1_UKR_F).

On the other hand, other participants highlighted that even having obtained the recognition of their qualification, they had not been able to find employment at their qualification level. As a result, most of the times this resulted in taking on a lower-ranking job position than the previous one.

I have been living in Switzerland for 3 years and in Ukraine I was a programmer. Now I am in Switzerland and here I have a job as a cleaner. Because I can't find work by profession (WP5_CHFG2.5_UKR_F).

In certain cases, a sense of inadequacy emerged from the focus group conducted with the Ukrainian participants, who raised their concerns related to the nationality quotas. In every sector, there is a limit of Ukrainian employees, and this excludes from being hired persons that could potentially be capable of holding that specific employment position only because of their country of origin.

I went to two interviews, and then they told me, 'We like you, but actually we have a quota, and we already have enough from Ukraine.' I thought, why did I have to prepare for two interviews just to hear that? That felt unfair. Overall, I can't say whether I'm satisfied or unsatisfied - I'm just always searching. Sometimes I am more successful, sometimes less. I guess it's not easy for anyone, so I just keep searching but trying to be aware of some of the complexities (WP5_CH_FG2.7_UKR_F).





Overall, these legal and administrative obstacles do not just slow down integration. They often trap people in precarious work, dependency, or rushed entry into the labour market, even before learning the language and attending training courses (see May, 2020). The result is a system that wastes human potential.

4.2.2. Housing and reception duration

Institutional timeframes regarding reception duration and housing insecurity often push migrants into early, precarious employment rather than training.

This barrier emerged particularly among refugees in **Italy**. Reception programmes for beneficiaries of international protection, such as SAI projects (*Sistema di Accoglienza e Integrazione*, Reception and Integration System¹⁹), are time limited. International protection holders can be hosted for a maximum of six months, with the possibility of a further six-month extension under specific conditions. As a consequence, SAI projects are oriented toward ensuring a rapid autonomy of the beneficiaries, so that they can enter the labour market, find a housing solution and exit the reception programme in due time. In this regard, migrant participants reported that the pressure to accept any available job often came from the reception conditions. As a matter of fact, many beneficiaries stressed that they felt forced to prioritise immediate income and housing stability due to the short timeframe.

Once reception support ends, housing becomes a critical vulnerability. As one refugee points out, this generates dramatic dilemmas:

My reception project will end in about six months. It's really stressful. We're looking for housing now, and it's hard because we don't have jobs. To rent an apartment, you need a guarantee, landlords often want a permanent work contract. In my case, I'm just about to start a new course, but I'm confused: should I go for training or should I just look for a job? If I must leave the project in six months, then I need to earn money as soon as possible. So, should I spend another six months studying, or should I roll up my sleeves and take the first job I can find? I tell myself: whatever comes first, I'll take it. (WP5_ITA_FG5.1_CI_F)

In order to mitigate such problems, the SAI programme can offer rent subsidies. Beneficiaries of international protection may be eligible for a temporary rent contribution when exiting the reception project, in order to support their transition toward housing autonomy. It is generally available for a limited period, typically up to six months after the end of the reception programme.

Almost all the focus groups participants reported discriminatory barriers in the private rental market, where landlords often refuse to rent to foreigners, even those with stable employment or financial guarantees. Access to housing is frequently tied to indefinite employment contracts and, most importantly, a personal reference (and often a financial guarantee) from a trustworthy person (preferably an Italian, in the everyday practice of most agencies), which few migrants can secure.

¹⁹ For an overview of the SAI system, see the latest annual report: <https://www.retesai.it/il-xxiii-rapporto-sai-presentato-oggi-a-roma/>.





For example, if I go to a real estate agency and an Italian provides a guarantee for me, they give me the apartment right away. But when I go alone...well, you need an Italian to vouch for you. Someone who says, 'He's a good person, there's no problem.' When I go with someone who speaks Italian and can explain things, it goes much more smoothly. (WP5_ITA_FG4.3_MLI_M)

4.2.3. Physical accessibility and local infrastructure

A significant obstacle reported by both stakeholders and migrants in **Italy** is the physical access to training locations, particularly in suburban and rural areas. In smaller towns, where many migrants live, public transportation is not capillary or frequent enough, or even completely lacking. Transport services may only run a few times a day, forcing people to spend the entire day outside their home or the reception centre just to attend a few hours of the course. The lack or inefficiency of transports leads also to the impossibility for many migrants to combine training with a part-time job, as it would be extremely difficult to reach both.

In urban centres, mobility is generally easier thanks to public transportation, the cost of which can however be another hurdle. Although some participants can afford it thanks to subsidies like unemployment benefits, others described ticket prices as being very high. In particular, some women participants expressed appreciation for hybrid or online courses that allowed them to follow training from their smartphones, without having to incur in costs of transports.

Furthermore, access to private transport is extremely limited for migrants. Many migrants lack a driver's license both because of the high cost (often over €1,000) and because the course and the written exam is only available in Italian, making it inaccessible for those with limited language proficiency.

As an employment service worker explained:

Not having a vehicle is an enormous limitation, especially in areas with little or no public transport. Often people don't have a car or even a driver's license, and this makes it nearly impossible for them to reach employment opportunities in small towns or rural areas. There might be jobs available but without a car, they're simply inaccessible. In some areas, public transport is reduced to a single bus in the morning and one in the evening. And in certain villages, even that minimal service disappears when schools close, leaving residents with no transport options at all. (WP5_ITA_STK_4).

4.2.4. Discrimination and stereotypes regarding migrants' skills

Across all five countries, participants highlighted how discriminatory practices and stereotypes affect access to training and employment.

During the focus groups in **Italy**, many participants reported experiences of discrimination and stereotypes regarding their skills and aspirations. Migrants, particularly black women, described being often automatically channelled into low-skilled roles in care and cleaning, regardless of their prior education.

When people see a black woman, they often assume she lacks competence or isn't on the same level as Italians. There's this persistent stigma: "she must be a caregiver." And while that's a job like any other, it becomes limiting when that's the only role society imagines for you. Many of us arrived in





Italy with degrees and valuable skills, but we're often seen as less capable or unfit for roles that others can access more easily. (WP5_ITA_FG5.2_SO_F).

This dynamic creates “migrant-only” professions, where certain communities are expected to work in specific roles. Even newcomers with higher qualifications feel the pressure to follow the same paths, reinforcing occupational segregation. This limits migrants’ personal aspirations but also results in a broader underutilisation of talent. As one stakeholder noted:

Even those who arrive with strong credentials end up doing basic work, because the system and expectations channel them in that direction (WP5_ITA_STK_5).

In **the Netherlands**, perceived discrimination was reported as coming particularly from employers. Beneficiaries perceived there was a tendency to select Dutch workers, sometimes exclusively and very directly. This could be regardless of holding certifications including C1 or data analysis training. One participant cited studies to back their claims:

Dutch employers prefer a Dutch, original Dutch, native Dutch, even with a criminal background over hiring an immigrant. That was produced by Radboud University, this study. Another study happened by Utrecht University: You have 30% less chance to receive a job if you have a middle eastern name, immigrant name on your CV. (WP5_NL_FG3.6_SYR_M)

Another beneficiary participant lamented:

You are never good enough for this society, even as a highly educated woman or as a highly educated refugee and person. It seems you're never good enough. You're trying to do the best, the language, integration, all of them. But still, no. Here are some good examples, I'll say later or now. It still hurts, at least me. Against the statement of colleague that has good experience with the Netherlands, as a fatherland; I don't have this. (WP5_NL_FG3.3_IRN_F)

In the focus groups, perceived discrimination came up frequently. It was emphasized that despite efforts to integrate, some participants felt they continued to be perceived as “other” (particularly if they had visible markers of difference from those originating from the Netherlands without migration background) and were at a disadvantage for this reason.

However, a further form of discrimination reported concerns the **opposite situation: when migrants are perceived as too qualified or as having “excessive” aspirations**. Some beneficiaries explained that, despite holding higher education degrees or extensive professional experience, employers were reluctant to hire them for low- or medium-skilled positions out of distrust in their long-term reliability. This dynamic reflects a bias against “overskilled” workers, leading to underemployment and wasted potential.

When we started finding a job, started looking, we came to the low level, so just salesman or something as warehouse employee. And employers say, okay, nice, that's good, but we don't want to work with you, because you have such a high level of education, level of thinking, that after a few months you say it's very boring, I don't want to work here anymore, I want to do another job. So we have to find someone else, we don't want to work with you. (WP5_NL_FG2.2_RUS_F)

This reveals how high aspirations, rather than being seen as a sign of motivation or potential, are sometimes perceived as unrealistic or undesirable by employers. This discourages skilled





migrants from pursuing professional growth and contributes to feelings of frustration and exclusion, reinforcing the perception that the system does not value their competencies.

Finally, the political climate also came up, in terms of more restrictive policies towards migration and asylum, particularly in the group of student beneficiaries. One participant felt that there was increasing discrimination against Muslims:

So, do I want me, my children, my next generation, to experience that? No, I don't. So of course, I'm going to leave. I want a place where I can feel welcome. Where I don't have to prove myself every day, to every single person. Because that's really exhausting, really energy consuming. (WP5_NL_FG3.6_SYR_M)

The political issue was emphasised by several stakeholders as well. The current difficulties in the Dutch political climate hinder successful migrant and refugee up-skilling and re-skilling efforts, as the government adopts or proposes more restrictive migration and asylum policies in light of recent elections. Literature indicates how negative socio-political climate towards migrants or refugees can constitute a barrier to refugee or migrant integration in the workplace, exacerbating stereotypical beliefs (Zimmermann et al. 2000), and this was confirmed by stakeholders. As the UAF (Foundation for Refugee Students²⁰) representative signalled, both societal and political discourse is painting refugees particularly as burdensome on the housing market, as if the housing crisis is their fault. Moreover, the perceived burden on the social benefit system in the Netherlands, whether or not this reflects reality. (WP5_NL_STK_7)

4.2.5. Training design and systemic mismatch

A recurring structural issue across contexts concerns the misalignment between training supply and actual labour market demand.

In **Italy**, many stakeholders and participants expressed concern that current training pathways do not adequately align with real labour market demands. Despite the availability of up-/re-skilling courses, several stakeholders reported that the training offered is often outdated or disconnected from current technological and sectoral trends. This mismatch leads to frustration among participants who invest time and effort without clear employment outcomes. One stakeholder reflected on the limited impact of training programmes:

²⁰ Foundation for Refugee Students UAF, founded in 1948, works towards development of refugee students and professionals in the Netherlands. They do so by educating, facilitating training, offering support and motivation, and serving as a mediator or connection between stakeholders including educational institutions, local governments, employers and volunteers. They also work on knowledge sharing and advocacy. Guidance to students and professionals includes mentoring support, professional language education, study preparation, advice and support during studies, work study support, help with commuting to work, support with medical assessments and financial support for study related costs. Especially given the civic integration system and its reform, the UAF advocates on behalf of an individual with a municipality, convincing the municipality that support in receiving a Dutch diploma, for example, and obtaining a job that meets their skill capacities is better for the municipalities welfare system and financial resources in the long run.





Of all the people I've seen completing courses, very few ended up working in the fields they trained for. Most had to redirect themselves to other sectors like construction or cleaning (WP5_ITA_STK_7).

According to interviewed stakeholders, this misalignment is due to the fact that training courses are not adequately tailored to labour market needs and occupational demands, because employers are still rarely involved in shaping the design of these programmes.

Participants also questioned whether it is worth leaving existing jobs and take the risk to start a training. As one participant noted:

My friend completed a course as an electrician and has the diploma and everything. But after finishing the course, he had to go back to working in a warehouse because he simply couldn't find a job as an electrician. He has children in Mali, and he needs to eat, pay rent, and cover bills. He spent eight months searching for work as an electrician, but he just couldn't find it. (WP5_ITA_FG4.3_MLI_M)

This mismatch between training and employability risks undermining trust in up-skilling initiatives, especially among migrants who cannot afford to spend time and resources on uncertain outcomes. It also highlights that training offers are often driven by provider capacity, not occupational demands. This is particularly true in times of disruptive technological change, when providing adequate training for new professional figures in high demand would require significant public investments, that on the contrary are not made.

In the Netherlands, a related issue emerges from the design of the activation and integration system. Stakeholders pointed out that municipalities, which are responsible for implementing refugee and migrant integration, are often financially incentivized to prioritise rapid job placement over the quality or adequacy of employment. In other words, the policy emphasis on reducing welfare dependency pushes local authorities to encourage beneficiaries to accept any available job, even when it is far below their qualifications. As one UAF representative explained:

Some municipalities think they surely have the idea that the fastest way is to get a job. So, you have to learn the language (but not at a very high level) in a short time and then you can start work. And it doesn't matter if you have an education in the country where you're from. Maybe a doctor's degree, it doesn't matter. You can start here as picking fruit, it doesn't matter. As long as you get a job, that's for us the best way. So, we don't have to pay for long time social benefits. That may be a bit harsh to say. And I can't say it about all the municipalities. And they have a social obligation. There are a lot of municipalities who have a bit more social or human aim. Or feel responsible for this group. But we see that a lot of the financial trigger is to get people to integrate very quickly. And to accept any job available is in the system. (WP5_NL_STK7)

Focus groups with migrants confirmed this pattern. This **logic of rapid activation** risks pushing skilled workers into low-level jobs, preventing upward mobility and the full use of their skills.



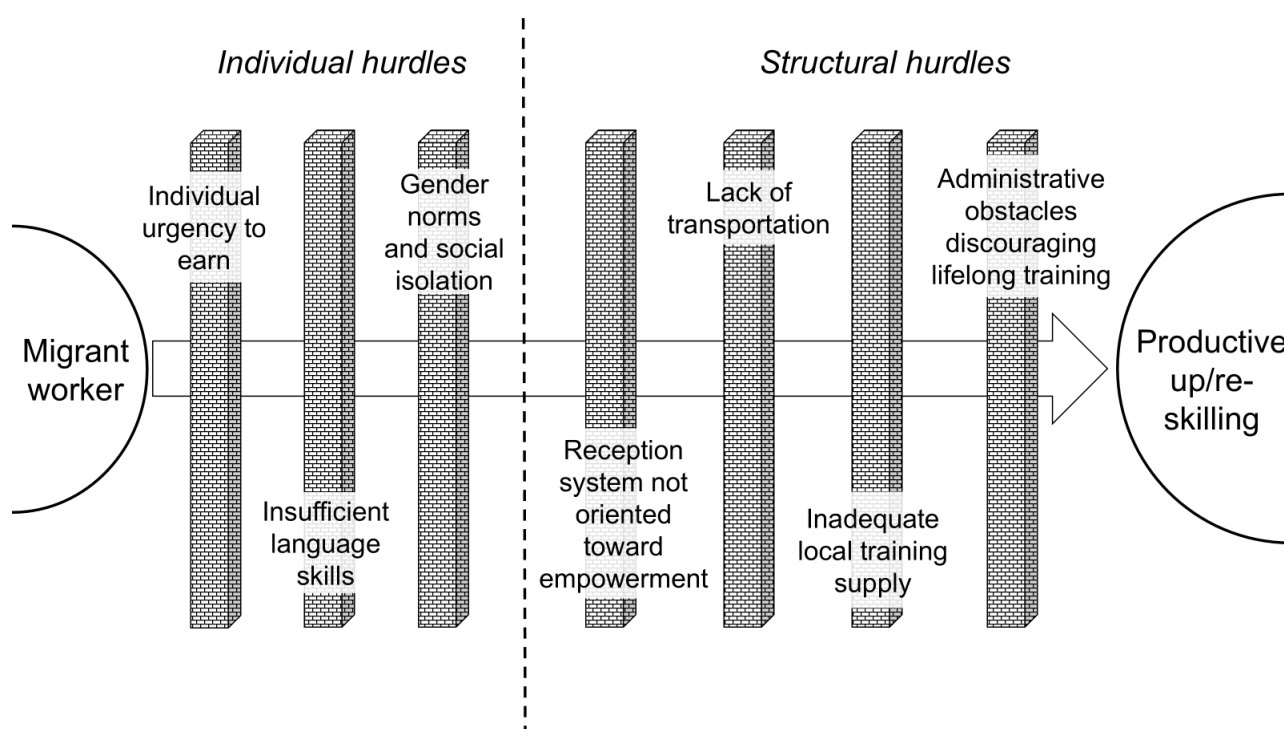


5. Concluding remarks

5.1. Hyper-precarity trap, poverty and skill waste

The various groups of migrants that we considered face a multitude of obstacles of different kinds that discourage or completely prevent access to up-skilling or re-skilling initiatives, even when these opportunities are theoretically available. In Figure 1, we summarise the obstacles described in Section 4, divided into the two categories of individual barriers and structural barriers.

Figure 1. Overview of barriers to up-skilling and re-skilling



The fieldwork clearly reflected a widespread sense of being in a **limbo** among refugees, migrant women and international students, who due to legal insecurity, administrative hurdles, housing instability, and family responsibilities face significant barriers to accessing and completing up-skilling or re-skilling pathways. For many, this results in the sheer impossibility to plan for the future.

This creates what has been described as the '**hyper-precarity trap**' (Lewis et al., 2014; Schenner et al., 2019; Palalar Alkan et al., 2024). This conceptual framework shows how the combination of socio-legal structuring of rights and entitlements, along with neoliberal labour market policies, results in people experiencing many different forms of insecurity.

Particularly, Lewis et al. highlight how several structural factors, such as gender, legal status, and individual migration paths, "create[s] multi-dimensional insecurities that contribute to the





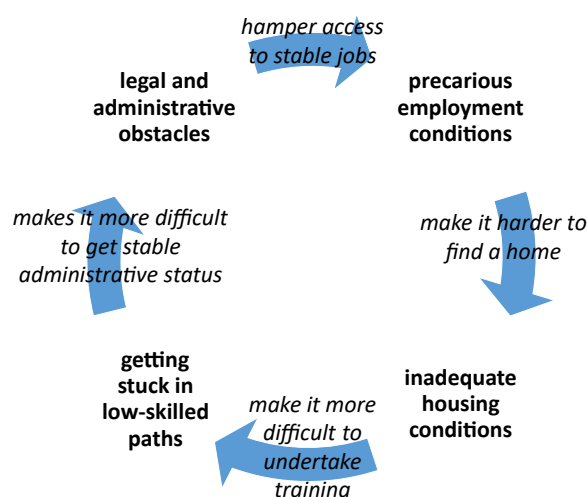
necessity to engage in, and close down exit from, severely exploitative or forced labour” (Lewis et al, 2014b, p.171). As a result, many migrants are pushed to take informal and insecure jobs in order to survive when they arrive in the host country (Lintner and Elsen, 2020; Van Doorn et al., 2023).

Despite substantial differences between our three target groups, many common challenges emerged. Several participants reported experiences of **discrimination**, whether in being channelled toward low-skilled “migrant jobs” or in the difficulty of securing housing. This has repercussions on the capacity to engage in up-/re-skilling initiatives. **Legal insecurity** is another recurring theme: long delays in renewing residence permits, combined with strict income requirements, often lead individuals to choose precarious work over training, simply to avoid falling into irregularity. Moreover, many participants referred to the **lack of social networks** as a major obstacle in navigating the system and obtaining emotional support.

All these barriers are closely interconnected. **Access to housing, stable employment, legal documentation, and social networks are not separate issues; on the contrary, they are deeply intertwined and mutually interdependent.** Without a valid residence permit, it is impossible to access training, sign an employment contract, or rent a house. Yet without a stable job and a rental contract, it becomes difficult to renew the residence permit. However, landlords often require an indefinite employment contract to meet rental guarantees. And in the absence of a job or housing, the ability to plan for the future or pursue training becomes extremely limited.

The precarity trap is characterised by complex vicious interactions across different spheres of social and economic life. In Figure 2 we represent a possible cycle of such interactions. It has to be stressed, however, that this is only a suggestive visualization of one of many possible recursive dynamics. Besides, in real life, interactions happen in more complex and non-univocal form. For instance, poor housing condition may interact directly with administrative obstacles by making it impossible to renew a residence permit. A last caveat is that these recursive interactions are highly context-specific, meaning that the legal and administrative specificities at national and local level (see above par. 4.2.1), as well the peculiarities of local labour and housing market, may have a deep influence on the specific mechanisms through which the trap operates.

Figure 2. The vicious dynamics of the precarity trap





Whatever the peculiar dynamics of the precarity trap in a given context, **social networks** invariably play a crucial role in breaking the trap itself. Knowing someone who can vouch for you, provide advice, or serve as a reference can make the difference between exclusion and opportunity. These networks can also offer emotional and practical support, for example, by allowing someone to invest time in training without needing immediate income. In some cases, as highlighted by many participants, having a network behind is what makes personal progress possible.

This resonates with existing research on refugee resilience, which consistently highlights **social support** as a key resource for well-being and integration. Qualitative studies in Germany (Walther et al., 2021), for instance, show that building new social connections, especially with members of the host community, fosters a sense of belonging, stability, and security, helping individuals to cope with challenges. Social networks not only provide emotional support and a sense of acceptance, but also practical assistance, such as guidance through legal procedures, job referrals, or access to housing.

The same mechanism was reported by our focus group participants. Migrants who had supportive networks or mentors reported feeling more confident in navigating the system and more capable of making long-term plans. On the other hand, isolation and the absence of social capital often led to resignation, reinforcing the sense of precarity.

Structural and long-term precarity has broader implications as well. When skilled migrants are trapped in low-paid work, **human resources are wasted**, and local labour shortages remain unmet. In this sense, the “precarity trap” is not only a social and psychological burden for individuals but also a major factor of systemic economic inefficiency for host societies. The inability to offer stable conditions and pathways for up-/re-skilling translates into structural skill waste, a paradox in a context where Europe urgently needs skilled workers in key economic sectors.

Addressing this issue requires more than up-/re-skilling opportunities alone: it demands **integrated policy approaches** that link skills development with secure housing, clear legal status, and social inclusion. As Ungar et al. suggest, resilience is “not only an individual’s capacity to overcome adversity, but the capacity of the individual’s environment to provide access to health-enhancing resources” (Ungar, 2007, p. 288). Therefore, resilience depends on whether institutions and communities create the conditions for people to rebuild stable and meaningful professional lives.

In this view, in the next section we highlight some policy implications and recommendations for a more effective and inclusive approach to migrant up-/re-skilling.

5.2. Policy implications and ways ahead

This study highlights the urgent need for a more coherent and inclusive governance of up-/re-skilling of migrants and, particularly, migrant women, refugees and international students, who are often overrepresented in the lower layers of the labour market. While some initiatives exist, they lack coordination among different policy domains (e.g., training, housing, job placement,





economic incentives, childcare) and fail to address the structural causes that hinder the participation of these specific groups of migrants.

Our analysis shows that up-/re-skilling initiatives pursue multiple and sometimes conflicting priorities. On one hand, they are designed to facilitate the socio-economic integration of migrants in the host country, in other cases the aim is to improve labour market efficiency and address skills shortages. In some national contexts, up-/re-skilling is used as a way to promote fast labour market participation in order to reduce welfare expenditure (see above, Section 1.2). However, these goals require a careful balance: activation measures often prioritise speed over quality, leading to placements in low-skilled jobs. This approach undermines the potential long-term benefits of investing in human resources.

- ➔ **To address this shortcoming, policy design should strengthen coordination between integration and economic actors, ensuring in a more systematic way that up-/re-skilling initiatives are aligned with current labour market needs.²¹**

The second finding relates to migrants' motivation and agency. The fieldwork highlights that migrants have high aspirations and willingness to engage in training, but this motivation is often very fragile and is frequently hindered by individual and structural barriers. Policymakers need to recognize the trade-offs between a short-term rapid labour market activation and the longer-term benefits of more productive and sustainable integration through skill development.

- ➔ **Policy responses should therefore move beyond offering just training and address the conditions that enable participation** (for more details, see specific recommendations below).

The third point is perhaps the most fundamental. The lack of social capital is a serious obstacle to successful up-skilling and re-skilling. The fieldwork reveals that social networks play a crucial enabling role. They open doors to jobs, housing, and training, they provide both emotional and practical support, and they make it possible to plan for the future and invest in skill development. In fragile contexts, such support networks can make the difference between success and failure. But it needs to be stressed that not all networks are equally accessible. That is why local actors (municipalities, NGOs, community organizations) play a vital role in building empowering support systems, ensuring that social capital is a real resource for all.

- ➔ **In order to do so, policy frameworks should promote a whole-of-community approach, fostering more systematic and continuous collaboration among public institutions, employers, migrant associations and civil society.**

Besides the three general points that we have just highlighted, and with specific reference to Figure 1 above, we present some recommendations for a more effective and inclusive approach to

²¹ For some examples on how this can be achieved (such as a special envoy on skill shortages at EU level) see for instance the GS4S General EC Policy Brief No. 1 "At the Intersection of Migration, Education, Development, and Trade: 20 Concrete Policy Recommendations for Tackling Skills Shortages in the EU and Beyond, Based on Interdisciplinary Evidence": <https://gs4s.eu/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/General-EC-Policy-Brief.pdf>





up/re-skilling, by distinguishing between measures more directly aimed at addressing individual or structural hurdles.

Recommendations addressing individual-level barriers

Urgent need to earn and financial constraints:

- Introduce financial incentives for training, such as microcredit schemes or honour loans (see Box 3 on the Powercoders Programme), to enable individuals to pursue up-skilling opportunities without compromising their immediate income needs. Diversify funding sources by involving philanthropic foundations, private sector partnerships, and local development funds.
- Eliminate residency-based discrimination in accessing social protection and support services, ensuring equal treatment regardless of length of stay in the country.

Insufficient language skills:

- Strengthen language learning for all asylum seekers and refugees by ensuring its systematic inclusion within the reception system.
- Develop tailored language courses for specific groups, such as migrant women arriving through family reunification and individuals with low or no literacy skills. A systematic evaluation of already existing initiatives of this kind in Member States could provide useful directions and wider diffusion of this approach.

Social isolation:

- Invest in programmes that foster social networks, including buddy systems, community mentoring, and volunteering opportunities²². These initiatives can be just as vital as formal training in supporting integration and skill development.

Recommendations addressing structural barriers

Reception system not oriented towards empowerment:

The current structure of the reception system tends (in some countries more than in others – but the trend is general and expanding) to prioritize rapid autonomy over long-term empowerment, due to the short duration of reception projects. This limited timeframe places significant pressure

²² For instance, see the Community Matching project in Italy: <https://buddy.unhcr.it/>. The project, created by UNHCR together with CIAC and Refugees Welcome Italia, promotes the role of the “buddy” and aims to support the integration of refugees through mentoring relationships between volunteers and refugee participants. Refugees receive concrete help from volunteers in dealing with everyday challenges, emotional support in making decisions, assistance with study or work, as well as opportunities to build friendships, engage in leisure activities, practise Italian, and discover the city. The project seeks to generate a positive impact both on the lives of refugees—by helping them build a social network—and on the communities hosting them, by strengthening their role in fostering a more welcoming and supportive society.





on both beneficiaries and social workers, often preventing meaningful engagement in up-skilling or re-skilling pathways.

- Extending the maximum duration of reception projects (housing and access to integration services) where needed would allow beneficiaries of international protection to participate in training and integration programmes with greater stability and less pressure.
- Increasing the number of hours and the staffing dedicated to labour and social inclusion within the reception system should be a top priority, enabling more effective support. Especially in some Member States (e.g. Italy) the investment in early integration support is clearly insufficient.
- Create structured moments of engagement between municipalities, local businesses, and third-sector actors to jointly design training and integration pathways that respond to both the needs of refugees and the local labour market, particularly in sectors experiencing labour shortages. This coordinated approach can facilitate sustainable employment and housing solutions, fostering real long-term integration.

Lack of transportation:

- Facilitate access to transportation by offering subsidized travel passes or mobility vouchers for those enrolled in training or job placement programmes.

Inadequate local training offer:

- Co-design training programmes with local employers and private companies to ensure alignment with real labour market needs and increase the likelihood of employment outcomes.

Administrative barriers:

- Enhance the capacity of local offices (and, in large cities, through decentralised offices) to issue and renew residence permits promptly, ensuring that migrants can access the regular labour market without unnecessary delays and without discontinuities in the renewal phase.

Housing instability:

- Promote innovative housing solutions, such as co-housing models, partnerships with landlords, and rental guarantee funds, to ensure stable living conditions, an essential precondition for successful participation in training.
- Launch anti-discrimination campaigns to challenge prejudice against migrants in the housing sector and in the labour market.





Annexes

Annex 1. Timeline of EU policy developments on up-skilling and re-skilling

This timeline summarises the main EU policy milestones shaping the European agenda on skills, lifelong learning, and labour market inclusion.

Date	Policy/Initiative	Main objectives and key features
December 2016	<u>Council Recommendation on Upskilling Pathways: new opportunities for adults (2016/C 484/01)</u>	First EU framework for adult up-skilling and re-skilling, aimed at helping low-skilled adults acquire basic literacy, numeracy, and digital competences, or progress toward an upper secondary qualification.
July 2020	<u>European Skills Agenda 2020-2025</u>	Five-year plan to boost skills for sustainable competitiveness (Green Deal), social fairness (European Pillar of Social Rights), and resilience after COVID-19. Introduces flagship actions on lifelong learning and labour market relevance of skills.
November 2020	<u>Pact for Skills</u>	Launched by the European Commission, the Pact for Skills is a shared engagement model for skills development in Europe, encouraging cooperation among public and private actors to upskill and reskill the European workforce, especially in strategic industrial ecosystems.
March 2021	<u>European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan (EPSR)</u>	Sets EU headline targets for 2030: at least 60% of adults in training annually, 78% employment rate, and 15 million fewer people at risk of poverty or exclusion. Provides overarching goals for all skills and employment initiatives.
June 2022	<u>Council Recommendation on a European approach to micro-credentials for lifelong learning and employability (2022/C 243/02)</u>	Establishes a common European framework for short, flexible, and modular learning paths to support lifelong learning, up-skilling, and re-skilling, especially for disadvantaged groups.
May 2023–May 2024	<u>European Year of Skills</u>	Thematic year promoting a skills-first mindset, partnerships between education and business, and alignment of training with labour market needs. Emphasised investment in professional education, reskilling, and talent attraction.
November 2023	<u>Skills and Talent Mobility Package</u>	Commission proposals to make the EU more attractive for foreign talent through tools like the EU Talent Pool and faster qualification recognition. Aims to complement internal reskilling by facilitating skilled migration.
March 2025	<u>Union of Skills</u>	Updated EU umbrella initiative integrating education, training, and cross-border recognition. Mobilises over €150 billion (2021–27) through RRF, ESF+, Erasmus+, ERDF, JTF, and





		<p>InvestEU. Introduces a 2030 roadmap on education and digital skills, an Action Plan on Basic Skills, and pilots a Skills Guarantee. Reinforces the Pact for Skills, promotes micro-credentials, and supports EU skills academies for the green transition. Addresses persistent skill shortages and barriers faced by vulnerable groups, including migrants and persons with disabilities.</p>
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Annex 2. Interviewed stakeholders in the five target countries

Italy

	STAKEHOLDERS' AFFILIATION	CODING
1	Representative from the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies	WP5_ITA_STK_1
2	Representative from Piedmont's Employment Agency (<i>Agenzia Piemonte Lavoro</i>)	WP5_ITA_STK_2
3	Representative from Piedmont's Employment Agency (<i>Agenzia Piemonte Lavoro</i>)	WP5_ITA_STK_3
4	Case Manager at a vocational training agency	WP5_ITA_STK_4
5	Immigration Officer at a local Public Employment Center	WP5_ITA_STK_5
6	Immigration Officer at a local Public Employment Center	WP5_ITA_STK_6
7	Project Manager for migrant integration at a Cooperative specialized in employment inclusion	WP5_ITA_STK_7

The Netherlands

	STAKEHOLDERS' AFFILIATION	CODING
1	Representative from IOM Netherlands	WP5_NL_STK_1
2	Representative from IOM Netherlands	WP5_NL_STK_2
3	Representative from Ministry of Social Affairs	WP5_NL_STK_3
4	International Labour Market Analyst UWV	WP5_NL_STK_4
5	Representative from the Directorate of Labor Relations, SZW	WP5_NL_STK_5
6	Representative from Refugee Talent Hub	WP5_NL_STK_6
7	Representative from Foundation for Refugee Students UAF	WP5_NL_STK_7

Estonia

	STAKEHOLDERS' AFFILIATION	CODING
1	Associate Consultant at Technopolis	WP5_EE_STK_1





2	Representative from the Department of Employment, Estonia's Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications	WP5_EE_STK_2
3	Representative from the Department of Employment, Estonia's Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications	WP5_EE_STK_3
4	Representative from the Department of Employment, Estonia's Ministry of Economic Affairs and Communications	WP5_EE_STK_4
5	Expert from the European Migration Network #1	WP5_EE_STK_5
6	Expert from the European Migration Network #2	WP5_EE_STK_6
7	Advisor from Estonia's Ministry of the Interior	WP5_EE_STK_7
8	Representative from EUIF #1	WP5_EE_STK_8
9	Representative from EUIF #2	WP5_EE_STK_9
10	Analyst from OSKA Team #1	WP5_EE_STK_10
11	Analyst from OSKA Team #2	WP5_EE_STK_11

Switzerland

	STAKEHOLDERS' AFFILIATION	CODING
1	Representative from Commission for Migration Federal Council	WP5_CH_STK_1
2	Representative from Travail Suisse	WP5_CH_STK_2
3	Representative from KOF Swiss Economic Institute	WP5_CH_STK_3
4	Representative from State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation (SERI)	WP5_CH_STK_4
5	Representative from PowerCoders programme	WP5_CH_STK_5
6	Representative from CAS Rebuild Ukraine Programme	WP5_CH_STK_6
7	Representative from Swiss Federal Office for Migration (SEM)	WP5_CH_STK_7

Germany

	STAKEHOLDERS' AFFILIATION	CODING
1	Representative from Technical University of Berlin	WP5_DE_STK_1
2	Representative from Bundesministerium des Innern	WP5_DE_STK_2





3	Representative from Sachverständigenrat Migration	WP5_DE_STK_3
4	Representative from Bundesagentur für Arbeit	WP5_DE_STK_4





Annex 3. Focus groups discussions in the five target countries

Italy

	FG TARGET	LOCATION	NO. OF PARTICIPANTS
FG1	International students reached through a religious organisation	Vercelli	4
FG2	Participants in a pilot IT training initiative (Powercoders)	Turin	5
FG3	Migrant women hosted in a housing facility for single women with children managed by a local NGO	Turin	5
FG4	Beneficiaries of international protection hosted in SAI reception centre	Vercelli	6
FG5	Refugee women reached through a refugee-led association	Turin	7

The Netherlands

	FG TARGET	LOCATION	NO. OF PARTICIPANTS
FG1	Working professionals that were students in a paid Dutch class at Radboud (nationals of third countries and one EU national), to gain B2 level over the course of a semester (twice weekly).	Nijmegen	5
FG2	Female beneficiaries of international protection in the Netherlands	Nijmegen	3
FG3	Students in the UAF programme (beneficiaries)	Utrecht	7
FG4	(Former) students/current graduates from UAF programme (beneficiaries)	Utrecht	3
FG5	Blue Collar interviewees (beneficiaries of international protection and migrant workers)	Nijmegen	5





Estonia

	FG TARGET	LOCATION	NO. OF PARTICIPANTS
FG1	Students in Estonia (nationals of third countries and one EU national)	Tallinn	4
FG2	Women, beneficiaries of international protection in Estonia, or coming via other legal migration pathways.	Tallinn	5
FG3	(Former) students and an employee of the Estonian Business School	Tallinn	6
FG4	(Former) students of the Estonian Business School	Tallinn	3
FG5	Participants of Digital Explorers 2 in Estonia.	Online	7

Switzerland

	FG TARGET	LOCATION	NO. OF PARTICIPANTS
FG1	Eritrean nationals. All participants arrived as minors with or without their parents in Switzerland. Some had the F-Ausweis (meaning: refugee status) at the beginning and then changed to B-Ausweis (meaning: Residence permit for foreigners staying in the country for a longer period of time, with or without gainful employment), others who came because of family reunification receive B-Ausweis directly.	Bern	6
FG2	Ukraine nationals	Bern	7
FG3	Italian and French nationals attending a bachelor's degree in IT in Switzerland.	Online	6
FG4	The participants of this group were all migrants from Italy. Working in the field of gastronomy, either having their own restaurants or being employed, or as care takers of facilities, families or elderly persons.	Bern	6





Germany

	FG TARGET	LOCATION	NO. OF PARTICIPANTS
FG1	All participants study and/or work in the architecture field.	Berlin	10
FG2	Afghanistan and Ukraine nationals	Online	6
FG3	PhD students and post docs from Colombia, Mexico, Pakistan, Indonesia, Bangladesh.	Göttingen	6





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GS4S comparative report (D5.2)

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Hurdles and potential of up-/re-skilling
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